“He who betrays the poor betray Christ” (Castro 2006: 10). This statement, issued by Fidel Castro following the triumph of the Cuban Revolution in 1959, captures the essence of liberation theology. Although Fidel Castro was then and remains today a professed atheist, it is fitting to begin any discussion of liberation theology with the words of Latin America’s foremost Marxist revolutionary. Liberation theology emerged in Latin America in the aftermath of the Cuban Revolution, during a period in which revolutionary opposition to the existing social, political, and economic order was a material reality, not merely a theoretical pursuit. Liberation theology encompasses both a radical interpretation and reassessment of the Bible and the Catholic Church’s role in society and a militant challenge to an existing social, economic, and political system based on violence, oppression, and exploitation. Liberation theology is not the academic pursuit of scholars confined to the Church hierarchy, but a revolutionary movement for the liberation of the poor and oppressed born out of the concrete material conditions of Latin America. In this paper, it is primarily the political aspects of liberation theology that will be addressed. Because, above all else, liberation theology must be understood not as a mere theological reinterpretation of the Catholic catechism, but as a revolutionary ideology seeking to transform society. Ultimately, liberation theology has far more in common with Marxism than it does with the vision of Christianity maintained by the Vatican.

Before beginning any discussion of the ideological principles or practical application of liberation theology, it is first necessary to briefly examine its historical evolution. For many—especially the non-religious and those engaged in progressive politics—the emergence of a revolutionary ideology within the Catholic Church may seem to be the ultimate contradiction.
the Catholic Church has continually served as a bulwark of support for the ruling classes and a staunch ideological backer of reactionary politics. In Latin America, the Catholic Church has historically served this precise function, beginning with its willing, open participation in the Spanish domination and oppression of the indigenous populations of the continent following the Spanish invasions of the “New World” in the late 15th and early 16th centuries. During the 19th century, the Latin American Church hierarchy again stood on the side of reaction as it fervently denounced the independence movements sweeping the continent and, at the orders of the papacy, urged loyalty to the Bourbon monarchy (Sigmund 1990: 17). The realization of independence throughout Latin America during the 19th century did nothing to alter significantly this trend. Following the triumph of the Cuban Revolution in 1959, the Cuban Catholic Church almost immediately established an openly hostile stance toward the new revolutionary government that dared to undertake in a project to achieve “the destruction of all privileges” (from an untitled Fidel Castro speech, 17 December 1960). In a pastoral letter published on May 17, 1960, Archbishop of Santiago, Enrique Perez Serantes placed the Cuban Church firmly on the side of the privileged, asserting that “the enemy is within” and declaring that “Communism is the great enemy of Christianity today.” However, despite the Catholic Church’s continued support for the Latin American ruling classes, in the decade following the Cuban Revolution, liberation theology emerged as a profound revolutionary force within the Latin American Church, encouraging and engaging in active participation with communists in a common struggle against local structures of privilege and against the evils of capitalism more broadly.

In order to understand this shift, it is necessary to focus on two key events within the Catholic Church itself. The first such event is the resolution of the Second Vatican Council in 1965. Without the sweeping institutional reforms established by Vatican II, there is little chance
that liberation theology would have emerged as a leading school of thought within the Catholic Church. In addition to the many alterations of specifically religious practices set forth by the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church also issued a series of statements indicating a shift towards more progressive politics. Notably, Vatican II called for a “continuing dialogue between the church and the world” while also denouncing “economic inequality and disparities between rich and poor nations” (Sigumnd 1990: 18). While this is certainly not a revolutionary or even anti-capitalist position, it signifies a clear precursor to later, more radical positions that would come to form the basis of liberation theology. Critical to this effort was Pope John XXIII’s tacit endorsement of dialogue between the church and the secular Left in Europe and Latin America. Far from casting communists and other Left anti-capitalists as the “great enemy of Christianity today” as was done by Archbishop Serantes in Cuba, Pope John XXIII affirmed that “all men [sic], believers and unbelievers alike, ought to work for the rightful betterment of this world in which all alike live” (Sigmund 1990: 19). While this is certainly not an open call to revolution or formal alliance with Marxist movements, this statement would later be cited by liberation theologians as justification for their own alliances with the revolutionary Left.

