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Religion and Revolution: Slavoj Žižek's Challenge to Liberation Theology

Thomas Lynch, Durham University, United Kingdom.

The prevalence of theological themes in contemporary continental philosophy is a topic of frequent discussion. Figures including Foucault, Agamben, Derrida, and Badiou have found theology both a resource and an object of critique. Currently, the loudest and most prolific voice of the interaction between these two fields is Slavoj Žižek. In the last decade his work has reached a theological crescendo, peaking in his collaboration with British theologian John Milbank (Žižek and Milbank 2009). The increasing importance of theology in Žižek's work has already been charted and analyzed in secondary literature.¹ This present essay is concerned with the curious lack of work examining the shared concerns of liberation theologyⁱⁱ and Žižek. This lack is doubly surprising: given Žižek's interest in religion, revolution, and the critique of ideology it is interesting that liberation theologians are ignored; and given Žižek's updating, if not advancement, of these themes, it is surprising that his work is discussed so little within liberation theology.

This essay is a critical examination of the only two essays that hitherto have seriously considered Žižek specifically in the context of contemporary liberation theology. First, we will briefly summarize the development of liberation theology in order to provide a context for the two essays. Second, we will examine Nelson Moldonado-Torres' post-colonial critique of Milbank and Žižek. Third, we will consider Manuel J. Mejido's analysis of impasses within liberation theology. Mejido argues that liberation theology should incorporate psychoanalysis and he elaborates this approach in reference to Žižek. We will conclude by suggesting that while Moldonado-Torres critique and Mejido's appropriation of psychoanalysis are significant in their awareness of Žižek's potential contribution, they ultimately fail to recognize the nature and critical power of his intervention into the theory of liberatory politics and religion.

Liberation Theology: A Brief Introduction

Liberation theology is a diverse theological category incorporating a variety of geographies and a range of positions. We are here focusing on Latin American liberation theology as it has been the predominate site for the development of liberation theology as a theory. Liberation theology is certainly active as a theory and movement in other regions, but it is in Latin America, beginning in the 1950s, that we really see this particular combination of Marxism and theology.

There are a variety of introductions, overviews, and histories of liberation theology all of which provide a basic, consistent chronology.ⁱⁱⁱ The Catholic Church held a near monopoly on institutional Christianity on the continent during the colonial regimes of the Spanish and Portuguese. In the early 19th century, colonial rule began to collapse and the Catholic Church in Latin America entered a period of institutional crises. Though the specifics varied from country to country, on the whole Catholicism was identified with the wealthy and foreign rule. It was able to maintain itself through its influence on conservative members of the political and social elite and its role in education. Even this influence, however, was not enough to insure its continuing presence. Across the region, dioceses struggled to recruit clergy from local populations and, depending on changes in the ruling parties, churches were faced with anti-clericalism and declining social influence. The mid 20th century saw the transformation of these crises as the region began to undergo new forms of political upheaval. The success of the Cuban Revolution dismayed the Catholic hierarchy; the official response mirrored the Catholic Church's criticism of Marxism in Europe. In contrast to this broader institutional response, however, many priests and members of religious orders were more open to the kind of grass roots movements that were encouraged by the events in Cuba. There was certainly no shortage of people who denounced communism as an atheistic force that would destroy the foundations of society, but there were also those that saw an affinity between Catholicism's position on poverty and justice, and the motivations of the Marxist groups that were organizing in the region.

While the responses to Marxism, and the reasoning behind these responses, varied, they can be charted along a spectrum. On one end, there is Camillo Torres, a priest who was defrocked after he took up arms with guerrilla forces in Columbia. On the other end, one finds the then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger and Cardinal Alfonso López Trujillo. At various points between these two extremes, one is able to place the majority of liberation theologians: Gustavo Gutiérrez, Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, Oscar Romero, Juan Luis Segundo, Jon Sobrino, and Enrique Dussel.^{iv} These two extremes were engaged in a protracted conflict, even as many of the liberation theologians faced persecution from political authorities. Cardinal Ratzinger oversaw the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, a position which enabled him to level criticisms at Gutierrez, Boff, and other Latin American theologians. Some of those whose work was challenged were able to reach agreements with the church hierarchy; others were silenced. With the Vatican's support

Cardinal Trujillo was able to become head of the Conference of Latin American Bishops (CELAM), a major victory in the conservative backlash against the liberation theologians.

