

DISSOLVING THE BOUNDARIES OF OPPRESSION
OPPRESSED, OPPRESSORS, AND THE CHALLENGE OF SOLIDARITY:

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The purpose of this paper is to examine how the overturning of oppression would actually work, in concrete terms. Already in that first sentence, we have opened up a number of tricky avenues to navigate. In selecting “oppression” as a theological term, we shall have to relate the meaning of the word to other concepts such as liberation, salvation, and the Reign of God. I shall show how these themes work together in the writings of the first generation of liberation theologians of Latin America. Second, a purported situation of “oppression” necessarily implies the presence of *oppressors* and *oppressed* – hard language indeed when we locate it in the actual situation of six billion human beings sharing one planet in the dawning twenty-first century. To many ears, this is political, not theological language (in fact it is both). We shall have to wrestle with this dividing of the world into antagonistic camps. Finally, if “oppression” is shown to be a legitimate theological problem; and if we indeed find it present within the concrete socioeconomic realities of our time – within ourselves – we must try to answer the original question: what kind of actual transformation would the overturning of oppression require?

It is at this point that neither theological analysis, nor any classifying of villains and victims, will give us any answers. We must instead tackle the constructive problem, *what shall we do?* The goal is to arrive at a situation in which these categories, or labels – *oppressor* and *oppressed* – should disappear. What remains afterwards is, of course, human beings, living together. The challenge then, once we have opened the Pandora’s box of the language of oppression is that, in the end, we have also to put that same language to rest. In fact, from where we stand today, it is only possible to begin to enter into a way of thinking about this endgame, not to imagine that there is a clear path ahead. For guidance, I shall enlist some pioneering work of the Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire and the recent work of Cuban-American theologian Ada María Isasi-Díaz.

“Liberation is liberation of the oppressed,” Clodovis Boff says, restating the relation which Jesus drew from Isaiah (“The Spirit of the Lord...has anointed me to preach good news to the poor...to set at liberty those who are oppressed.” Luke 4:18). Who are the oppressed? For Boff, the “characteristic visage of the third-world oppressed is that of the socioeconomically poor...the disinherited masses of the urban and rural slums” – those who are subject to “infrastructural oppression.” Many people have found it easy to attribute such social destitution to personal vice or to collective backwardness, but liberation theologians such as Boff instead identify *poverty as oppression*. Poverty is “the fruit of the actual economic organization of society,” which exploits and excludes in privileging capital over labor. “The solution is an *alternative* social system,” a transformation in which “the poor emerge as the ‘subject’ or agent of the corrective.”¹

The few words of Jesus cited above concerning “the oppressed” are clearly important, as his opening act of ministry in Luke, but they do not necessarily explain themselves. Liberation theologians have strongly related Jesus’ anti-oppression to his central teachings on the themes of salvation and the expected Reign (Kingdom) of God. Jon Sobrino affirms (though this is not a conception that originates in liberation theology) that the Reign of God *is* salvation, the “already, but not yet” state of living “as genuine human beings,” a utopia to be attained. While many theologians have spilled ink defining Reign and salvation along these notional lines, Sobrino notes that, as to what these terms really meant concretely to Jesus, “the vagueness and abstraction are of no help.” By drawing the oft-ignored line to oppression, liberation theology brings just that concrete specificity to the concepts of Reign and salvation, though not without controversy.²

For Sobrino, the Reign of God is to be understood in the following terms. The Reign is a way of praxis for Jesus – his involvement is deep and active, as shown in his healing miracles motivated by compassion, and his denunciations of the powers responsible for the “anti-Reign” – the wealthy, scribes, priests, rulers and the like. Implicitly, Jesus denounces “the configuration of the society that they create,” for “a society that produces this many victims is the anti-Reign.” The Reign of God is also to be understood in terms of whom Jesus’ addressees are: the poor, primarily, as in the Beatitudes. Since the same poor are a historical reality today, “it is in terms of *these* poor that the nature of the Reign of God can be made concrete.” While “the best formulation of the Reign of God would be, at bottom, something only the poor themselves can answer,” Sobrino suggests that it is, at least, “a world, a society, that makes life and dignity possible for the poor.”³

The kind of transformation that liberation theology calls for as a salvific theme, then, is a transformation of the relationships signified as “oppressive” – a transformation of *this* social world. It will be helpful at this point to go further in identifying whom is meant by “the oppressed” today. In so doing, we shall see the pitfalls of such concrete identifications. But we shall also gain a positive lesson, recognizing that individual human beings are far too complex to be locked permanently into any such characterizations. There are advantages to locating oppression in human *structures*, not just in human *beings*. And we shall confront the fact that the concretization of worldly “oppression” must result in the replacement of otherworldly hopes for salvation with real works of love, by real people.

