

Lúcio Álvaro Marques, Luis Martínez Andrade

THE DEFENSE OF AN ECOLOGICAL ETHIC OF LIBERATION: LEONARDO BOFF'S CRITIQUE OF THE EXPLOITATIVE NEOLIBERAL MODEL

Latin American philosophy (LAPh) should possibly not be seen as a “philosophy without more”, that is, as if it had always been recognized as such within the international agora of thought [Zea 1989]. Nor is it a question of self-deprecation or a lack of struggle for recognition. It emerged in a peripheral and underbalanced condition, although this does not mean that it remains so today. To explain the place that the LAPh occupies in the history of global philosophical thought, we will first describe the main stages of its formation until its consolidation in the last decade and, in the second, we will present liberating ecological ethics in the formulation of Leonardo Boff (born in 1938, in the state of Santa Catarina, Brazil) as a response to two problems: the global climate crisis and the search for the institutionalization of a fully-fledged Brazilian democratic policy. The question that emerges from this and will be discussed in this article is, what does ecological ethics mean within the LAPh? The legitimacy of this philosophy as an autonomous form of philosophizing from Latin America is at issue.

1. Liberation Philosophy as a Genuine Latin American Philosophy

The philosophy of liberation (PhL) is one of the main distinguishing marks of Latin American thought. This is not to overestimate or belittle what has been done here over time, since the colonial invasion in 1492. Instead, it's about recognizing and situating a field of analysis capable of equating what place the LAPh occupies within the international agora of thought. It is not a question of finding a distinctivist thought or a tribalist ethnic philosophy whose identity would apply strictly to Latin America, nor a universalist thought that would characterize the LAPh as a mimetic act of universal philosophy. Therefore, the option of thinking about Latin America from the theoretical position of the middle ground, integrating the use of universally valid arguments, produced wholly or partly by Latin American thinkers and capable of arousing “interest inside and outside Latin America” [Nuccetelli 2021: 94]. This is the hallmark of what can be called LAPh. Looking back over the history of PhL, it is possible to identify how and when this form of philosophical understanding emerged.

What characterizes the LAPH as a whole is that it thinks about Latin America from the perspective of oppression, resulting in a commitment to political thinking on the one hand and liberating thinking on the other. This condition would give rise to what is considered to be the LAPH's own character: "true thinking, the only one possible for them. This true thinking is what expresses and realizes the original fundamental structure of human existence, as being-within-another, a radically political structure, which in Latin America is subject to domination" [Beorlegui 2010: 669]. This philosophy's fundamental starting point is therefore an anti-colonial or anti-hegemonic reflection on the political situation that has imprisoned the Latin American continent for more than three centuries in a system of primary exploitation and dilapidation of its natural resources. The issue is to consider Latin America's identity beyond mere colonial mimicry and the colonization of time and space that would establish the Iberian Peninsula as the metric and mirror for its development. Breaking away from colonialism is not just about bringing about political change by establishing the seat of power within the continent itself. It requires much more than that, especially thinking about the condition of situating oneself in the world beyond the reproduction of the culturally and socially internalized colonial system.

Naturally, a characterization as general as this needs to be broken down into its stages in order to be properly understood. On the one hand, we need to consider the social, political and cultural backgrounds that shaped the theoretical scenario in which the foundations of PhL emerged and, on the other, we need to recognize the main currents of thought that resulted from this. Let's move on from there. The social, political and cultural backgrounds are intertwined with the foundations of philosophy, roughly understood as the first generation. Let's look at the main antecedents [ibid.: 677-690]: the economic one, characterized by the theory of dependent development based on the colonial subordination of the economy and which operated in the post-colonial period in new forms of dependence, both scientific-technological and due to the external indebtedness of national economies; the pedagogical one, which remained centred on a primary relationship of theoretical mimicry and which was recolonized in the post-independence period through the underdevelopment of research and academic production far removed from the immediate reality of researchers; the theological, marked by the hierarchy of the inheritance of missionary Christianity through the suppression of indigenous and Afro-descendant religions under the monopoly of Christian preaching; the literary, where Iberian aesthetics predominated with a disregard for pre-Columbian nativist literature; and the theoretical, with the growing awareness of cultural dependence, the need to think of its cultural autonomy as a concomitant part of political autonomy also grew [ibid.: 686].