If this spectrum gives a somewhat ahistorical perspective on the various positions that arise within debates about liberation theology, the meetings of CELAM provide insight into the historical rise and reaction to the movement. The organization first met in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 1955 to discuss the crisis of Latin American Catholicism's relationship to the poor. The years between this meeting and the next, held in 1968 in Medellín, Columbia, saw the beginnings and expansion of a variety of educational movements and local organizations (called Base Ecclesial Communities). Though the 1968 meeting did not result in unrestrained affirmation of liberation theology, the resulting documents revealed its influence. In many ways this meeting marked the apex of liberation theology; though it would never come to be the dominant form of Catholicism in Latin America, by 1968 liberation theology was an influential minority, both in the ecclesial hierarchy and in the political conflicts that dotted the region. The following years were marked by the organization of a conservative response, which, with Cardinal Trujillo's takeover of CELAM, marked the beginning of liberation theology's decline. When CELAM next met, in Puebla, Mexico in 1979, many of the liberation theologians were not able to gain access to the conference. Undeterred, they met in adjacent buildings and sought to influence the proceedings through sympathetic participants. Their efforts aside, the peak of liberation theology's ecclesial and political influence had passed.

Since Puebla, liberation theology increasingly has taken the form of what might be called identity theologies. Though the figures above were certainly attentive to their Latin American context, much of their work was stated generally. Its theological interpretation of Marxism, dependency theory, and democracy developed an approach to theology that was applicable beyond its context. This process of theorization is often put in some variation of 'action-reflection-action.' A particular oppressive situation gives rise to a reflection on the nature of oppression. A response is formed, drawing on Christian teachings, which seeks not just to end that particular oppression, but to challenge the functioning of oppressive structures. On the whole, it was able to conceive of a universal theology that it then employed within the context of Latin America. These newer forms of liberation theology, however, tend to focus more on specific contexts. Thus one finds queer, feminist, and indigenous liberation theologies. Put another way, earlier Latin American liberation theology focused on political economy; the newer forms of liberation theology are focused on cultural identity.

Nelson Moldonado-Torres: Critiquing Orthodoxies

It is in this context that Nelson Moldonado-Torres offers a critique of both Žižek, and Milbank.^v Appearing in a collection of essays entitled *Latin American Liberation Theology: The Next Generation*, Moldonado-Torres analyzes their mutual goal of developing a universal theological and philosophical programme in conscious rejection of pluralism. This goal is found in Milbank's development of a "postmodern critical Augustinianism," cultivated largely through a return to orthodox Christianity, especially the work of Thomas Aquinas, and a critique of secularity (Milbank 1991 and Milbank 1993). In Žižek, this tendency is found in his frequent attacks on identity politics.

Moldonado-Torres is arguing for a position of radical diversality, which he defines as

an ethico-political perspective that criticizes the excesses of global capital, the pathos of postmodern nihilism, and the facile relinquishment of politics to ethics in the neoliberal world. Radical diversality is the conjunction of a politicized form of dialogical ethics with a universalistic rendering of the implications and repercussions off the coloniality of power and the colonial difference (57).

Moldonado-Torres finds Milbank's Radical Orthodoxy incompatible with this position. His critique centres on the idea of colonial difference.^{vi} Radical Orthodoxy offers a theological argument against secular reason. The difference between theological reason and secular reason is thus the central difference. Moldonado-Torres argues that, though this difference is significant, it misses a broader colonial difference. Both Radical Orthodoxy and its secular opponents are thus guilty of perpetuating a Eurocentric discourse. Liberation theology, in its post-colonial concerns, is attacking this configuration. It still must be concerned with the illuminating critique of secular reason, a critique that impacts liberation theology's relationship to Marxism, but it also attends to this colonial difference. For example, Milbank's work has examined theology's relation to social sciences. Moldonado-Torres explains that liberation theology, in its Latin American context, stems from a different set of historical relationships between the disciplines.

Liberation theologians used the Latin American social sciences to clarify from a theological standpoint an operating logic in the history of the Latin American church. Instead of simply reinterpreting Christianity in terms of a dominant secular discourse of their day, as Milbank argues, they subsumed the social sciences in their theological framework (46).

Thus, the extension of Milbank's argument to theology in general is already a move within colonial difference (46-49).