“Oppression” is, minimally, the usurping of any human being’s freedoms and capabilities to develop and grow, in a world in which there is enough for all. There are critical thresholds points below which such capabilities are not self-sustaining. In our world today, the most strikingly obvious location of oppression is the materially poor, “those for whom the struggle for survival is a way of life.”⁴ Currently, 1.2 billion people are estimated to live on less than \$1 per day, and almost 3 billion people live on less than \$2 per day.⁵ “Poor,” Clodovis Boff says, is taken as a code for “dependency, weakness, helplessness, anonymity, contempt, and humiliation” – though the poor would not define themselves in such terms.⁶

But the global web of oppressive tendencies is hardly exhausted with the poor and the poorest: “Specific oppressions...are not self-contained realities but are interconnected parts of a worldwide system of domination.” So, under many diverse circumstances, women, people of color, those who suffer under politically repressive regimes, victims of environmental destruction, or of war, all know oppression tangibly – and many individuals exist in overlapping communities under oppression.⁷ Different individuals experience greatly different degrees of

oppression, and those who experience the “lesser” degrees of oppression – the glass ceiling, the absence of affirmative action – will to a greater or lesser extent know, by affinity, the experience of those defined, by poverty, as truly, deeply oppressed.

What begins to emerge into view is a rather fluid situation in which individual identities are subject to change. As Clodovis Boff notes, “a black taxi driver and a black soccer star are not the same thing.” There is a key distinction to be made. If “the oppression of a class – socioeconomic poverty – is...the infrastructural expression of the process of oppression,” then great wealth and great poverty define two opposed groups which can only unite *to the extent that they also dissolve themselves*. On the other hand, other basic differences, such as color/white, woman/man, while they *may* act as “the superstructural expressions of oppression” – are not in principle irreconcilable.⁸

There is another reason why it is unwise to label a person “oppressed” as if that identity is not subject to change. While, for liberation theology, the poor are regarded as having a unique insight, as the addressees of Jesus’ discourse, into the character of the Reign, they are not thereby any “better” than anyone else. Paulo Freire argues that when the oppressed struggle against their oppression individually, they enter into a process rife with pitfalls. There is an all-too-human tendency of those who would liberate themselves to become oppressors themselves, or “sub-oppressors.” Conditioned by the myths of the old order, one may not struggle to overcome the *systemic* contradiction, but instead come to identify with one’s opposite half. Indeed, Freire says, when oppressorhood is the dominant model of humanity, this is a highly likely outcome.⁹

For all of these reasons, Ignacio Ellacuría cautions that:

we must get beyond simplistic formulas with regard to both the causes of oppression and to its forms, so as not to fall into a Manichean division of the world, which would situate all good in the world on one side and all evil on the other. It is precisely a structural way of looking at the problem that enables us to avoid the error of seeing as good all the individuals on one side and as evil those on the other side, thus leaving aside the problem of personal transformation.¹⁰

“Structures of sin,” then, are key to this analysis – just as the individual is. The murky overlapping of these categories, “oppressed” and “oppressor,” should be taken as a sign of hope in the possibility of achieving meaningful sympathy – of seeing the other in one’s self.

Shortly, we shall go in depth into the core question, *what kind of actual transformation would the overturning of oppression require?* But first, one more fact is notable from what has been said so far. If anti-oppression – liberation, that is – is so closely identified with salvation and the inbreaking of the Reign of God – does this fact not alter the traditional “division of labor” between humanity and God as to who effects salvation, and who brings about the Reign of God? Ada María Isasi-Díaz notes that the relationship of God’s acts to human acts in the unfolding of salvation is always a difficult problem: it is, in fact, the question of human freedom. Here is how she handles it: “Salvation is gratuitously given by God; it flows from the very essence of God, [which is] love....The love relationship is the goal of all life.” Thus, love among humans “sustains the ongoing act of God’s salvation.”¹¹

With this formulation, it is important, Isasi-Díaz says, to bear foremost in mind what love actually requires: “the *active involvement* of those who are in relationship” (italics mine). Love, then, is an active principle; it falls on human being, as God’s image, to love as God loves, not merely to receive love. Thus “Our participation in the act of salvation is what we refer to as

liberation. It consists of our work to transform the world.”¹² Such an understanding of salvation as a *this-worldly* organic principle of growth through love is a vivifying image indeed! It points to the value of and in living creation *per se*.

