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PHILOSOPHIES OF LIBERATION*

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RÉSUMÉ : Cet article rappelle d'abord l'origine des philosophies de la libération en Amérique latine dans les années soixante-dix, ainsi que leurs traits caractéristiques. Il s'applique ensuite à distinguer trois types principaux : les philosophies de la libération (1) latino-américaine, (2) noire et (3) féministe. Chacun de ces types est décrit en lui-même et par référence à ses principaux interprètes.

ABSTRACT : This article first recalls the origin of the philosophies of liberation in Latin America in the 1970s and the characteristic features of those philosophies. It then concentrates on three main types : Latin American, Black and Feminist philosophies of liberation. Each type is described in itself and with references to its main interpreters.

Any philosophy arising out of the lived reality of social oppression can be called a philosophy of liberation. Like a theology of liberation, it immerses itself in concrete reality to achieve universality. Both accord a privileged place to excluded people and criticize discourse that legitimizes current dominating systems or ideologies, but they differ in presuppositions, method and categories.

The term "philosophy of liberation" originated in Latin America in the 1970s but was soon used for philosophies in other countries. Its significant insights were brought to North America by translations of the writings of Paolo Freire and Ivan Illich and inserted into philosophical discourse by 1980.

In 1974 fifteen Latin American philosophers in a kind of "manifesto" announced that a new way of thinking philosophically is coming forth in Latin America. It starts with sympathetic awareness of the oppressed, marginalized, and poor of dependent nations whom others consider to be merely an object or a being. It intends to eliminate philosophies which ignored these oppressed people, and it attempts to think consistently from the viewpoint of the other situated outside of current dominant oppressive systems. Only from within the practice of liberation would it clarify "the real categories which will allow *the people* of the poor and marginated to participate" humanly and fully in a "future system of greater international, national, and interpersonal justice." Thus instead of starting with abstract ontology, philosophy of libera-

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tion considers first philosophy to be relationships between people, to others and the Other.[1]

This manifesto contains elements common to a number of contemporary philosophies elaborated by African-Americans, native Americans, and feminists in the U.S. and Canada that can be called philosophies of liberation, namely :

1) acknowledging the importance of people excluded from systems and thinking with them, communally rather than individualistically,

2) developing metaphysical and epistemological categories rooted in liberating praxis, grounding theory in transformative activity,

3) attempting to change relationships to create more just societies guided by a utopian vision of a future common good.[2]

Not all philosophers of liberation are professors in universities. They may be persons who describe the folk wisdom and proverbs which express the common customs and beliefs of a people. They may be recognized wise people in a given culture who also think critically and offer alternatives to common practices and beliefs. They may be persons consciously seeking true liberation for a people primarily through sociopolitical means. Finally, a few are professional philosophers who analyze, criticize and interpret reality in general and tend to ask meta-philosophical questions such as "What is philosophy ?"

Philosophies of liberation may also be divided according to schools of thought with which they can be identified : socialist, liberal, anarchist, Freudian, Marxist, phenomenological, existentialist, postmodern, cultural, ecological, or radical.[3]

This article will concentrate on three foci where the literature is plentiful enough to identify authors and trends : the experience of Latin Americans, Blacks, and women. It will be an overview rather than an exhaustive treatment. Although philosophers' interest in the many facets of liberation is relatively recent, new insights and terms are constantly appearing. Latin American and Black liberation philosophers were influenced by the categories and critical discourse of liberation theology — by Gustavo Gutiérrez and James Cone, respectively. Feminist philosophy acknowledges the influence of European philosopher Simone de Beauvoir and also U.S. theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether.

LATIN AMERICAN

Originating in Latin America in the late 1960s as institutional violence and a culture of terror and death could no longer be ignored, liberation thought usually

1. Back cover of *Hacia una filosofía de la liberación Latinoamericana*, Buenos Aires, Editorial Bonum, 1974.
2. See Eduardo MENDIETA, "Theology of Liberation and the Liberation of Philosophy : A Latin American Perspective," *Contemporary Philosophy*, 14, 4 (July/August, 1992), p. 13.
3. Michael Leahy and Dan Cohn-Sherbok, editors of *The Liberation Debate* (New York : Routledge, 1996), suggest the following areas of liberation debate : women, black, gay, children, and animals.

started in small communities of mutual support such as the Madres de Plaza de Mayo in Argentina. They not only recognized but dared to question the status quo in the name of a utopia where life and justice are central values of social and political life.