A resistance to dialogue complements Radical Orthodoxy's colonial difference. Again, posed in contrast to liberation theology, Moldonado-Torres argues that "while liberation thought attempted to politicize the dialogical turn in Western thought, orthodoxies withdraw from dialogue and the ethical encounter with the 'other' in order to assert the primacy of a unique and supreme

tradition of praxis and critique” (Moldonado-Torres 50). The demonstration of this tendency relies heavily on the work of Gregory Baum (1994) who argues that Milbank’s return to orthodoxy slips into the repetition of old Christian prejudices; these prejudices are caught up in colonial attitudes about race and gender.

For our purposes, these are the key points of Moldonado-Torres’ critique: colonial difference and resistance to dialogue. Analyzing his reading of Milbank is beyond the scope of this essay, but the overlap in his critiques of Milbank and Žižek are pertinent to a consideration of Žižek’s work on theology. Moldonado-Torres argues that Žižek is guilty of the same errors and the resultant return to old Christian prejudices. These errors are complicated by Žižek’s particular mixture of Christianity and “Lacanian Marxism” (50). As one might expect, Moldonado-Torres is especially critical of Žižek’s writings on identity politics. Coming out of Žižek’s writings on Paul, which extends the latter’s “universalization of male and Christian bodies,” Moldonado-Torres argues that Žižek’s “conception of universality collapses into a defense of *universalized provinciality*” (53, italics in original). This flawed treatment of particularity is diagnosed as indicative of a larger trend in a European philosophy that is marked by the Eurocentrism discussed above.

The trick of Eurocentrism is that it matches identity politics with the search for the universal, and then opposes identity politics elsewhere as vicious forms of victimization. The search for the universal is thus tied to exclusivism, and the affirmation of particularity: the highest religion, Christianity, corresponds with the highest civilization Europe (53).

Not only does this contribute to Žižek’s aggression towards identity politics, it reveals his interpretation of the relationship of Judaism and Christianity, mediated by Paul, as anti-Semitic.^{vii}

Thus, from the perspective of Moldonado-Torres, the mutual errors of Milbank and Žižek are clear: both operate within an often unacknowledged Eurocentrism. For Milbank, this epistemological confinement results in the misreading of liberation theology’s relationship to social sciences and forecloses dialogue with other traditions.^{viii} Žižek’s Eurocentrism leads to the incorrect elevation of a particular to the level of the universal, resulting in a similar inability to enter into dialogue with other traditions. Moldonado-Torres summarizes this critique succinctly: “Christian and Marxist Orthodox oppositions to secular liberalism are thus the outcome of an intramodern struggle for the heritage of Western exceptionalism and universality. The overall result is the *recolonization* of entire areas of thought and the suspension of dialogue” (53).

This comparison of Milbank and Žižek provides several points for consideration that are only enhanced by their recent collaboration.^{ix} For the purpose of analyzing liberation theology, however, two preliminary points are necessary. First, Moldonado-Torres’ argument against Eurocentrism must be affirmed. The relationship between European and Latin American philosophy and theology is largely one way. European discussion of Latin American thought tends to take the pattern of “look how well they adopt our theories.” Milbank and Žižek may be criticized

at this point. Neither regularly draws on non-North Atlantic traditions. This exclusion is problematic to the extent that they offer global programmatic statements. Second, in qualification of the first point, the critique of Žižek's position on universalism deserves more consideration. Though Žižek tends to remain safely within the confines of European theory, he sometimes ventures beyond and adopts a position similar to that of Moldonado-Torres. Moreover, it is in these moments that one glimpses the particular nature of Žižek's universalism.

The clearest example of Žižek's ability to extend beyond a Eurocentric position is found in his discussion of Haiti. In his most recent work, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* the Haitian Revolution is posed in Žižek's familiar dialectical form: it is only when the Haitians took up the revolutionary ideas of the French that the French encountered the Real of revolution. "The ex-slaves of Haiti took the French revolutionary slogans more literally than did the French themselves: they ignored all the implicit qualifications which abounded in Enlightenment ideology" (Žižek 2009: 112). Indeed, Žižek argues that the Haitian Revolution is not important because it is an example of European revolutionary ideas. Rather, the revolutions of Europe cannot be understood apart from the events in Haiti (Žižek 2009: 121). This understanding of the Haitian Revolution is crucial to understanding Žižek's universalism. This point is clearly articulated when he quotes Susan Buck-Morss, who writes

rather than giving multiple, distinct cultures equal due, whereby people are recognized as part of humanity indirectly through the mediation of collective cultural identities, human universality emerges in the historical event at the point of rupture. It is in the discontinuities of history that people whose culture has been strained to the breaking point give expression to a humanity that goes beyond cultural limits (Buck-Morss 2009: 133 in Žižek 2009: 112).