From this background came the main currents of the LAPH [ibid.: 697-700]: the first was the ontological current, whose central concern was to build the identity of the Latin American peoples, both as historical subjects of action and as objects of reflection and historical liberation from colonial conditions, above all thinking of them as those oppressed by the system of exclusion of the center versus the periphery, the developed versus the underdeveloped, the global north versus the global south. The second current was the analytical (not the analytical stance). This brings together the analytical tendency with the dialectical duty to think of Latin American peoples as the "other" – the marginalized, the impoverished, the subject denied – by colonial forces. Analytics goes beyond pure knowledge of the historical situation as it integrates a commitment to revolutionary liberation struggles. The third current is the historicist current itself, bringing together the Marxist and Freudian conceptual apparatus to analyze colonial history, as well as recognizing the

common object of the Latin American peoples – the struggle for liberation – and the effort to understand their own reality and find solutions to national problems. The fourth is the problematizing current, which focuses on the problem of language, ideology and the methodology of Latin American thought itself. It arises from the need to overcome mere theoretical populism or simple militancy and to institute a new way of thinking.

It is in this demarcation that we must consider what we have come to call the stages in the history of PhL, namely its historical germ up to its characterization in the present, taking into account the current cycle of post-colonial debates. By cross-referencing the social, political, and cultural background and the main currents of the PhL, we can arrive at the following dating of the phases in the historical development of this thought. Let us take a look at a summary of the stages [Marques 2023: 219]:

Since the *affaire* between Leopoldo Zea and Salazar Bondy, the philosophy of liberation has counted five generations: the first, concerning the origin and foundation of liberating thought (1960–70); the second, on the development and foundation of Latin American criticism (1970–1989); the third, on the development and critical updating of philosophy (1989–2000); the fourth, the broad interlocution of philosophy with interdisciplinary perspectives (2000–2013); and maturity and historical dialogue through the creation of research networks and dissemination of this philosophy (from 2013). After all, what is a philosophy of liberation?

What characterized the emergence of the PhL was (i) the centrality of dependency theory in all aspects of social, political and economic life; (ii) the development of liberation theology, overcoming the understanding of liberation merely from sin for an understanding of the historical and social liberation of impoverished peoples; (iii) the recognition of social praxis and dialogue through Marxist categories for analyzing the socio-historical context, promoting the centrality of orthopraxis in relation to orthodoxy; and (iv) the promotion of “unparalleled literary creativity” as a principle for the self-knowledge of Latin American peoples [Bello Ortiz et al. 2009: 402]. The *affaire* between Zea and Salazar Bondy created the need to formulate a way of thinking that wasn't merely universalist and that did not get lost in theoretical distinctivism. This gave rise to the debate on the fundamental bases of liberating thought, the main aim of which was established as “liberation philosophy [which] is then the first philosophical movement that begins the epistemological decolonization of philosophy itself, from the world's periphery, criticizing the pretension of universality of modern European and North American thought located at the center of the world system” [ibid.: 399–400]. Due to the atopy – the non-place – of Latin America in the system of thought about the Iberian Peninsula in the colonial period, and the global North in the post-colonial period, the need arises to seek a theoretical and spatial delimitation so that Latin America can no longer think of itself as the work of colonial development, but from within itself.

It was in this spirit that the second phase of the PhL emerged in the struggle for the development and foundation of Latin American criticism, even knowing that this would not happen without recourse to the European theoretical framework. There was no intention of committing epistemological parricide. What was at stake was more than that; it was finding the conditions to think about Latin America beyond the colonial system. In this sense, historical experience has shown that the common point between all the countries of the continent was one – the poor – as a historical result of the colonial system perpetuated in the

system of economic dependence. Far from being an abstract conceptual category, the poor became the catalyst of the PhL extended to the various spheres of our reality, namely, the poor as the other of the world system of exploitation is instantiated in the peoples “indigenous, Afro-American, working class, peasant and popular, marginal, feminist, anti-racist movements, etc.” The condition of arduous poverty extended to all countries at that time (the 1970s and 1980s) unified struggles for the liberation of the “pauper ante festum”, i.e. all those who needed to transform their bodies into merchandise to be included in the productive and exploitative system of capital [ibid.: 406].

