

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON GRASSROOTS ALTERNATIVES FOR  
POSTCAPITALIST AND DECOLONIAL FUTURES – SELECTED SESSION

- Topic: Theological Reflections on Grassroots Alternatives for Postcapitalist  
and Decolonial Futures
- Convener: Susan Abraham, Pacific School of Religion
- Moderator: Joseph Drexler-Dreis, St Mary's College of California
- Presenters: Rufus Burnett, Fordham University  
Leo Guardado, Fordham University  
Steven Battin, University of Notre Dame

In “Blues People and Trans-Plantational Futures: Towards a Blues Theology of Spatial Possibility,” Rufus Burnett, Jr. performed a theological reflection on the Freedom Farm Cooperative in Sunflower County, Mississippi. The cooperative was developed by civil rights activist and community organizer Fannie Lou Hamer in 1967. Burnett’s paper opened with an overview of the work of the cooperative which provided livestock, farm land, housing, and food to impoverished peoples living in Sunflower County. After the overview, Burnett engaged the thought of geographer Clyde Woods to interpret the epistemic insights of Hamer’s work. Using Woods as a basis, Burnett argued that Hamer’s activity could be understood as a part of a blues epistemology. Burnett, following Woods, described the blues epistemology as a way of knowing that provided an alternative vision, a trans-plantational vision, for the lands of the Mississippi Delta. As an alternative, the trans-plantational vision dislocated the imperialist and colonial ecology of large land holding planters and their descendants. Burnett further clarified the epistemology employed by Hamer with insights from decolonial theorist Anibal Quijano and critical geographer Priscilla McCutcheon. To round out his epistemic and spatial interpretation of Hamer, Burnett clarified that Hamer’s epistemology was an expression of her existence on the underside of modernity and the coloniality of power that dominates therein.

Leo Guardado’s paper, “Reimagining Community in the Shadow of Empire: Meeting Gandhi and the Zapatistas at the US–Mexico Border,” analyzed how the US–Mexico borderlands constitute a site of cognitive struggle for articulating who is human in western modernity. First, he focused on how grassroots ministries, like No More Deaths in Tucson, Arizona, invite us to re-think and see the world, literally and figuratively, from the other side of the line, from the perspective of systemic and unjust human suffering that the government seeks to relegate beyond our periphery—beyond the walls of our vision. He then turned to the vision of Gandhi’s constructive program and the more contemporary case of the Zapatistas struggle for autonomy as examples that continue to influence our capacity to imagine alternate constructions of society beyond what seems reasonable. Lastly, he argued that that the contested ministries of placing water and food in the desert wilderness of the borderlands are not only a form of resistance to state violence, but also a means of re-articulating the church’s role in the construction of alternate futures at the margins of the present—incarnational work for which the church will be put on trial as it struggles to know the truth of its existence as one that is not dependent on the state for its legitimacy but on the veracity of its humanizing ministry in history.

*Selected Session: Theological Reflections on Postcapitalist and Decolonial Futures*

Steven J. Battin, in “Exit Strategies: Grassroots Postcapitalist Alternatives for Another Possible World,” posed the question, “How might we think about the way grassroots movements and Christian ecclesial praxis relate to one another?” He began his address of the question by turning to the work of sociologists Andrej Grubic and Denis O’Hearn, whose research situates anti-systemic movements in the broader context of the conflict between “state-making” civilizational projects and “state-breaking” projects for local autonomy. The activity of state-breaking movements in modernity creates what Grubic and O’Hearn characterize as “exilic spaces” from capitalist accumulation; examples of what Battin calls “exit strategies.” Next, he situated Jesus’ activity on behalf of the Kingdom of God within the premodern struggle between state-making domination and state-breaking projects for local self-governance, positing that Jesus and the early Jesus movement represent an option for the latter. Battin highlighted that Christians, having been steeped in premodern state-making theologies and modern capitalist and colonizing epistemologies, will likely be without many internal theological re/sources for imagining system-evading structures in the present moment. He proposed that Christians should acquaint themselves with grassroots movements that express their aims in terms of decolonizing and postcapitalist futures. Battin then suggested three current grassroots initiatives that provide both form and content for the kinds of ecclesial praxis that protologically conforms to Jesus’ own state-breaking exit strategy, and proleptically indicates another world is possible. He concluded with a warning against the temptation to theologize grassroots movements, suggesting theologians should instead re-signify theological language in a way that offers a contribution to the multiplicity of already existing exit strategies that are reconnecting people with place and nurturing genuine community.

The session concluded with a lively conversation moderated by Joseph Drexler-Dreis and thirty members in the audience.

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