

SEMINAR ON THEOLOGY AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

THE POWER OF THE POOR: THEOLOGICAL AND SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

Recent church documents have declared that in the historical conflicts of the present age, God is on the side of the poor. God's blessing rests in a special way on the poor. The poor, we are told, have a special role to play in the transformation of society. Latin American ecclesiastical documents have come to speak of the Church's "preferential option for the poor." The high point of this ecclesiastical development is Pope John Paul II's *Laborem exercens* which first urges solidarity *of* the workers and *with* the workers and then enlarges this, for third world societies, to solidarity *of* the poor and *with* the poor. For this encyclical, the social justice struggle of workers and the poor, joined by those who love justice and hence by the Church itself, is the dynamic element of contemporary history. "The Church is firmly committed to this cause, for it considers it to be its mission, its service, a proof of its fidelity to Christ, so that it can truly be the 'Church of the poor'" (N. 8).

The seminar was intended to examine the question, from a theological and sociological perspective, whether it is realistic to assign such power to the poor, i.e. to the exploited, the oppressed, the marginalized. Is the Church at this time, by summoning forth the solidarity *of* and *with* the poor, mobilizing a children's crusade, an army of the powerless to be eventually crushed by those possessing power? Or is the Church's new call realistic? Is it possible to determine in each situation, through dialogue with sociology and political science, who "the poor" are that bear social power and may become the historical agent of social transformation?

In this context several participants noted that the dominant sociological theories are not very reliable on this issue. In functionalist social theory in particular, political protest tends to be understood as social action that while possibly leading to certain reforms, actually contributes to the stabilization of society. Functionalists, moreover, tend to look upon societies as unities—America is a unified society. Thus they are eager to investigate the ideas and values of Americans, seek generalizations about Americans, and identify American ideologies. In doing so they often make invisible the sectors of American society not identified with the mainstream. Robert Bellah's brilliant lecture given at the Annual Convention offered a good example of this. Studying the cultural reality of America he made no mention of Blacks, Mexican-Americans, nor other minority groups or peoples. When asked about this, he replied that there was no need to mention them since these groups are increasingly influenced by the mainstream and losing their social cohesion. What he did not remark was that a social science approach that makes these groups invisible contributes to the cultural forces that undermines the identity of these groups.

Is Marxist theory more helpful? Marx's theory that the proletariat, the industrial working class, was the bearer of social revolution was well grounded in the historical conditions of the nineteenth century. The laborers had power, Marx argued, because they produced the wealth of society and hence were able

to block its flow and secondly, because working as they did in large industrial institutions, they acquired skills of organization and technological reasoning. In the twentieth century, Marx's theory of the proletariat is no longer helpful, except possibly in Eastern Europe where it reveals the power of industrial workers to transform the totalitarian state. In third world countries the industrial proletariat is a small minority: the great majority are the dispossessed, excluded from the process of production. From a Marxist point of view there is no reason why these poor people should be regarded as the special agent of social change. In the Western industrialized societies, it also no longer makes sense to speak of the proletariat. Why? Because the working class itself has become profoundly divided. In France, French workers stand against North African workers who were admitted in great number. In Germany, German workers are at odds with Turks and other "guest workers" imported in recent years. In the USA, sociologists have uncovered a dual work force, made up by unionized, white, male workers on one side and by non-unionized, non-white, and female workers on the other. In addition to these tensions, Canadian workers are also divided over the national issue, especially since 1981 when the socialist movement in Quebec opted for independentism. Marx's arguments for assigning special power to the proletariat are no longer valid.

It was the great contribution of Max Weber to recognize that the objective conditions of oppression by themselves did not generate protest movements. What is necessary, in addition to infrastructural conditions, are cultural symbols that make people recognize oppression and yearn for emancipation. Weber showed that the capitalist revolution, i.e., the successful struggle of the bourgeoisie against the feudal and aristocratic order, cannot be fully explained without paying attention to "the Protestant ethic" with its special affinity to the "spirit of capitalism." A recent study of servitude in an African tribe, the Machube of Northern Benin, revealed that the slaves, destined to servitude by the structure of their teeth, expressed no impatience over their condition, harboured no resentment, and dreamt of no deliverance. What was lacking was cultural or religious symbols that defined their destiny and made them perceive their subjugation as injustice. Following the Weberian insight, modern sociological research pays a good deal of attention to cultural and religious factors in liberation struggles. Neo-Marxist scholars have come to appreciate the role which national, ethnic, moral and religious traditions may play in the empowerment of oppressed groups. From a sociological point of view, therefore, the new mission of the Church to mobilize the poor in a joint struggle for justice can, under certain circumstances, be a realistic undertaking. In each historical situation dialogue with sociology is necessary to define the hidden possibilities of the present.

The seminar discussion brought up many important points which deserve recording. Several participants said that academic sociology has the tendency to underestimate the power of the poor. Max Weber, for instance, argued that the destitute in a society were prone to imitate the behavior pattern of the powerful and had never generated a prophetic imagination. What this leaves unsaid is that the poor have been subject to a socialization process which has strongly affected their mind set. Their passivity is, therefore, nothing inherent in their condition. A participant who had lived among poor people in Brazil said that the poor in Latin America differ from the ever-busy North Americans, hard at

work to assure their economic security for the future: the poor concerned only with bread for the day have time: they reflect, they converse, they are artistically inventive, and they have insight into their situation. The power of the powerless has recently been described as the power to disbelieve, the power to come together, and the power to act effectively. Since the June 12 Peace March to the United Nations in New York City took place during the Annual Convention, the drama of the powerless seeking power was before everyone's eyes. What was needed above all was dedication, courage, and imagination.