While this kind of argument does not absolve Žižek of the charge of Eurocentrism, it does show that his arguments have the capacity of extending beyond epistemologies defined by a limited geography.^x Even if his work is clearly concerned with European (or perhaps, North Atlantic) thought, it is arguable that this limit is not necessary.

On the other hand, in an example of the interpretation of Paul that Moldonado-Torres opposes, "there are no Greeks or Jews, no men or women" becomes "there are only those who fight for emancipation and their reactionary opponents; the people and the enemies of the people" (Žižek 2009: 45). Here Žižek is clearly guilty of exclusionary rhetoric. If on the one hand, we can argue that Žižek surpasses the charge of neglecting particularity, we must also admit that he is not willing to accept all perspectives. There are some who deserve to be excluded.^{xi} While it is certainly possible to argue about *who* deserves to be excluded, Moldonado-Torres and Žižek have a fundamental disagreement in that the latter does not hesitate to name those he deems "reactionary opponents."

In order to grasp the implication of Žižek's position we turn to the opening pages of

Moldonado-Torres' essay, where he writes, "Liberation theology's achievements... appear quite limited and problematic when looked at from the perspective of women and peoples of color in the Americas" (41). The Žižekian response to this statement, must be "No. If women and people of color are ignored within liberation theology, then it is not only from their perspective that liberation theology is failing. It is failing without qualification." It is at this point that Žižek's reading of Badiou is helpful. As Žižek explains in *The Ticklish Subject*, the "Event is the Truth of the situation that makes visible/legible what the 'official' situation had to 'repress', but it is also always localized...the Truth is always the Truth of a specific situation" (Žižek 2000: 130). Badiou and Žižek certainly have their differences, but at this point they agree. It is always these repressed specific sites that give opportunity to the potential burgeoning of universal subjectivity. Thus, in an example that particularly suits Moldonado-Torres' own work on race, Žižek demonstrates how the particularity of the struggle of African Americans relates to the universal struggle of oppressed people. Revising a statement made by Black Power founder Stokely Carmichael, Žižek argues "what the oppressors really fear is ... a self-definition which, by way of appropriating key elements of the 'white' egalitarian-emancipatory tradition, *redefines that very tradition* ... obliterating the implicit qualifications which have *de facto* excluded Blacks from the egalitarian space" (Žižek 2009: 120). The Truth does not result from the particularity of blackness (or whiteness), but in reconfiguring the dominant tradition from the underside of history.

Moldonado-Torres offers an important critique of a Eurocentrism that dominates theological and philosophical discourse. Regarding Milbank, the critique ultimately takes the form of "Yes, but..." Yes, Milbank's theological appropriation of postmodernism enables a critique of secular reason. But, this critique obscures and perpetuates a more fundamental colonial difference. Similarly, Moldonado-Torres problematizes Žižek's rejection of particularity in the name of universalism. In this case, however, subsequent work has rendered clearer how Žižek's universalism in fact acknowledges particularity. Rather than dismissing particularity Žižek sees particularity as naming specific sites of a universal struggle. For Žižek, this universality is what distinguishes his communist approach from socialism. Communism is characterised by the universality of the proletariat (Žižek 2009: 99). In the terms of Moldonado-Torres critique, "in contrast to socialism, communism refers to singular universality, to the direct link between the singular and the universal, bypassing particular determinations" (104).

