

THESIS II

Power and the Spirit of Justice: Elites in oppressive societies maintain their privileges and power through the monopolization of force and the promotion of ideologies rationalizing the plight of the poor. The power of the Spirit is revealed in the awakening of the poor to their own dignity as daughters and sons of the Creator and in their efforts to nurture mutuality and respect in the context of the struggles for new life.

Power comes out of the barrel of a gun, and through the use of various instruments of torture like thumb screws and cattle prods. Many governments throughout the world, in Chile, El Salvador, the Philippines, South Africa, Argentina, Guatemala, Indonesia and elsewhere are demonstrating every day that unjust and exploitive political/economic regimes can be maintained in power through the use of terror as a matter of policy. Kidnappings, interrogations and torture are tools in the ongoing struggle of those in power to identify and keep tabs on opponents; murder is an efficient way to eliminate opponents, and those suspected of being opponents. And both torture and murder contribute to the overall climate of fear which helps to keep others in line.

But no social order survives on sheer brute power for long. Even the military has to have food and clothing and housing, along with guns and tanks and instruments of torture, and an income to buy these and other necessities and luxuries of life. Foreign aid from "friendly" superpowers can help for a while, but even this is not enough in the long run. Sooner or later any government must promote an economic climate in which income can be generated and taxed to support the government and military. And even a modestly productive economy requires active support from significant sectors of the population, especially from those who control capital and investment and those who staff the middle and upper levels of corporations and government, the "middle classes." The support of these groups depends, in turn, on the belief that the policies of the government and military serve their "interests"; in other words, it depends on an ideology which "makes sense" to these groups, a definition of the world, of the appropriateness of the policies of those in power, and of the "interests," material and otherwise, that are being fulfilled by these policies.

A highly exploitive social order requires, over the long run, not so much the active support of the majority of poor and working people, as their passive acceptance of "the way things are." There are several familiar ideological devices for promoting this passive acceptance, the two most common being to convince the majority that their fate is "God's will," or the result of fate (the caste system in India), or biology (race or sex); or to convince them that it is their own fault: "if only they had worked harder. . . ." These ideologies inculcate a sense of inferiority in the oppressed which makes rebellion difficult. Oppressed people are under pressure to learn, emotionally as well as intellectually, not to question their "superiors," not to think for themselves, not to dare to dream of an alternative social order of justice. These attitudes are reinforced every day through the expectations those in power have for their "inferiors," and through the punishment they are quick to mete out when the oppressed give any signs of critical thought and initiative beyond acceptable limits. Those who are marginalized altogether from the world economy, not needed as workers or even as consumers in an age of automated factories and global markets (some

estimates place fifty percent of the world's population in this category), may be simply ignored by national elites so long as they do not become a political threat. Sickness and hunger render many of these people incapable of resistance.

In addition to control over the means of force, then, the exercise of power rests ultimately on the ability to control "definitions" of the world, to channel perceptions toward some possibilities and away from others, and to celebrate this order through symbols, myths, rituals and "scientific" theories. As blacks, women, native peoples and oppressed majorities throughout the Third World have testified, this kind of power inevitably requires oppressed peoples to repress their anger at the continual assaults on their dignity and their lives, a repression that so often channels anger not into liberating and transformative action as into pathological and self-destructive reactions.

But the Spirit of life continues to surprise those in power. For poor and oppressed people continue to irrupt into the history in which they have for so long been invisible to challenge the structures of exploitation and oppression and those who benefit from them. And in this process of liberation oppressed peoples are re-reading the bible and finding in it a source of inspiration and hope.

The bible is subversive of an oppressive social order in many ways. First, God is revealed especially to the poor. And this "preferential option for the poor" has dramatic implications for poor and oppressed people. As a young mother in a basic Christian community in Brazil said: "God became poor like us in order to show *us* that we are people too!" As Christians we believe that all are called to lives of dignity, love and mutuality, that we are all sons and daughters of the Creator, that we all have a fundamental right to participate in the decisions that affect our lives.

Second, our efforts to love one another as God has loved us are always lived out in the context of concrete, historical obstacles to love, and as Christians we are called to confront these obstacles. As an early baptismal formula reveals: "Baptized into union with him, you have all put on Christ as a garment. There is no such thing as Jew and Greek, slave and freeman, male and female; for you are all one person in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:27-28). In other words, we are called to confront the racism/ethnocentrism, class divisions, and sexism that distort the humanity of the oppressed, and ultimately of everyone.

And third, the good news announced to the oppressed concerning the coming Kingdom of God calls oppressed people and their allies to hope for justice. Oppressed and exploited people can dare to think that life can be better. Indeed, as Christians they dare not dream of less. In other words, oppressed people and their allies are called to participate in the communities and movements struggling against the old order to unfold new institutions, structures, and ideologies reflecting new relations of power which, it is hoped, will be less violent, alienating and oppressive, less sinful. This project of unfolding a society which nurtures integral human development will always be incomplete, until the final coming of the Kingdom. The bible does not encourage any naivete on this issue. Yet it is also subversive of any existing unjust social order; it demands belief in the non-necessity of the present order. Of course, the power of those in control, through guns and terror and control over the minds of so many, may make such hopes look naive. The Resurrection calls us to this hope in spite of all the evidence.

The Bible, then, testifies to a different kind of power, a power rooted in love and mutuality and the struggles for justice. And biblical faith inescapably nurtures the irruption of the oppressed which we are witnessing throughout the world today in the struggles for liberation in their many forms.

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THESIS III

Communities are the infrastructure of all forms of social power, whether those forms be cultural, political, or economic. The dialectic of social power is rooted in the dialectic of community. Historically, communities have exercised alienated and alienating forms of dominative power (or force) insofar as they extrinsically imposed cultural, political, and/or economic meanings and values upon both their own members and other communities or groups. Such dominative power as exemplified in empires or superpowers is bound to collapse eventually since it ends up destroying its own infrastructure, i.e., community. Liberation theology is in the process of recovering a Christian redemption of social power to the degree that it empowers those infrastructural communities (com unidades de base) which are the foundations of any and all just and humane social orders.

There is a persistent tendency to reify social power, treating it as a force over against the human life-worlds which create and sustain it. This reification tends to reduce social power to variant forms of physical power. The persistent role of militarism in history testifies to the depth of this reification and the terrible consequences it has on natural and human life. The necrophilic growth of military-industrial complexes in the twentieth century, along with the nuclear arms races and the massively destructive wars, challenges us with the need to both expose and correct this reification. Otherwise it could quite literally destroy human life-worlds on this planet. The tasks of analysis and transformation are manifold, requiring both collaboration between all the human sciences and theology as well as promoting and extending those communities of reflection and action dedicated to transforming the social order.

Within the extreme brevity of this statement I shall outline a few of the avenues of analysis I am now pursuing. The intellectual or noetic praxis of self-appropriation articulated in Bernard Lonergan's turn to the subject is not a privatized project but is embedded within the social contexts of concretely existing communities of discourse and action. Just as the infrastructural foundations of all the differentiations of consciousness in common sense and theoretic universes of discourse can be appropriated in the related and recurrent activities of human subjects performatively engaged in the self-correcting processes of learning, so also the infra-structural foundations of all the vast differences in social and institutional organizations—with their varieties of technological, economic, political, and religious developments—admit of an ongoing appropriation in the historical movements from intersubjective communities to ever more conscious and differentiated interpersonal communities. The heuristic