While the Second Vatican Council provided the initial spark for liberation theology, the 1968 Conference of Latin American Bishops (CELAM) meeting in Medellín, Colombia produced the basic—albeit far from fully developed—theoretical underpinnings. US journalist and advocate of liberation theology, Penny Lernoux observed in 1980 that Medellín was “one of the major political events of the century” because it “shattered the centuries old alliance of Church, military, and the rich elites” (Montgomery 1982: 99). The Medellín Conference is, perhaps, best known for its coining of the term: “preferential option for the poor.” However its most significant influence on the development of liberation theology is its application of certain
secular, social scientific political methods. Although the direct application of a Marxist
analytical framework was not yet present in this precursor to liberation theory, certain Marxist-
inspired influences are evident in the bishops’ statements. Dependency theory was surely a
prominent element in their thinking at this point. The conference’s most famous document,
Peace, denounced as a “sinful situation” Latin American countries’ “dependence on a center of
economic power around which they gravitate…so that our nations frequently do not own their
goods or have a say in economic decisions effecting them” (Sigmund 1990: 30). Additionally,
CELAM concluded:

…Latin America finds itself faced with a situation of injustice that can be called
institutionalized violence, when because of a structural deficiency of industry and
agriculture, of national and international economy, of cultural and political life, whole
towns lack necessities and live in such dependence as hinders all initiative and
responsibility as well as every possibility for cultural promotion and participation in
social and political life, thus violating fundamental rights. This situation demands all-
embracing, courageous, urgent, and profoundly renovating transformations (Sigmund
1990: 30).

This statement is critical because it demonstrates a recognition of the impact of larger, systemic
forms of oppression maintained by structures of violence that must necessarily be overthrown.
Although outright revolution was not yet the proposed method, the use of the phrase “profoundly
renovating transformations” implies a solution that goes far beyond mere reformist politics.
And, although the bishops did not openly endorse the revolutionary armed struggle ongoing
throughout the continent in the wake of the Cuban Revolution, they refused to denounce violent
revolutionary action. Instead, they merely observed: “We should not be surprised…that the
temptation to violence is surfacing in Latin America” (Sigmund 1990: 30). While Marxist class
analysis and the conception of class struggle was not yet present in CELAM’s statements, it is
clear that the bishops recognized a distinct difference between the violence of the oppressed and
the violence of the oppressor. If the “natural” order of things was being maintained through
pervasive structural violence, then those who resist domination through violent struggle could not be condemned for disturbing a peace that was only illusory in the first place.

The first concrete manifestation of a coherent, revolutionary liberation theology appears in Gustavo Gutiérrez’s 1971 treatise, *A Theology of Liberation*. This work is liberation theology what *The Communist Manifesto* is to revolutionary communism—a founding document of sorts. However, it must be emphasized that, just as Karl Marx did not *invent* communism, Gutiérrez did not *create* liberation theology. Instead, liberation theology should be understood as the manifest result of the gradual evolution of a specific branch of Catholic religious-political thought profoundly influenced by the material conditions of Latin America and the Church’s Vatican II reforms. Therefore, liberation theology—like all ideologies—cannot be fully attributed to any particular individual or any single work. However, liberation theology as a distinct revolutionary school of thought can be said to effectively begin with the publishing of *A Theology of Liberation* in 1971. Gutiérrez’s theological conclusions and methods are unique and are far more radical than those set forth by CELAM at Medellin in 1968.

The ideological basis of liberation theology, as provided by Gutiérrez and later contributors, is primarily supplied by Marxism. Although liberation theologians are careful to present their ideology as a distinct school of thought, unique from Marxism as a whole, the fact that liberation theology “freely borrows from Marxism certain ‘methodological pointers’” (Boff 1987: 28) is not contested. Liberation theology moves beyond dependency theory and the vague notions of institutionalized violence present in the works of the Medellin Conference and wholly embraces the revolutionary theory of class struggle distilled by Karl Marx in his famous proclamation that “the history of all hitherto existing society [i.e. all written history] is the history of class struggles” (Marx 1848: 34). In *A Theology of Liberation*, Gutiérrez concludes:
“To take into account only the confrontation between nations misrepresents and in the last analysis waters down the real situation. Thus the theory of dependence will take the wrong path and lead to deception if the analysis is not put within the framework of the worldwide class struggle” (Gutiérrez 1988: 54). Gutiérrez further asserts that, although it is true that “Latin American development is not viable within the framework of the international capitalist system” and, therefore, “there can be authentic development for Latin America only if there is liberation from the domination exercised by the great capitalist countries, and especially the United States of America”, any true liberation must necessarily become engaged in a “confrontation with these groups’ natural allies, their compatriots who control the national power structure” (Gutiérrez 1988: 54). This conclusion not only reveals the ideological growth of liberation theology beyond dependency theory and the general conclusions of the Medellín Conference, but also reflects an application of revolutionary Marxist thought beyond 19th century Marxism in its most narrow, orthodox form. This notion of a reactionary alliance between the local “comprador” capitalist class—along with semi-feudal national elites—and the wider international capitalist system is, whether intentionally or not, a testament to the theoretical contributions of many of Marx’s ideological successors—including Vladimir Lenin, Mao Tse-Tung and Latin America’s foremost Marxist thinker, José Carlos Mariátegui. In a dialectical, Marxist fashion, Gutiérrez understood the plight of Latin America not merely as the result of international factors or local structures of oppression and domination, but as a fluid combination of the two, existing within the wider global capitalist system.