For the remainder of this paper, I shall examine the concrete questions of what we must do if we are to shed the costumes of “oppressed” and “oppressor.” I begin by recognizing the challenges involved and considering arguments for the unique transformative potential of “the poor.” Next, I examine the methods by which the poor and oppressed are advised to go about transforming themselves and their situation. Finally, we come to enter the most challenging aspect of this whole scheme: the participation of *oppressors* in unraveling the great web of oppression. First, I note the obvious resistances of oppressors as they favor their own interests in the status quo. Then I consider the distinction between acts of oppression and the “passive” act of benefiting from a pervasive system of oppression. It is among those who “passively benefit” that Isasi-Díaz gives us a new category, the “friends of the oppressed.” In the “friends,” solidarity can take effective root. And with the awakening of solidarity between the oppressed and the “friends,” there is, finally, the possibility of transformative action towards the overturning of oppression. But that is no simple matter.

I have noted that there are structural aspects to oppression – the organization of economies, or the cultural norms of leadership, for example. In liberation theology terms, such structures of oppression are aspects of our alienation, both from God and our fellow creatures – the missing of the mark that we commonly know as sin. In this world, in this time, the reign of God is held in abeyance by the social phenomenon of oppression, the broken web of relationships that extends outward, inward, and through each of us and is bigger than any of us. Injustice and exploitation are the outward faces of sin and alienation. Realizing this is tantamount to a calling to discern the way through the web and find the connections that must be woven, the structures to be built which can allow love to flow into the shared, public realm. The personal becomes outwardly transformational. “To struggle against oppression, against alienation, is a matter of ongoing personal conversion that involves effective attempts to change alienating societal structures.”¹³

I indicated earlier that liberation theology locates a distinct transformative potential in those who live the experience of poverty. Again, it is not that the poor and the oppressed have a claim to moral superiority. But, Jon Bonino says, the point of view of the oppressed, “pierced by suffering and attracted by hope, allows them, in their struggles, to conceive another reality. Because the poor suffer the weight of alienation, they can conceive a different project of hope and provide dynamism to a new way of organizing human life for all.” Living under the brute facts of poverty and oppression gives access that is blocked to those imbued in privilege. “This contribution, which they alone can give, makes it possible for everyone to overcome alienation.”¹⁴ Only, of course, if the fruits of that experience are uniquely engaged.

Paulo Freire equates oppression with “dehumanization.” Overcoming oppression, then, is “humanization” – the process of becoming more fully human. It is the oppressed who initiate the process of restoring the humanity of both oppressed and oppressors. Oppressors cannot do it – because the generosity of oppressors only serves to maintain the existing unjust social order. The fight for liberation is itself an act of love, because it opposes the lovelessness of oppressors’ way of violence.¹⁵

If anyone has dedicated himself to developing concrete approaches to overcoming oppression, it is Paulo Freire. Because Freire is a pedagogist concerned with teaching people to struggle against and overcome oppression, his work is deeply entangled with the real obstacles to learning to create change (Freire is not a liberation theologian, but his work is centered in the same “base communities” of the Latin American poor which have been the focus of “liberation”). Freire says that the precious state which we call freedom is only acquired by conquest, never given as a gift. But, the struggle by some who are oppressed inevitably threatens both oppressor and other oppressed people who are fearful that such action will bring even greater repression down upon them. Furthermore, a vision of common interest with one’s fellow-oppressed can easily be overcome by the struggle against each other, the ripping apart of bonds of commonality, in the struggle for what scarcities are actually within reach. The “charity” of the oppressors is held out as a check against a solidarity of others in their deprivation. Turning away from this charity to solidarity among themselves “requires great willingness to take risks.” The tragic dilemma of the oppressed, then, is a choice: to grasp the power to transform the world demands *acting*. For Freire, the moment of enlightenment that enables this action is the discovery by the oppressed of themselves as “hosts” of the oppressor. The oppressed are faced with a confounding duality: to be is to be like, and to be like is to be like the oppressor. The critical discovery is that both I, the oppressed person, and the other, my oppressors, are equally living manifestations of dehumanization. Oppression, then, does not constitute a closed world, but merely a limiting situation which is open to being transformed through action. This discovery is meant to initiate the birth of a new humanity, his “new man” (sic), neither oppressor nor oppressed, but persons in the process of liberation. This process cannot happen to the individual in isolation, only to people socially, because it is viable only insofar as the contradiction of oppression is superseded by the humanization of all people.¹⁶