Manuel J. Mejido: Psychoanalysis and Liberation Theology

In the same collection of essays, Manuel J. Mejido adopts a much different position regarding Žižek. Mejido argues that liberation theology is facing an impasse resulting from both internal and external tensions. He suggests that the way forward may be found in appropriating Žižek's reworking of Lacan. Mejido opens with a consideration of the relationship between traditional

theology and liberation theology. He describes the former as a historical-hermeneutic science, which means “they have established theological knowledge through the *interpretation* of the meaning of transcendence” (Mejido 2005: 119). Liberation theology differs in that it is a critically oriented science. It was “never satisfied with the interpretation of the meaning of transcendence grasped through the restricted categories of praxis,” but instead “establish[es] a theological knowledge that is interested in the *making* of transcendence” (Mejido 2005: 119).^{xii}

An external misinterpretation and internal loss of self-understanding have resulted in a confusion of liberation theology’s role as a critically oriented science. External critics tend to evaluate liberation theology as a historical-hermeneutic science. One result of this confusion is the frequent accusation of vulgar materialism. Liberation theology is charged with complicity in totalitarianism, an accusation that invariably leads to the theological reification of liberal-democracy. Paralleling Moldonado-Torres, Mejido claims this criticism relies on a faulty understanding of the foundational relationship between social sciences and theology. Rather than submitting wholeheartedly to the dictates of Western social sciences, “theologies of liberation... occupy themselves with the more radical task of elucidating a certain social theoretical perspective that emerges from within the limits of theology...” (122).

Liberation theology itself is partially responsible for this misinterpretation in its failure to maintain its role as the first theology to move beyond the historical-hermeneutic sciences. Mejido argues that this internal problem is composed of a dialectic between epistemological and empirical issues. This dialectic underlines the core of liberation theology which is built on the relationship between theory and praxis.

The theoretical problem of grounding liberation theology, the system of thought – a problem that is generated by the liberationist rupture with the historical-hermeneutic theological sciences – is realized praxeologically by liberation theology, the social movement, as making a rupture with the basic coordinates of U.S.-style liberal-democratic capitalism, the latest moment of the dialectic of the Americas. Bringing forth and negotiating this dialectic, which has always been “there,” is precisely the problem of a Marxian social theoretically oriented theory of knowledge as the implicit foundations of the critically oriented theological sciences of liberation (124).

Mejido pushes the critique of liberation theology’s internal failures further. It has been too concerned with defending its relationship to Marxism, fearing the charges of complicity with totalitarianism, neglecting the more foundational issue of defining liberation theology’s operation as a critically oriented science. Two interrelated oppositions define this operation. First, there is the tension between poiesis and praxis. Second, there is the tension between the universality and the particular concerns of specific liberation theologies. These two tensions feed into one another. The first tension has led to liberation theology’s reduction to cultural commentary. This reduction is actually the mutation of an attempt to supplement the exclusive focus on material-economic

conditions with “praxeological transformation of symbolic-cultural conditions” (Mejido 2005: 125). Mejido argues that liberation theology has shifted more and more to an exclusively cultural critical role. Such a shift disintegrates the originally dialectical tension between poiesis and praxis into a dualism.

While not denying the importance of liberation theology’s ability to address the symbolic-cultural elements of oppression, Mejido sees the increasing neglect of the material-economic as debilitating. The second tension thus builds on the first, demonstrated by the development of what amounts to a liberation theology rooted in identity politics. Mejido argues

the turn to the particular is achieved in and through a postmodern conception of culture grounded in language that annihilates the category of social labor that, as the universal, is what socio-historically mediates the particulars. In the end the second tension, like the first, falls captive to the historical-hermeneutic reduction of the emancipatory cognitive interest (127).

Mejido argues that in order to recuperate liberation theology’s original potency it is necessary to reject the hermeneutic-historical model. The return to liberation theology’s role as a critically oriented science, he states, might be accomplished through following postmodernism through the linguistic turn. Rather than following this trajectory through the turn to particularity, thereby rejecting a meta-narrative of liberation, he suggests appropriating Žižek’s reworking of Lacanian psychoanalysis (Mejido 2005: 133-6).