The third stage in the development of the PhL was marked by the “development and critical updating of philosophy (1989–2000)”, which no longer accepted the need to live in a condition of dependence on the global North, i.e. it wanted to establish new political, social and economic conditions in relations between the global North and South. The asymmetrical subordination of North-South relations no longer served the emancipatory interests of the PhL. It was necessary to start from a condition of known historical dependence to think about symmetrical and emancipatory political conditions for the whole continent. It was at this time that the economic and political critiques of dependency theory bore the best fruit in characterizing new forms for international and commercial relations between Latin America and the developed countries [ibid.: 409].

The fourth stage opened up philosophical dialogue with interdisciplinary perspectives (2000–2013) without breaking with the PhL’s main matrix, namely the struggle for the liberation and emancipation of peoples. This stage was fundamental both for resuming historical debates and for consolidating the new fronts of theoretical development. To put it bluntly, “liberation philosophy adapted to its time by geopolitically imposing the possibility of critical philosophical thinking from the periphery of capitalism, which began in the 15th century with colonialism and racism”. Without being bound by historicism or disregarding the deep marks left by the colonial trauma, PhL added a new analytical category, colonialism, to the category of the poor as the other of history: “thinking about coloniality was the starting point, the prerequisite for understanding the philosopher’s ‘location’ in his historical context. Its implementation from popular praxis was the second aspect” [ibid.: 411]. The interdisciplinary openness made it possible to broaden the concept of the poor, situating it from now on from the relationship between colonialism and popular and theoretical praxis. With this, the PhL reached maturity. However, this maturity does not mean that it is over. On the contrary, this was a moment of theoretical expansion and dialogue with other fronts of academic knowledge.

The maturity of the PhL since 2013 has allowed the debate to broaden and specialize. Among all the theoretical trends and research perspectives, some have had greater theoretical fortune, especially the ethical perspective. In this sense, the PhL has a strong appeal, on the one hand, to liberation theology and, on the other, to community ethics. Currently, this theology is suffering a strong counter-offensive from reactionary and conversionist segments of Catholic and Reformed theology. Since the *Instruction on some aspects of “Liberation Theology”*, signed by the then-Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Joseph Ratzinger, the theological strand of Latin American Catholicism has entered a regressive process of a certain return to orthodoxy, including the cassation of theologians such as Leonardo Boff in 1985, which led him to change course in his writing [Ratzinger 1984]. We’ll take a closer look at one perspective of his thinking in the second part of this article. In turn, liberation ethics went beyond the canons of religious thought and established itself as a new ethical paradigm:

The new ethics will consist of six principles: the material principle, the formal principle of validity, the principle of feasibility, and starting from the victims, who suffer the adverse effects of the order being carried out with a pretense of goodness, the three critical ethical principles: the critical material principle, the principle of validity of those excluded from the discourse, and the principle of critical feasibility, or rather the “principle of liberation” [Bello Ortiz et al. 2009: 414].

Thus, liberation ethics differs from deontological, normative, and pragmatic ethics, since its principle is the excluded and it assumes praxis as the basis for theoretical elaboration and as a social imperative. In any place and/or condition where there is someone excluded – the other marginalized by some hegemonic system – there is the possibility of thinking about liberation as a principle for theory and praxis. This considerably broadens what is meant by PhL, because it is no longer just a question of philosophical thought, but of the ethics imposed in the face of any form of exclusion. In the case of Latin America, the other or the poor can be found in a myriad of theoretical places: women, indigenous people, black people, the impoverished, the landless, the homeless, the unemployed, etc.

In all these conditions and theoretical places, what is at issue are the old and new forms of colonialism: the coloniality of power, knowledge, and being [Mignolo 2010]. This is another way of thinking about the intersectionality of gender, ethnicity, race, geographical location, and ageism (social opportunities affected by age criteria). The coloniality of power was the founding principle of the colonial process, which did not end with the advent of national independence, as forms of power were re-colonized by new internal or external agents, subordinating state structures to private interests. The coloniality of knowledge endures as low investment in science, technology, and innovation (ST&I) turns underdeveloped countries into mere consumers, trained to balance the trade balance by exporting raw commodities with no added value and within asymmetrical economic relations. The coloniality of being manifests itself mainly in the conservation of unequal structures, above all in intersectionality, preventing emancipatory relations of equality and social development.