Since the process begins in the experience of the oppressed, the first movement outward is a praxis of mutuality among the oppressed, which Freire termed “conscientization.” Conscientization is not mere intellectual understanding. It is an ongoing effort that reveals the need to “engage with others in changing a situation.” It is the decisive movement “beyond the isolated self” that must precede effective liberation strategies.¹⁷

For Freire, consciousness is a method, it is the ground of transformation. As the learner takes on a greater unveiling of a challenging reality, she gains a deeper critical entrance into reality. He describes a two-stage process by which the transformation of oppression occurs through pedagogy. First, the oppressed unveil the oppression and commit themselves to its transformation. They must find ways to overcome self-depreciation, dependence, destruction, and they do this through critical and liberating dialogue, by which they can come to believe in themselves and trust in their ability to reason. In addition, they must engage in serious reflection (praxis), and participation. The method, then, lies in dialogue, through which conviction as subjects is gained. In order for this to happen, those who will unleash themselves from oppression must realize that they are fighting not merely for freedom from hunger, but for the freedom to create and construct, to wonder and to venture.¹⁸

Second, reality itself is transformed, as the pedagogy encompasses all people in process of permanent liberation. This process promises the expulsion of myths of the old order. (Needless to say, the unfolding of such a mutual process has been meager since Freire theorized it in the early 1970s. Some have criticized his work for concentrating on states of mind {pedagogy, “conscientization”}. For example, Ivone Gebara notes that this model was limited to

“a single model of awareness: one that was western, rationalistic, male, and white...regarded to be consciousness as such”¹⁹⁾

The conversion of *oppressors* is no easy matter: former oppressors will not likely feel liberated! To use Freire’s description, any restriction of their way of life, in the name of the rights of the community, appears to the former oppressors as a profound violation of their individual rights. After all, the inception of oppression is violence, and its perpetuation through many generations creates a strongly possessive consciousness – possessive of the world and of men and women. It is a way of being-in-the-world that transforms everything surrounding it into an object of domination, and translates everything materialistically into money and profit. In this manner, to be is to have.²⁰⁾

We observe, then, the obvious point that oppressorhood comes with material benefits, and that many of those who hold the benefits would tend to actively seek to maintain or increase them. But it is not only in the active exercise of personal power at the expense of another that individuals wind up in the oppressors camp. There are also many people who benefit from the systems of oppression and yet are of good intention and seek change. We must focus on a subtler, “passive” sense of what oppression means. The mere accident of birth, after all, produces many “oppressors,” long before they are able to take responsibility as adults. Oppression, then, has a passive face as well as an active one. Whereas it is not difficult for a well-to-do person in a wealthy nation to react against abuses by corporate or governmental powers, or by rogue individuals pursuing nakedly oppressive agendas, it is a greater personal challenge to accept that *being in a position that benefits* from the work of other actively oppressing agents is also a mark of the oppressor. For example, all Americans deposit a greatly disproportionate amount of their accumulated waste in the earth’s atmosphere, at the expense of present and future generations in all nations. Furthermore, we have a government which fights for our “right” to do so. Even if we rail against this fact, we cannot avoid *participating* in it – and *benefiting* from it. Owning up to one’s status as “oppressor” requires an awakening, whereas self-justification is automatic in the culture.

This awakening to one’s responsibility for “passive” benefit is a call to enter into the challenge of *solidarity* with the oppressed. But what does solidarity really mean? For Isasi-Díaz, “Solidarity has to do with understanding the interconnections that exist between oppression and privilege, between the rich and the poor, the oppressed and the oppressors.” One measure of solidarity is the “cohesiveness...among communities of struggle.” Through solidarity, we identify “common responsibilities and interests.” This emphasis is notably different from notions of altruism which posit a disinterested agreement – for example, a Rawlsian system of ethics in which, if one did not know what one’s position would be within the system, one would support a guaranteed minimum level of justice and opportunity for all. Isasi-Díaz imbues solidarity with a far deeper connection: an orientation to others which depends on “shared feelings,” which “lead to joint action.” We can sense here, then, that solidarity is indissoluble from the concrete experience of the individual in his/her particular community of shared responsibilities and affections.²¹⁾

Isasi-Díaz gives a name to those individuals in the camp of oppressors, whose “passive action” benefits from structures and acts of oppression, yet who seek to act in genuine solidarity with the poor and oppressed: she calls them the “friends” of the oppressed. Her quotations marks indicate a kind of tentative status, because the action of “friends” on the side of justice for the oppressed must be renewed every hour of every day, whereas their participation in oppression

grinds on inexorably and inescapably. But let us examine what potential this class of “friends” has for improvement.