This voluntaristic view of the social struggle made some participants quite uneasy. Populist movements can also be dangerous, the organs of oppression and destruction. First, it is important not to underplay the rational or scientific element in the social struggle. For a populist movement wrestling against oppression on the basis of a false analysis, for instance blaming a particular race or religion for the present conditions of oppression, can become a devastating force in society, possibly even allying itself to fascist politics. Secondly, it is important to examine the symbolic content of a protest movement. For unless a struggle against oppression bears symbols of universal significance, for instance proclaiming the right of all peoples to be free, it can easily give rise to new forms of domination and degradation. These reflections made it clear that social activism must always be accompanied by an appropriate social theory. In this context, liberation theology appeared as a very practical enterprise, not only as guide to the spiritual life but also as contribution to the struggle for social justice.

When one speaks of the power of the poor, what groups precisely are being designated? Participants with experience in Latin America said that "the poor" refers to the vast majority, the great mass of the people, or better still, simply the people. In countries where the elite and the middle classes are relatively small, it makes sense to refer to the great majority as the people and to argue that the middle classes, out of social solidarity, associate themselves with the majority and thus become part of the people themselves. In liberation theology, it was argued by one participant, the people is more than a sociological reference. It is a notion that has moral and sacred significance. It recognizes the high destiny of the impoverished majority and calls for the spiritual identification of the middle classes with the poor so that together they become the people on whom God's blessing rests. The Church becomes the popular church, the Church of the people, when it too identifies itself with the vast majority and understands its own fidelity to Christ from the viewpoint of the poor.

Who are the poor and oppressed in the industrialized societies of the West? The participants believed that it is no longer possible to look upon the workers, or more especially the industrial workers, as the essential core of the exploited in society. To designate the victims of industrial capitalism today it will no longer do simply to make a class analysis. We must also take into consideration despised races and ethnic groups as well as women, especially working women; and we must pay attention to new threats to humanity, associated with the present industrial system, such as the threat to the ecology, the threat to employment, the threat of nuclear arms and the arms race, and the threat of bureaucratic centralism and the cultural conformity controlled by the power center of the system. These threats have provoked new social movements—the

ecological movement, the peace movement, and the movements of de-centralization on various levels in society (and the Church)—which must now be brought together with the movements struggling for greater justice for non-white people, for ethnic groups, for women, for workers and the unemployed. Even while such coalitions are not yet possible and groups struggle in relative distance from one another, it is to be hoped that as the oppression increases issues of national importance will emerge around which coalitions can be built.

Do we have a word in English that refers to this wide sector of society? Quebecers speak of "les classes populaires" referring to working people, low income groups, unemployed, despised minorities living in poor neighborhoods, agricultural workers, working women, and the various "powerless" groups that organize against the threats to humanity produced by contemporary industrial capitalism. Is it possible to speak of "popular classes" in English? Perhaps the term should be introduced in English, even though the current meaning of popular is different?

Some participants felt that the discussion did not pay enough attention to the powerlessness experienced by ordinary people belonging to the middle strata of society. The ordinary parish is made up of people who do not feel comfortable in modern society. Do we have the right to neglect these parishioners by an exclusive concentration on the poor? This question gave rise to a long discussion. It was argued that pastors in such parishes are in a dilemma. Should they preach solidarity with the poor and adopt the liberationist perspective? Or should they respond rather to the needs, problems, and aspirations of their own congregation? Church documents and liberation theology which stress identification with the poor, with "les classes populaires," presuppose the need for conversion on the part of the Church's mainstream. To look upon my country and my city from the viewpoint of the poor and to interpret mainstream culture from the same perspective introduces me to a new spiritual universe, resituates me inwardly, and modifies most of my ordinary experiences. The new perspective introduces an element of rupture or discontinuity in regard to the world as communicated to me by the cultural agents of society, including the schools, the mass media, and the Church's traditional preaching. It can be argued that if people of the middle strata, belonging to ordinary parishes, entered into this new identification with the poor, they would gain a new perception of their own situation, analyze their own experience of powerlessness in a new way, and discover that their position of relative privilege leaves them much room to work for social change.

The majority of the participants felt that there was enough historical experience and enough sociological evidence to affirm that under certain circumstances the poor, workers, the popular classes, or simply the people, have power to change society. It was recognized, however, that this power depends in part on the weapons which the powerful choose to employ in their defense. Some movements of the poor, for instance Ghandi's struggle in India, were successful, in part because the powerful, in this case the British colonial powers, were unwilling to employ the most brutal form of repression, held in check as they were by a certain civilized public opinion at home. In some Latin American countries there is no such restraint. Military governments rule through terror. In Argentina people who had leadership capacity in the labor movement, in the Christian action groups, at universities and in the formation

of public opinion simply disappeared. With the help of para-military forces, the generals crushed the movements for justice and human rights. With less cruelty, though brutal enough, the Polish army intervened to destroy the workers' movement for social justice. When we speak of the power of the poor, we refer to a combination of what is and what should be, something that is given within the possibilities of society but something that must be created by commitment and protected by special circumstances. It is important to neglect neither the analytical nor the utopian dimension of this concept.

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