At this point, the parallels between Mejido’s diagnosis of liberation theology and Žižek’s frequent indictment of leftist politics are clear. Žižek decries the relegation of Marx’s insights to the realm of cultural studies, just as Mejido argues against the dilution of liberation theology into “the *interpretation* of popular knowledge, culture, and religion as liberative” (125). Žižek argues that what is needed is a repetition of Marx “not as he was” (Derbyshire 2009: no pagination), which is precisely the same kind of operation Mejido proposes regarding liberation theology. Žižek states that the culture war is the displacement of a class war (Žižek 2009: 33). Mejido articulates a need to return to understanding the symbolic-cultural as fundamentally wed to the material-economic. Again, Žižek’s description of the relationship between the universal struggle of liberation and the activity of particular geographical or cultural communities comes into play. It is not, as Moldonado-Torres suggests, that for Žižek the struggles of women or Afro-Caribbean people are insignificant. Rather, using Badiou’s terminology, it is that the Truth of these struggles is not found in their particularity. Rather, they are particular manifestations of a universal struggle for liberation. Furthermore, this discussion takes place in the context of what both Mejido and Žižek describe as blackmail. Mejido wants to move out from under the confines of theologies that “mistook the emancipatory interest of the theologies of liberation for vulgar materialism and put forth the ‘blackmail’ that any radical emancipatory project that attempts to push beyond the coordinates of

liberal-democratic capitalism would lead inevitably to totalitarianism” (120). Žižek responds with encouragement: “the time for liberal-democratic moralistic blackmail is over. Our side no longer has to go on apologizing” (Žižek 2009:8).

Mejido’s essay concludes with an outline of how psychoanalysis might serve as a guide for reconstructing the foundations of liberation theology. He argues that Žižek’s “reworking of Jacques Lacan provide the possibility of theoretically overcoming the postmodern reduction of social reality to the hermeneutic conception of language and therapeutically going beyond the naturalization of global liberal-democratic capitalism” (Mejido 2005: 138). He demonstrates this reconstruction through a discussion of U.S. Hispanic theology and the experience of *mestizaje*.^{xiii} The hermeneutic concept of language, which Mejido describes as “grounded in the idealist idea of language as presence, disclosure, and understanding,” does not match the fragmented experiences of *mestizaje* (140). He finds this concept in Žižek’s reinterpretation of Lacanian psychoanalysis. This conception, characterized by “lack, dissimulation, and alienation” is capable of responding to the experiences of cultural production and reproduction that define the U.S. Hispanic experience. Mejido argues that through adopting a pastoral psychological approach, U.S. Hispanic theology may begin to analyze “the way U.S. Hispanic popular religious beliefs and practices function both *ideologically* to assimilate U.S. Hispanics into the Anglo-American mainstream, and *liberatively* as resistance and forward-looking hope in the face of fragmentation” (141).

Several points within Mejido’s essay raise questions. First, in his concluding analysis of the experience of *mestizaje*, he fails to relate this particular site back to a universal critique of oppressive structures. Thus, while offering an interesting method for combining liberation theology and Žižek, he does not adequately address why psychoanalysis is able to speak to broader issues within liberation theology. The parallels to Žižek are clear, but he does not elaborate on the implications of these parallels. By failing to extend his argument, Mejido risks elucidating a theory that repeats an error that Žižek critiques – isolating particular struggles, rooted in questions of identity, from a broader emancipatory vision. Second, his reading of Žižek is sometimes problematic. For example, he states “the end of Lacanian psychoanalysis is to liberate the subject from language, or stated positively, to achieve the Real beyond language” (133), but finds Žižek necessary to develop this position into one feasible for founding a pastoral psychological practice. Recent secondary work argues that Žižek may actually misread Lacan at this precise point (Pluth 2008). The psychoanalytic concept of language that Mejido endorses is thus not Žižek’s, but Lacan’s, even if Žižek’s work on the topic allows for a fresh repetition of Lacan’s insights. While the focus of this essay is not the relationship between Lacan and Žižek, it is at these points that his attempt to appropriate Žižek begins to break down. Psychoanalysis may provide the kind of theory necessary to reconfigure liberation theology, and Žižek may be especially helpful in this process, but we must move beyond Mejido in order for such a reconfiguration to occur.

Conclusion

In Moldonado-Torres and Mejido we have two substantially different reactions to Žižek. Moldonado-Torres sees Žižek as perpetuating the colonial slight of European epistemology. Mejido sees him as a resource for the reconfiguring of liberation theology's foundations. In the course of our analysis, we hope to have shown that, while Moldonado-Torres highlights the importance of attending to colonial difference, he misses Žižek's ability to relate the relationship between the struggles of particular communities and the universal struggle for liberation. Mejido represents, in part, this counter reading. He uses Žižek to combat the tensions in liberation theology which have resulted in this critically oriented science slipping into the impotency of the historical-hermeneutic.