Enrique Dussel is one example of a Latin American philosopher who took notice.[4] His thought has been stimulated by Heidegger, Marx,[5] and Levinas. He also acknowledges the influence of the Frankfurt School, with its concept of critical theory as a form of thought in the Marxist tradition committed to abolishing domination and open to a wide variety of situations.[6] He returned to Argentina from his studies abroad in 1970 ; while Augusto Salazar Bondy was asking whether a Latin American philosophy existed, while Peron was presenting himself as an anti-imperialist, and while Argentinean university re-structuring facilitated communication among philosophers. Dussel's involvement in politics led to an attempt on his life, so he moved to Mexico. In 1980 he tried to initiate a dialogue at the annual meeting of the American Catholic Philosophical Society in Philadelphia, anticipating that there would be some common basis between his views and North American pragmatism that was also theistic. Shortly thereafter he spearheaded the founding of the international Association for Philosophy and Liberation (APL) during a congress in Bogota. Membership in this association has remained small but dedicated.[7] Since 1995 the APL has supported a South-South (Africa and Asia) dialogue initiated by the American Philosophical Association, Western division.[8]

Being concerned with human relationships and actions, philosophy of liberation must work with ethical insights. Dussel says ethics *is* first philosophy, and the absolute ethical criterion by which to judge a concrete historical project is a utopia of face-to-face relations without domination. The proper method of philosophy of liberation is an *analectic* founded on faith in an other beyond one's system and on responsibility to the Absolute Other for the human other. Each human individual has a biography that is never repeated ; each one is an other who has a world and shapes history because the person is free. Each particular subject expresses the memories and dreams of a people as well. Thinkers like Dussel and Juan Carlos Scannone, SJ, are

4. Dussel has European graduate degrees in philosophy and theology as well as history and is the founder of EATWOT (Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians), the president of CEHILA (Commission for the Study of Church History in Latin America) and general editor of a series of books on the history of the church in the Third World.

5. Dussel has completed and published a thorough study and clarification of Marx's writings. Neither he nor his colleagues call themselves Marxists, however, since they do not subscribe to all of Marx's principles but only to the ones that fit their own philosophical project.

6. See Rolf WIGGERSHAUS, *The Frankfurt School : Its History, Theories and Political Significance*, translated by Michael Robertson, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1994.

7. Founding members from the Americas were soon joined by philosophers from Europe. The association persistently participates in various congresses and in the annual meeting of the American Philosophical Association, Eastern division. Their dialogue has increasingly been with phenomenologists rather than with pragmatist or analytic philosophers. Political changes in Europe since 1989 as well as recent political and economic upheavals in Mexico seem to have made no appreciable difference in their interests.

8. For an example of a North American philosopher who has been influenced by Dussel and his philosophy, see James L. Marsh's dialectical phenomenology, a version of critical modernism, in *Critique, Action and Liberation* (New York, SUNY Press, 1995).

not afraid of "metaphysics," which they define as the study of being from the experience of the "other," exteriority beyond the world and Being. Metaphysics, according to Dussel and Scannone, is a praxis that reveals what is absent or beyond the present and refuses to adore any fetish. Metaphysical activity is ethical, liberating praxis on behalf of the one denied in the reigning system. This praxis lets in transcendence.[9]

In the 1990s members of the Association for Philosophy and Liberation are in intensive dialogue with the hermeneutics of Gadamer and Ricœur and the discourse ethics of Apel and Habermas. Both discourse ethics and ethics of liberation claim to avoid thinking that is abstract, subjectivist, individualistic, ahistorical, totalitarian or universalistic. They want to respect the plurality of life-worlds. While Apel's discourse ethics adjudicates conflicting interests and claims by transforming and renewing transcendental reflection, Dussel's ethics of liberation takes solidarity with the poor (whoever is outside the social totality because of gender, class, nation, etc.) as a critical standpoint. The demands of those outside the system unmask the pretended universality of a given society and are therefore unassailable by ideology critique.[10] These poor are metaphysically "other" and can be understood only by one who encounters them closely enough to hear their cry for justice, commiserate in a nonpaternalizing way, and join in their struggle for liberation. Such a person becomes "de-centered" or detotalized from his/her "world" or totality upon realizing it was not universal. The next step is to enlarge one's life world to include those previously excluded.