Born in a peripheral country, immersed in a neoliberal market economy and profound social inequality, despite notable advances in recent decades, and a country with a rich biodiversity, Leonardo Boff developed an ecological ethic based on the recognition of the global climate crisis, critically anticipating certain discussions about Earth Overshoot Day (EOD, which in 2024 was August 1), and thinking about the need to consolidate the national democratic foundation in order to overcome the webs of dependence, namely colonialism. It is, therefore, an ethic based, on the one hand, on the critique of the climate crisis and, on the other, on reinterpreting Brazilian politics in the light of a democratic and participatory nation project. These are the foundations of Boff's ecological ethics.

2. The Socio-Enviromental Ethics of Leonardo Boff

A prolific author and important protagonist of critical thought, the Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff has developed, in recent decades, a far-reaching theoretical proposal that continues to be based on the “negative materiality” [Dussel 2013] of the victims to suggest a new socio-environmental ethic [Boff 2005]. Obviously, this socio-environmental ethic is in line with what the economist Joan Martínez-Alier has called the Environmentalism of the Poor [Martínez-Alier 2002].

Although the critique of modernity is not absent from Leonardo Boff's early work [Boff 1981], it is with his book *Latin America. From the Conquest to the New Evangelization* (*América Latina: Da Conquista à nova evangelização*), a radical critique of modernity/coloniality became evident. The 500th anniversary of the "discovery of the Americas" had an important impact on the Brazilian theologian. For instance, in his book dedicated to the figure of Francis of Assisi, we can observe two interesting ideas: the notion of "critique of analytical-instrumental reason" and the "two paradigms of being-in-the-world" [ibid.: 62]. Starting from the observation that society is suffering a structural crisis due to the dynamics of the hegemonic system, Boff is convinced that the ontological root of this crisis must be sought deeper in reality and further back in time. Drawing on the contributions of Critical Theory, the Brazilian theologian distinguishes the elements of the bourgeois ethos (desire for profit, accumulation of power, quantification) that have established another relationship with nature. Science and technology have become instruments at the service of the *ad nauseam* production of commodities, and nature has been stripped of its therapeutic and humanizing function [Boff 1992].

This is not a reactionary rejection of modernity but rather a radical questioning of its destructive dynamic, which, through the creation of surplus-value, instrumental rationality, and unlimited growth, destroys people and nature. For Leonardo Boff, the fact that reason has become a great system of world domination is due to the alienation of the 16th century bourgeoisie from the revolutionary project of modernity. Moreover, it is with the Cartesian *cogito* that the hegemony of *logos* over *eros* and *pathos* became concrete. Leonardo Boff claims the figure of Francis of Assisi as an alternative model of "being-in-the-world". Indeed, the postmodern current has also outlined the critique of the hegemony of the *logos*. However, the Brazilian theologian's critique differs from this current in that it stresses the importance of a historical project that tends to transform society radically.

Obsessed by the desire for profit and accumulation, modern bourgeois society promotes instrumental reason, which aims at the production of commodities. To the detriment of the natural conditions of social reproduction, modernity deploys a whole mechanism aimed at the incessant exploitation of man, in which the commodification goes hand in hand with the commodification of nature. Leonardo Boff identifies two paradigms of "being-in-the-world" [Boff 1981]: on the one hand, the modern one that positions itself above things, and on the other, the pre-modern one that encounters them.

This distinction has not only ethical but also ecological consequences, since in modern man this way of being on top of things translates into a relationship of domination of nature. Obviously, people need nature to ensure their reproduction. However, the destruction of the earth and the depletion of resources for the sole purpose of producing exchange values and futile commodities are the expression of one of the "authentically necrophilic dimensions" of the system. The Brazilian theologian finds in the figure of Francis of Assisi a new way of "being-in-the-world-together-with-things", where fraternization with nature expresses a horizontal relationship between creatures, in other words, of a fraternization with all things. Thus, Boff proves that it is not a question of anachronistic romanticism. It is a question of correctly understanding the fundamental structure of man, being-in-the-world-with-all-things, in a cosmic democracy [Boff 2005]. According to the Brazilian theologian, the Franciscan attitude is not limited only to another relationship to nature, since it also questions the system that produces so much poverty and destroys the social, ethical, and ecological bond.