In his book *Violence*, Žižek distinguishes between subjective and objective violence. Subjective violence, briefly, is manifested in acts of brutality: a woman is raped, there is genocide in an African country, the list of horrors can continue indefinitely. He contrasts this mode of violence with objective violence.

The catch is that subjective and objective violence cannot be perceived from the same standpoint: subjective violence is experienced as such against the background of a non-violent zero level. It is seen as the perturbation of the "normal," peaceful state of things. However, objective violence is precisely the violence inherent to this "normal" state of things. Objective violence is invisible since it sustains the very zero-level standard against which we perceive something as subjectively violent (Žižek 2008: 2).

To appropriate Mejido's distinctions, theology as a historical-hermeneutical science is unable to respond to the strata of objective violence. Žižek hits on this precise point when he criticises theological responses to the recent financial collapse. "This disgusting spectacle of cheap moralization is an ideological operation if there ever was one: the compulsion (to expand) inscribed into the system itself is translated into a matter of personal sin, a private psychological propensity" (Žižek 2009: 37). With the appropriation of Marx, liberation theology underwent the transformation of becoming a critically oriented science. Within theology, it remains uniquely situated to perceive the objective strata of violence, claiming alongside Žižek that "[t]he self-propelling circulation of Capital thus remains more than ever the ultimate Real of our lives" (Žižek 2009: 37). In its current state, however, liberation theology risks losing the momentum of its critical turn. Again in Mejido's terms, if liberation theology cannot escape its ever more common role as one amongst many historical-hermeneutical sciences, then theology's ability to speak of the material liberation of the poor will be compromised. For if Žižek's critique of ideology tells us anything, it is that the oppression of the poor nearly always happens at the level of objective violence; it is the condition of our normalcy

In the course of analyzing existent receptions of Žižek, we have seen three points at which

Žižek intervenes on issues within liberation theology. First, liberation theology must not submit to the blackmail of liberal-democratic capitalism; communism does not inherently lead to totalitarianism. Liberation theology's role is not to apologize for failures of past regimes, but to deploy a critical theology in the name of egalitarian justice. Second, liberation theology must revisit the relation of material-economic conditions and cultural politics. Third, but inextricable from the second point, it must operate as a universal struggle manifested in particular situations. The task of speaking to the oppression of specific communities must be part of the broader liberation of the proletarian subject.

The absence of liberation theologians from Žižek's work may be curious, but not particularly detrimental to his engagement with theology. Liberation theology, however, in failing to engage with Žižek, and the renewed debate about communism within contemporary theory, misses an opportunity to circumvent its current impasses. His diagnosis of contemporary ideology allows liberation theology to follow his realignment of contemporary political debate. Liberalism argues that we must balance the demands of the oppressed with the preservation of individual freedom, represented above all by the freedom of choice. Žižek rejects this arrangement, arguing not only that this freedom of choice is not really freedom at all, but also that we have the freedom to make Truth. Put in Mejiro's terms, Žižek offers liberation theology the ability to rethink its role as a maker of transcendence. This criticism of freedom conceived of primarily as negative freedom brings Žižek back into debate with Milbank. In *Theology and Social Theory*, Milbank critiques liberation theology at precisely this point, writing that liberation theology is trapped by an understanding of salvation that "is either individualist, or else reducible to a secular promotion of negative freedom" (Milbank 1993: 209). Žižek's reading of the Marxist tradition offers a different position that could be appropriated to support liberation theology.

In a recent work, Ivan Petrella criticizes liberation theology along lines similar to those presented here. He argues that liberation theology must regain its lost ability to speak of material contexts. He presents this recovery as a return to the primacy of class. As of now, liberation theology finds itself powerless 'because the upsurge of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality as organizing axes for liberation theology has blurred the fact that material deprivation, that is, the deprivation that comes from one's class standing in society, remains the most important form of oppression' (Petrella 2008: 82). Petrellas concludes his argument for the centrality of class by suggesting '[p]erhaps the future of liberation theology lies beyond theology' (148). Perhaps it lies in Žižek.