Given this Marxist ideological basis, it becomes clear that poverty, exploitation, and oppression are not merely an inevitable historical fact willed by God or enshrined in some innate “human nature”, but are the direct result of concrete social relations constructed by mankind
itself. Thus, liberation theologians recognize that poverty cannot be solved through charitable contributions or reformist solutions that merely seek to improve the relative situation of the poor. Instead, it is necessary to fundamentally overturn a system in which “the poor are oppressed and made poor by others” (Boff 1987: 4). In A Theology of Liberation, Gutiérrez condemns narrow focus on reforms as “palliatives” that, “in the long run actually consolidate an exploitative system” (Gutiérrez 1988: 65). This realization is what separates the revolutionary, emancipatory ideology of liberation theology from reformist political and religious schools of thought that serve as “only a justifying ideology for a profound disorder, a device for the few to keep living off the poverty of the many” (Sigmund 1990: 36). When it is understood that it is the capitalist system itself that necessarily produces the “social sins” of poverty and exploitation, it becomes evident that a social solution is required. For liberation theologians like Gustavo Gutiérrez, the solution was clear—revolution and the establishment of a “more just, more free, and more human” socialist society (Sigmund 1990: 37). This sentiment is captured eloquently and succinctly in Gutiérrez’s endorsement of the conviction that “private ownership of capital leads to the dichotomy of capital and labor, to the superiority of the capitalist over the laborer, to the exploitation of man by man…. The history of the private ownership of the means of production makes evident the necessity of its reduction or suppression for the welfare of society. We must hence opt for social ownership of the means of production” (Gutiérrez 1988: 66).

The defining feature of liberation theology as a revolutionary ideology and not merely some scholastic pursuit is, however, not found in its ideological similarity to Marxism, but is evident in its emphasis on praxis—the unity of theory and practice. In the words of Gustavo Gutiérrez, “concrete, real-life movements are what give this theology its distinctive character; in liberation theology, faith and life are inseparable” (Gutiérrez 1988: xix). Liberation theology is
not a revolutionary ideology merely because it offers a philosophical or theological basis for liberation, but because it actively seeks to overthrow oppressive relations in society. In this way, liberation theology is an affirmation of Karl Marx’s famous dictum: “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it” (Marx 1888: 145). It is the alteration of material reality, not the academic development of some pristine theory that is the primary task undertaken by advocates of liberation theology. Brazilian liberation theologians Leonardo and Clodovis Boff assert that those seeking to further develop the theology should strive to be “not armchair intellectuals, but rather ‘organic intellectuals’ (in organic communion with the people) and ‘militant theologians’, working with the pilgrim people of God and engaged in their pastoral responsibilities. They certainly keep one foot in centers of study, but their other foot is in the community” (Boff 1987: 19). In a dialectical fashion, theory informs practice and practice reacts back upon and informs theory. This is the essence of revolutionary praxis.

The effective application of liberation theology can be observed throughout Latin America in the 1970s and ‘80s. Perhaps the most stirring example of this can be found in El Salvador. While the roots of liberation theology are grounded in the Medellín Conference’s “preferential option for the poor” and Gustavo Gutiérrez’s conception of revolutionary liberation through popular participation, these abstract notions provide little in the way of specificity without accompanying concrete examples. Even liberation theology’s definition of “the poor” is not well defined. Gutiérrez’s explanation of this term seems to intentionally avoid any narrow, quantitative components and, instead, provides a broad, descriptive understanding of poverty as “a subhuman condition” (Gutiérrez 1988: 164). To further clarify, Gutiérrez poetically affirms that: “Concretely, to be poor means to die of hunger, to be illiterate, to be exploited by others, not to know that you are being exploited, not to know that you are a person” (Gutiérrez 1988:
While this description may be unsatisfactory to social scientists intent on arriving at firm definitions of terms, for those priests engaged in the active practice of liberation theology in El Salvador, the meaning of poverty was quite clear—it was all around them, in their communities and in their parishes. And, in El Salvador, liberation theology was necessarily applied under extremely dire circumstances. During the course of a brutal civil war (lasting from 1979-1992), the “preferential option for the poor” was not merely a slogan or abstract call to action. The members of the Salvadoran Catholic Church who chose to oppose the existing socio-economic and political order faced the ever-present threat of violence from right wing paramilitary “death squads” working in conjunction with a corrupt, oligarchic state propped up by US aid, weapons, and advisors.