Not all Latin American philosophers of liberation would accept Dussel's categories or prefer the same themes he does, but they all claim to use a rigorous, historical method ; to focus on "the people" and their memory, self-expression, and dreams ; and to question the method and self-concept of philosophy.[11]

BLACK

The outstanding African-American spokesman for Black philosophy of liberation is Cornel West, who insists that Black philosophy begins with historical sensibility and that the character of its work is explicitly partial, partisan, and engaged. No interpretation is divorced from values ; no facts are unmediated ; no observation language is neutral. Black philosophy is "inexplicably bound to cultural criticism and political engagement" and not confined to any one discipline.[12]

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9. Ofelia Schutte, a Cuban-American philosopher, is highly critical of Dussel's "analectic" which allows him to theorize about alterity that lies beyond totality. She accuses him of reasoning in an authoritarian way and silencing the voices of women and dissenters. See her *Cultural Identity and Social Liberation in Latin American Thought* (New York, SUNY Press, 1993).

10. Hans SCHELKSHORN, "Discourse and Liberation : Toward a Critical Coordination of Discourse Ethics and Enrique Dussel's Ethics of Liberation," *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology*, 5, 2 (November, 1997), p. 57, 62.

11. See MENDIETA, "Theology," p. 13-14.

12. Cornel WEST, "The Black Underclass and Black Philosophers," in *I am Because We Are : Readings in Black Philosophy*, edited by Fred Lee Hord (Mze Lasana Okpara) and Jonathan Scott Lee, Amherst, MA,

West is severely critical of Eurocentric cultural traditions and social practices, all of which have been infected by the idea of white supremacy. This concept has shaped modern knowledge and discourse and contributed to protracted social decline. West proposes "demystification" of Western cultural and artistic conventions as the best form of theory. Unlike advocates of "demythologizing," West "gives theory a prominent role and the intellectual a political task."[13] Demystification analyzes representational practices and takes history seriously. It scrutinizes the dynamic of power structures to reveal options and alternatives for transformative practice. Epistemic justification terminates in social practice. Human agency plays a central role, and critique is prophetic in clarifying moral and political aims. Since 1973 the lessening of U.S. economic and military power, structural changes in the U.S. economy, and the moral breakdown of communities have especially impacted those in lower economic strata and helped to divide affluent Blacks from those in the underclass.[14] Neither a Black middle-class nor a political party is sufficient to build the institutions and structures that can transmit good values.[15]

West challenges those inside the academy to promote a new cultural politics of difference. They are to be grounded in nonacademic institutions and organizations effecting social change. As "critical organic catalysts"[16] they are to be open to others, yet wary of being co-opted. They need a supportive community where critical sensibility and personal accountability are cultivated and personal expression is encouraged. They are simultaneously committed to individuality and democracy.[17]

Like West, Cheryl J. Sanders is concerned about the division between Blacks based on economic and educational differences. Black liberals emphasize *freedom from* coercion and Black conservatives desire *freedom to* do and be whatever they choose.[18] She sees the need for people who can lead Rodney King and others like him and change power structures. Black liberation ethics needs intra-group social responsibility and inclusiveness more than protest speeches and marches. The urgent present ethical task is to propose norms for moral decisions for those who have acquired access to social goods and services and are in a better position to empower others. These leaders often abandon the black community instead of using its institutions and resources to liberate those still in poverty and hopelessness. Sometimes the former oppressed becomes the new oppressor.

University of Massachusetts Press, 1995, p. 357. Lewis R. Gordon concurs that "Black studies of blackness have a rich history of simultaneously addressing the question of human liberation, the question of social identity, and the question of rigor in the study of human beings" (*Her Majesty's Other Children : Sketches of Racism from a Neocolonial Age*, Lanham, MD, Rowman and Littlefield, 1997, p. 108-109).