- i There are two books entirely devoted to this topic: Marcus Pound's *Žižek: a very critical introduction* (2008) and Adam Kotsko's *Žižek and Theology* (2008). Kotsko even briefly addresses the unexplored connections between Žižek and liberation theology. In addition to the various books in which Žižek discusses theology, several texts have chapters devoted to the topic, including, but not limited to, *Criticism of Heaven: On Marxism and Theology* (Boer 2006) and *Interstices of the Sublime: Theology and Psychoanalytic Theory* (Crockett 2007). Additionally, Žižek's work has been discussed and critiqued in *Cities of God* (Ward 2000), *Genealogy of Nihilism: Philosophies of Nothing and the difference of theology* (Cunningham 2002), several essays in *Theology and the Political: the New Debate* (Davis, Milbank, and Žižek ed. 2005), *Theology, Psychoanalysis, and Trauma* (Pound 2007), and *Political Myth: On the Use and Abuse of Biblical Themes* (Boer 2009).
- ii For the purpose of this essay I will use liberation theology, in the singular, to denote the particular theological movement connected to Marxism that has been concentrated in Latin America and so-called "third world countries." While theology has always included a political dimension, liberation theology is typically described as beginning during the period leading up to the Second Vatican Council. The publication of Gustavo Gutiérrez's *A Theology of Liberation* in 1971 provided an initial codification of the concerns of the movement generally. Subsequent scholarship and action has broadened to include not just class conflict, but also race, gender, sexuality, and globalisation. Liberation theology is thus not meant to denote homogeneity, but differentiates liberation theology from other theological discourse by its fundamental concern with the liberation of the oppressed. One might also speak of theologies of liberation, but for the purpose of this essay the broader designation is sufficient.
- iii The most accessible introduction is Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff's *Introducing Liberation Theology* (2007). More detailed analysis, may be found in *Liberation Theology: The Essential Facts About the Revolutionary Movement in Latin America and Beyond* (Berryman 1987) and *The Emergence of Liberation Theology: Radical Religion and Social Movement Theory* (Smith 1991). Casting a wider perspective, addressing liberation theology's connection to North Atlantic political and intellectual developments, Michael Löwy's *The War of Gods: Religion and Politics in Latin America* (1993) may be of particular interest to readers of the *International Journal of Žižek Studies*. Each of these texts contains a version, varying in level of detail, of the historical narrative that follows.
- iv This list is of course merely an overview of some of the most well-known and prolific liberation theologians.
- v It is important to note that the volume in which the essay appears was published in 2005, several years before the publication of Žižek and Milbank's public collaboration. Also, this essay appeared before Žižek's most recent work, which is utilized in the following discussion. This recent work, however, does not represent a substantial departure from his previous positions.
- vi Radical Orthodoxy is a theological movement that takes its name from a volume of essays entitled *Radical Orthodoxy: A new theology* (1999). Edited by Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward, it initiated a series of books attempting to develop a theology that is orthodox not only in the general sense of affirming "credal Christianity and the exemplarity of the patristic matrix," but pushing further to "a richer and more coherent Christianity that was gradually lost sight of after the late Middle Ages" (1999:2). This orthodoxy was "radical" in its return to patristic and medieval theology, its use of this return to "criticise modern society, culture, politics, art, science, and philosophy," and its refiguring of the traditions that it draws from (2).
- vii For a different perspective on Žižek's writing on Judaism, see Kotsko 2008: 88-100.
- viii Interestingly, when Milbank and Žižek debated at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London (18 June 2009), Milbank stated he was open to the insight of other religious traditions. Žižek denounced this stance as too pluralistic.
- ix In what follows, we focus on Moldonado-Torres arguments against Žižek. While Milbank, and those who share his perspective, might take issue with Moldonado-Torres characterizations, these issues lie beyond the focus of this essay.
- x Again, it is important to note that *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* was published in 2009, four years after Moldonado-Torres critique. Nonetheless, it is arguable that this position is a continuation of earlier ideas, contained in works such as *The Ticklish Subject*.
- xi Žižek uses Hitler as an example (Žižek 2009: 39-40).
- xii These distinctions are appropriated from Habermas. Mejido provides a detailed explanation of his usage of these terms in his essay "Theology, Crisis and Knowledge-Constitutive Interests, or Towards a Social Theoretical Interpretation of Theological Knowledge" (Mejido 2004). A side note, some of Mejido's work is published under his full name Manuel Jesus Mejido Costoya.
- xiii Mestizaje is a cultural concept referring to people of a mixed European and indigenous American heritage. This group makes up the majority of people in and from Latin America.

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