Before discussing the role of the Catholic Church in El Salvador during this time period, it is necessary to draw an important distinction between the Church hierarchy and the so-called iglesia popular, or popular Church. While the hierarchy remained a primarily conservative force in Salvadoran society and political life, the popular Church began a campaign to organize, educate, and mobilize its impoverished parishioners. The organizational efforts of radical priests in El Salvador encompassed a wide variety of activities. The most significant of these undertakings was the establishment of Christian base communities (CBCs). No longer relegated to the status of mere observers passively receiving the priest’s message during Sunday Mass, the poor and downtrodden were now empowered to actively participate in religious life. The CBCs, originally established with the support of radical clergy, were designed to be led not by the priests themselves, but by ordinary campesinos (peasant farmers) in a system that would allow for critical mass engagement with the scriptures. Unlike traditional, conservative religious messages encouraging the dispossessed to accept their fate on Earth in anticipation of some
greater reward in the afterlife, these groups emphasized biblical stories demonstrating God’s firm
stance on the side of the poor and oppressed. This new viewpoint, combined with mass popular
empowerment, radically altered the mindset of many impoverished Salvadorans. The testimony
of Maryknoll Sister Joan Petrik demonstrates a tremendous shift in the thinking of the members
of these base communities. Having worked with _campesinos_ in the Salvadoran countryside for
seven years, she attests:

> When I first arrived in Tamanique, every time a child died the family would say, “It’s the
> will of God.” But after the people became involved in the Christian communities, that
> attitude began to change. And after a year or so I no longer heard people in the
> communities saying that. After a while they began to say, “The system caused this.”
> (Montgomery 1982: 104).

Furthermore, she affirms that the _campesinos_ involved in these communities began to “walk
upright, their heads held high, with self-confidence” (Montgomery 1982: 104). This new-found
self-confidence and political consciousness had a direct and profound impact not only on
individual _campesions_, but on Salvadoran society as a whole, as many members of Christian
base communities became leaders of trade unions and, during the civil war, active members of
the revolutionary guerrilla forces.

Ultimately, however, liberation theology has been largely curbed not only in El Salvador,
but also throughout Latin America as a whole. In El Salvador this was achieved through wide
scale violent repression. The murder of six Jesuit priests and the assassination of Archbishop
Oscar Romero by right wing paramilitary forces are only prominent examples of this coordinated
campaign of violence. The final defeat of the revolutionary armed forces by the Salvadoran state
in 1992 only further solidified the retreat of liberation theology in El Salvador. However, on a
continental and global scale, it was not primarily outright violent repression that stymied the
spread of liberation theology. Instead, it was the political maneuverings of the Catholic Church
hierarchy that effectively neutralized the revolutionary potential of liberation theology. Pope John Paul II, as a staunch anti-communist and effective Cold War ally of the United States, was able to significantly derail liberation theology and return the Church to its basic centuries-old alliance with the global power structure. This was achieved through the work of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger—later Pope Benedict XVI—who not only mounted a concerted theological attack against liberationist thought, but also oversaw a campaign of outright persecution.

Cardinal Ratzinger, as prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, possessed tremendous power to regulate and enforce the Church hierarchy’s dominant theological interpretation. Targeting liberation theology for its tendency to “make use of different concepts [i.e. Marxism] without sufficient caution,” Ratzinger dismissed liberation theology as a vision of Christianity that placed undue emphasis on “liberation from servitude of an earthly and temporal kind” (Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 1984). And, although he was careful to avoid dismissing these powerful ideas outright, Ratzinger essentially endorsed a return to the traditional conservative belief that the poor must accept their lot on Earth in anticipation of the glory of Heaven. In practice, Pope John Paul II and Cardinal Ratzinger’s concerted attack on liberation theology was not only confined to theological criticism and silencing of dissent, but was also manifest in the Church’s concrete policies.