In the face of the necrophiliac dynamics of the system, Leonardo Boff presents Francis of Assisi as a source of inspiration for a “cosmic democracy” in which bourgeois interests, selfishness, exclusive possession, the desire to dominate, and the will to power are set aside. Francis of Assisi represents the need to show a fraternal attitude towards all creatures living in the common home. Hence the importance of a synthesis between subjectivity (interior archaeology) and exteriority (exterior ecology), which the Poverello embodies and in which elements such as the principle of hope and the utopian dimension are actively involved [Boff 2003].

In this critique of modernity, we already find the root of the “ecological turn” in Leonardo Boff’s thought, a turn that will be incontestably evident at the dawn of the 1990s [Martínez Andrade 2019]. True, Franciscan sensibility played a crucial role in Boff’s approach to deep ecology, but this approach, at times paradoxical, did not prevent him from being part of concrete political projects. It is not fortuitous to see the Brazilian theologian committing himself to popular movements such as the Landless Workers’ Movement (MST) or supporting Lula da Silva’s candidacy for the presidency [Martínez Andrade 2022].

Moreover, the 500th anniversary of the “discovery of the Americas” was the setting for an intense debate on the socio-cultural and political implications of the modern-colonial imaginary forged in 1492. For the Brazilian theologian, the year 1992 marked a decisive turning point in his personal and theological trajectory [Boff, Zoja 2016]. Personal, because on June 28 of that same year, Boff decided to separate from the Franciscan order, but without abandoning St. Francis of Assisi’s dream of tenderness and fraternity. Theological because, from now on, he will engage in a reflection along ecological lines with holistic pretensions. The book *Ecology, Globalization, Spirituality* (*Ecologia, mundialização, espiritualidade*), published in 1993, marks the emergence of the new paradigm in Leonardo Boff’s thinking [Baptista 2012].

As far as the decolonial critique of capitalist modernity is concerned, it is with the book *Latin America. From the Conquest to the New Evangelization*, the Brazilian theologian places the voice of the victims of colonization at the center of the debate on the commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the “discovery of the Americas”. It is thus a radical denunciation of the socio-historical injustice experienced by the oppressed. “The invasion, writes Boff, was the greatest genocide in human history (...) Today this process continues for the two thirds who suffer from hunger, for the pauperization of the cities, for the ecological aggression, in which the poor and the indigenous are the beings most threatened with extermination by the foreign debt which represents the new tribute that the nations, kept in underdevelopment, must pay to their old and new masters” [Boff 1992: 10].

For Leonardo Boff, there is a link between ecology and liberation theology because both are concerned with the two bleeding wounds: that of misery and that of the systematic aggression against nature. It is for this reason that Leonardo Boff sees ecology as a Cry of the oppressed [Boff 1997]. This Cry is expressed both in global poverty and in the destruction of the environment. The Brazilian theologian affirms that the earth bleeds, especially in its most singular being, the oppressed, the marginalized, and the excluded, for all of them make up the great majority of the planet. It is from them that we must think of the universal balance and the new ecological world order. This is why ecology and liberation theology are sensitive to the cry of the victims who demand freedom (*Exodus* 3,7) and the redemption, not only of mankind but also of creation (*Romans* 8,22-23).

According to Boff [1997], the destruction of living conditions and the increase in global poverty go hand in hand. This relationship has ethical consequences because the cruelest contradictions are to be found on the periphery of the world economy. Capitalism and modernity have created a situation where inequalities are appalling, for example, between 1990 and 2010, the proportion of the world's population living below the poverty line is one third of humanity. At the same time, greenhouse gas emissions have increased, and deforestation has destroyed 13 million hectares of forest in 2009. Leonardo Boff argues that scientists claim that, between 1500 and 1850, one animal or plant species was destroyed every ten years, and between 1850 and 1950, one species per year. Since 1990, one species has disappeared every day. Moreover, the Brazilian theologian adds that every year, an area of 43,696 km² is converted into a desert space. The correlation between poverty and pollution is evident. Economic rationality has been imposed instead of environmental rationality and the predatory logic of capital has led to a real ecocide.