The “friends” of the oppressed, living in the fruitbasket of oppression, are nonetheless awakened by the injustices they have perceived, and they have set as their goal *to be with* the oppressed. This is no simple thing to achieve: Isasi-Díaz illustrates the barrier to a genuine “walking with,” or “being with,” by recounting a conversation from her stint as a missionary in a rural village in Peru: her unemployed and impoverished neighbor told her, “Remember, you can always leave this place; we can’t.” The danger she sees “for the majority of people who are committed to justice,” is that “solidarity means merely *agreement with and sympathy for* the poor and the oppressed” (emphasis mine). “Agreement with” is an ephemeral commitment, a “disposition” that can be maintained or discarded depending on circumstances. Mere feelings of sympathy have “little or nothing to do with liberative praxis.”²²

Isasi-Díaz seeks to replace *charity*, as “the appropriate Christian...ethical behavior...in our world today,” with authentic *solidarity*. That is, if the gospel mandate is that we love our neighbor, acts of authentic solidarity are the appropriate expression of that love, whereas charity is typically a “one-sided giving...of what we have in abundance” – only a salve for the conscience! “If the true meaning of solidarity were understood and intended,” she says, “visible radical change would be happening in the lives of those of us who endorse it with our applause.”²³

The question of solidarity, in this sense, is how do you define your community? Who is in and who is out? Again, liberation indicates that the answer is guided by our understanding of who our neighbor is: the poor and the oppressed. “From a Christian perspective the goal of solidarity is to participate in the ongoing process of liberation through which we Christians become a significantly positive force in the unfolding of the ‘kin-dom’ of God.”²⁴

Isasi-Díaz poses solidarity as a theory that “opposes the theory of oppression by reconceptualizing every aspect of society.” As one’s awareness of one’s own location in one region of the web of oppression grows, one begins to find its connections everywhere, and, if one is to be true to that intuition, one must follow these links and try to conceive of the totality of these relationships – and then one may see what, in one’s own small place, one must do. It is through this awareness that “a commonality of feelings and interests [can] flourish and become...the cornerstone of society, the way it is organized and operates.” Recognizing that, in our globalizing world, no society is isolated, we can begin to locate ourselves in a worldwide web of commonality. Again, it is only in the grounding of our understanding of oppression in our particular experience that the wider connections of feelings and interests that are the essence of solidarity can be felt. The recognition of a commonality is the basis for mutuality.²⁵

Now we enter into the final challenge. How to achieve mutuality of the oppressor and the oppressed? A process of conscientization “requires the oppressor to establish dialogue and mutuality with the oppressed.” But the awareness of the oppressor *must be sparked by the word of the oppressed*. “Oppressors who are willing to listen and to be questioned by the oppressed, by the very act of listening begin to leave behind their role as oppressors and to become ‘friends’ of the oppressed.”²⁶ The word of the poor is often indirect or muzzled, but when it reaches the receptive “friend,” it “appeals to the ‘friend’s’ domination and possession of the world...and questions the desire for wealth and power.”²⁷ This “weak” word is efficacious because it enables the leap to mutuality: it “gives the ‘friends’ the courage to question and judge the structures that they have supported and from which they benefit, thus becoming co-creators with the oppressed of new liberating structures.”²⁸

The next step that Isasi-Díaz proposes is the most difficult, for it goes one step further than Freire's proposition that the oppressed, on their own, discover oppression internalized within them. Pressing the case for full mutuality, Isasi-Díaz suggests that the "friends" respond to the oppressed, "helping them to recognize the oppressor they carry within themselves..." This "can help the oppressed to move away from seeking vengeance and from wanting to exchange places with the oppressors." "Friends" help the oppressed to understand that what they need to do is not to participate more deeply in the structures of oppression, but to change them. This is a tricky dynamic, easily open to charges of presumptuousness and condescension. But such charges, in the end, risk defending the status quo. Somehow, real mutuality must emerge, and that process is inevitably rife with tension. The key point is that "If we do not recognize the need for the oppressed to learn from the "friends," then we cannot claim that mutuality is at the heart of solidarity." Solidarity "requires a true dialogic relationship."²⁹ Commitment to mutuality "is possible only if there is a 'sense of being bound to whoever or whatever is the object of [this] commitment' ... Commitment gives other persons or a worthy cause claim over oneself," resulting in "a relation of binding and being-bound, giving and being-claimed."³⁰ Without this conversion, division remains until one side is destroyed. Finally, a mutual commitment demands mutual action, for action expresses and constitutes mutuality, and "begins to make liberation present." Such commitment "involves all aspects of one's life and demands a lifelong permanency."³¹

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ENDNOTES

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