13. Cornel WEST, *Keeping Faith : Philosophy and Race in America*, New York, Routledge, 1993, p. 89.
14. Cornel WEST, "Unmasking the Black Conservative," *Christian Century*, 16, 23 (July, 1986), p. 644.
15. Cornel WEST, "The Black Underclass and Black Philosophers," p. 364.
16. They are similar to the "organic intellectual" of Gramsci approved by Dussel.
17. Cornel WEST, *Keeping Faith*, p. 27-28.
18. *Empowerment Ethics for a Liberated People : A Path to African-American Social Transformation*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1995, p. 101.

Sanders finds contemporary African-American moral discourse inadequate and misleading in that it tends to see well-being only in economic terms and understands wickedness in strictly social terms (as victimization or discrimination against a group). Sanders proposes a womanist empowerment ethics, defining empowerment as "the process by which an individual or group conveys to others the authority to act" (p. 4). This process begins with personal conversion or conscientization but expands to the interpersonal realm and to "remoralization," defined as becoming "positioned to make positive contributions to the moral progress of the entire community" (p. 7). Remoralization today demands "a collective response to the alienated and self-destructive state of the disinherited African American male, that is, of those demoralized by poverty, its environment, and its effects" (p. 107-108). Her message to rising professionals who begin to feel guilty for not remaining in low-income areas to serve as role models is that repentance and restitution are not enough. Justice demands a "self-critical assessment of the full cost of the equitable sharing of one's own power and resources" (p. 124).

For West, Sanders, and other African-American thinkers such as activist philosopher Angela Davis and cultural critic Bell Hooks, philosophy is neither sophisticated common sense nor scientific theory but reflective, conscious self-appropriation. Its categories arise from real questions about concrete social situations ; its purpose is to integrate knowing and doing in one's living.[19]

FEMINIST

Though not explicitly philosophical, both womanist and mujerista feminists accept the basic principles of philosophy of liberation, including its openness to interdisciplinary support and exchange. Mujerista thought is practiced by Hispanic women struggling to liberate themselves as members of a Hispanic community rather than as individuals. It demands critical intellectual reflection, inclusion of excluded groups for the sake of the good of all human beings, and political action to change oppressive economic-socio-cultural structures of society. Mujeristas attempt to deconstruct the normative, mainline, disciplinary method of theology which fails to recognize that theological understandings play an important role in Latina daily life.[20]

The volume and quality of feminist publications since the 1980s are indeed staggering, so any short summary will be inadequate. Some themes and characteristics, however, are noteworthy. The active Society for Women in Philosophy, which began in the U.S. in 1972 and in Canada in 1976, testifies to the vitality and variety of women philosophers.[21] As Mary C. Segers points out :

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19. See M. Shawn COPELAND, "The Exercise of Black Theology in the U.S.," *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology*, 3, 3 (February 1996), p. 12-13.

20. Ada Maria ISASI-DIAZ, *En la Lucha/In the Struggle : Elaborating a Mujerista Theology*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1993.

21. See their respective web sites : http://www.uh.edu/~cfreelan/SWIP/index.html and http://sbrennan.philosophy.arts.uwo.ca/swip/.

> There is much disagreement about the causes and nature of the oppression of women, and the remedies for it. Nevertheless, diverse feminist theories do not so much compete with as complement one another. Each feminist theoretical perspective is a partial, provisional answer. [...] The different varieties of feminist thought overlap and enrich one another.[22]

The first wave of feminist liberation thought, which began in the previous century, struggled for formal equality between the sexes. Achieving the right to vote was one of the great accomplishments of these pioneer bourgeois women, some of whom had tendencies to naive individualism. Prominent thinkers included Mary Wollstonecraft, Sarah Grimké, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. The second wave, rooted in diverse schools of thought, was more aware of the importance and diversity of women's lived experience. Second wave feminists saw the need for new language specific to those experiences and began to recognize the possibility that revolution might be the only solution to women's continued oppression.[23]

The feminist impact on philosophy has required more than simple modifications of philosophical methods and questions. Some feminists claim, for example, that Anglo-American philosophy, cannot serve as a basis for feminist thought "because its analytical tools are deeply embedded in a specifically and powerfully male experience of the world."[24] If philosophy has not been truly universal in perspective, nothing less is demanded than an extensive transformation of the discipline itself.[25]

Although some contributions of women to philosophy in the past have been recognized, for the most part women have been absent from this field. In Western culture, woman has been consistently defined as Other, as not-male. As a result, all fields are deprived. Taking account of each feminist perspective illuminates what is absent as well as what is present in traditions. Feminist philosophers are making it impossible to ignore women's experience in any field. Moreover, they argue convincingly that women's lived experience has political and theoretical implications. Showing how current language is unsuitable for expressing those experiences, feminists are forging new, more adequate languages.