Leonardo Boff thinks that the environmental crisis is a crisis of Western, modern, capitalist civilization. Overcoming this social formation will only be possible when we understand the causes of its contradictions. This is why environmental rationality must become the central nucleus of economic logic. Thus, the Brazilian theologian proposes the construction of an environmental knowledge that distances itself from the dominant reason [Boff 2008]. In the face of the desire for accumulation and the appetite for profit, mental ecology promotes the solidarity and mutualistic dimension of human beings. Boff postulates that all these paths of ecological practice must be articulated and, therefore, only holistic ecology makes it possible to weave links between them.

Obviously, the holistic ecology proposed by the Brazilian theologian values the dimension of veneration and respect for what exists, but it does not avoid the dynamics of the capitalist system. This is why we believe that Leonardo Boff's ecological turn does not imply an abnegation or capitulation to the single thought, or worse, the pusillanimous acceptance of the hegemonic social formation: modern/colonial/capitalist oppression.

Boff recognizes the antagonistic character of the hegemonic social formation that produces a class society. Asserting that socio-economic oppression determines all other oppressions, the Brazilian theologian issues a warning: the capitalist system, as a specific socio-historical relation, generates an essential contradiction between oppressors and the exploited. This observation about the antagonistic character of the current social formation does not minimize the other demands of the oppressed, such as respect for cultural diversity, the recognition of sexual identities, or the demand for new rights [Martínez Andrade 2024].

At a time of profound crisis, whose expression today is evident not only in the economic but also in the environmental sphere, it is necessary to search for alternatives to the looming catastrophe. Today, we need theoretical and political proposals that confront the destructive logic of capital, which is leading us to the total destruction of life. In this sense, as Walter Benjamin [1979] foresaw, theology can only be helpful if it is at the service of the cause of the oppressed, therefore, it is essential to take stock of liberation theology, since it can continue to provide clues for the defense of life [Martínez Andrade 2023]. Solidarity, as Boff points out, is a central political category in the construction of a global ethos, that is, of a planetary consciousness where life is the determining axis of the actions of peoples [Boff 2000: 110].

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Received / Одержано 4.01.2025

Lúcio Álvaro Marques, Luis Martínez Andrade

The Defense of an Ecological Ethic of Liberation: Leonardo Boff's Critique of the Exploitative Neoliberal Model

Facing of the global climate crisis and the increase in social inequalities, it seems important to us to address theoretical proposals that not only produce a negative critique of the existing social formation, but also propose some socio-political and ethical signs to find alternatives. In this sense, the Ethics of liberation represents a theoretical contribution to thinking about the critique of Modernity, the contemporary ecological crisis and the limits of neoliberalism in the 21st century.

Лусіо Альваро Маркес, Луїс Мартінес Андраде

Захист екологічної етики звільнення: критика Леонардо Боффом експлуататорської неоліберальної моделі

За умов глобальної кліматичної кризи та зростання соціальної нерівності важливо звернутися до теоретичних розробок, які не лише містять негативну критику існуючої суспільної формації, але й пропонують певні соціально-політичні та етичні орієнтири для пошуку альтернативи. У цьому сенсі «Етика визволення» є теоретичним внеском у роздуми про критику Модерну, сучасну екологічну кризу та межі неолібералізму у XXI столітті.

Lúcio Álvaro Marques, Professor at the Federal University of the Triângulo Mineiro (Uberaba, Brazil).

Лусіо Альваро Маркес, професор Федерального університету Триангулу Мінейру (Убераба, Бразилія).

e-mail: lucio.marques@uftm.edu.br

Luis Martínez Andrade, Scientific Collaborator at Université Catholique de Louvain, Belgium.

Луїс Мартінес Андраде, науковий співробітник Католицького університету Лувена, Бельгія.

e-mail: l.martinez@uclouvain.be