Closely related to the experience and language themes is the recognition of how power is defined and used. Feminists see empowerment of the other to be more effective than power over another. But present "discourses of power assume relations of inequality at their very roots."[26] Empowerment demands according equal respect to all voices, persevering in dialogue, and taking individual responsibility for group welfare. The most compelling epistemological insight of feminism may lie in how it has

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22. "Feminism, Liberalism, and Catholicism," in *Feminist Ethics and the Catholic Moral Tradition*, edited by Charles E. Curran, Margaret A. Farley and Richard A. McCormick, New York, Paulist Press, 1996, p. 588.
23. Imelda WHELEHAN, *Modern Feminist Thought : From the "Second Wave" to "Post-feminism,"* Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1995. See especially p. 4, 18, 238, 246. A few of the very numerous feminist philosophers of the "second wave" are Mary Daly, Marilyn French, Sandra Harding, Alison M. Jaggar, Elizabeth V. Spelman, and Iris Young.
24. Nancy J. HOLLAND, *Is Women's Philosophy Possible ?* Savage, MD, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1990, p. 167.
25. Nancy TUANA. *Women and the History of Philosophy*, New York, Paragon House, 1992, p. XIV, 5.
26. Imelda WHELEHAN, *Modern Feminist Thought*, p. 1.

connected knowledge and power, recognizing "that legitimation of knowledge-claims is intimately tied to networks of domination and exclusion."[27]

"The personal is political" is a feminist slogan tied to critical analyses of experience, language, and power. Anti-dualist to the core, feminists have challenged the notion that the public sphere is for men and the private sphere for women. They have also identified and rejected numerous distinctions such as abstract/concrete, sameness/difference, reason/emotion particular/universal which have hardened into exclusive dualisms. Usually feminists adopt a both/and rather than an either/or stance and claim to incorporate, complete or reinterpret others' positions. Carol Gilligan, considering Lawrence Kohlberg's data to be incomplete, first developed an ethics of caring in contrast to a liberal rights-based ethic which claimed to be neutral and universalizable. Caroline Whitbeck's "feminist relational ontology" views the individual in contextual relationships and construes ethics in terms of relationship responsibilities. Recently postmodernists attack feminism itself as a metanarrative and are opposed by feminists who see "postmodernism as curiously serving ruling-group interests by preventing the formulation of oppositional consciousness in subordinate groups."[28] Ecofeminism targets the hierarchical, dualistic thinking of patriarchy which has led to widespread destruction of natural resources. Ecofeminists consider the domination of nature and of animals to be central to patriarchy and therefore central to feminist theory.

Feminism resists categorization because of its interdisciplinary, eclectic character. Feminists who engage in thought not for thought's sake but to make major social changes are certainly liberation thinkers. They have shown how devaluation of the feminine has led to the distortion of values, concerns, and priorities that are general human concerns.[29] Like Latin American and Black liberation philosophers, they have stressed the collective and acknowledged the importance of the non-rational and intuitive in human thought and action. All three of these philosophies of liberation have changed the questions seen as central to philosophy. If they are taken seriously, all philosophers will have to re-evaluate their priorities, concepts, and theories.

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27. *Knowing the Difference : Feminist Perspectives in Epistemology*, edited by Kathleen Lennon and Margaret Whitford, New York, Routledge, 1994, p. 1. See *Feminist Epistemologies*, edited by Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter, New York, Routledge, 1993.

28. Josephine Donovan, *Feminist Theory : The Intellectual Tradition of American Feminism*, New York, Continuum, 1992, p. 203. See p. 196-197, 201.

29. Jean GRIMSHAW, *Feminist Philosophers*, Brighton, Sussex, Wheatsheaf Books, 1986, p. 74. See *Feminism and Philosophy : Essential Readings in Theory, Reinterpretation, and Application*, edited by Nancy Tuana and Rosemarie Tong, Boulder, CO, Westview Press, 1995, p. XI.