Ultimately, the Church hierarchy was able to overcome the “threat” of liberation theology through the appointment of conservative bishops to preside over liberation theology strongholds in Latin America and through the outright dismissal of hundreds of priests and theologians (Democracy Now! 2013). While working within the confines of the Catholic Church allowed radical priests a built-in platform for their ideas, it also proved to be the movement’s fatal flaw. Because, ultimately, all members of the Catholic clergy remain, at all times, accountable to the
Vatican and to the Pope himself. And, just as there was a contradiction between the Church hierarchy and the iglesia popular within El Salvador, so too is there a contradiction on a global scale. Although liberation theology found its roots in Vatican II, within a wider Catholic reform movement, the official position of the Church never approached the revolutionary opposition to the capitalist system manifest in liberation theology. In fact, the Church hierarchy, by its very nature, has very real class interests that require the maintenance of a system that supports the “rights” to privilege and wealth. Because, the Vatican bureaucracy is not only—or perhaps even primarily—concerned with religious matters, but also constitutes a board of governors of sorts, responsible for safeguarding the Church’s tremendous, albeit undisclosed wealth. While liberation theologians have proved adept at recognizing the reality of class struggle within society more broadly, liberation theology, as an ideology, seemingly fails to recognize that this same struggle also necessarily holds sway within the Church.

The Catholic Church does not exist in some religious vacuum, un tarnished by global politics. The Cold War alliance between Pope John Paul II and the United States government is well documented. Time Magazine journalist, Carl Bernstein wrote glowingly in 1992 of this partnership, publishing an article entitled: “Holy Alliance: How Reagan and the Pope conspired to assist Poland’s Solidarity movement and hasten the demise of Communism.” It is widely held—although not firmly established—that the Reagan administration offered aid to the Polish opposition in exchange for the Church’s neutralization of liberation theology (Fox 2011: 23). Given the openly expressed position of the US government during this time period, there is little reason to doubt the veracity of this claim. Prior to a 1982 meeting between Ronal Reagan and the Pope, the US president and his advisors first met in Santa Fe, New Mexico to discuss liberation theology. “The Santa Fe Document” produced at this meeting declared that
“American foreign policy must begin to counterattack (and not just react against) liberation theology” (Fox 2011: 22). In this statement it is clear that the US government treated liberation theology as, above all else, a revolutionary political ideology and a threat to US hegemony in the Western hemisphere. And, they were willing to utilize religious institutions to achieve their political ends. The Church hierarchy was, of course, a willing partner in this effort.

Ultimately, liberation theology is precisely what the US government feared—a profoundly revolutionary ideology. However, by failing to either undergo an outright break with the Church’s structures of power or wage a struggle against the reactionary Church hierarchy, liberation theology left itself vulnerable to neutralization and cooptation by the Vatican elite.

Discussing the attempted pacification of the legacy of past revolutionaries by contemporary Social Democrats in 1917, Vladimir Lenin concluded:

During the lifetime of great revolutionaries, the oppressing classes have visited relentless persecution on them and received their teaching with the most savage hostility, the most furious hatred, the most ruthless campaign of lies and slanders. After their death, attempts are made to convert them into harmless icons, canonize them, and surround their names with a certain halo for the ‘consolation’ of the oppressed classes and with the object of duping them, while at the same time emasculating and vulgarizing the real essence of their revolutionary theories and blunting their revolutionary edge (Lenin 1917: 7)

This is precisely the strategy embraced by the Vatican during its campaign against liberation theology. Although individual liberation theologians were not the target of this pacification effort and were not canonized (a quite fitting term in this instance), the same process described by Lenin was applied to the entire ideology of liberation theology after its effective “death” at the hands of the Church hierarchy. The “harmless” aspects of liberation theology were steadfastly embraced by the Church while its radical, anti-capitalist notions were dismissed and silenced. This is why it is possible for Pope Benedict the XVI to be, at once, the man primarily responsible for launching and heading the Vatican’s attack on liberation theology in the 1980s.
and the Pope who declared “the excessive accumulation of wealth by a few” to be one of the seven new deadly sins in 2008. Because, as long as the Church does nothing to actively oppose the capitalist system which, of necessity, produces the excessive accumulation of wealth by a few, then the “consolation” and “duping” of the “oppressed classes” described by Lenin can be achieved. Of course, liberation theology has not been totally eradicated, but through an active campaign of repression, the Church hierarchy has effectively marginalized liberation theology, allowing for it cooptation by the Vatican which has largely succeeded in “vulgarizing the real essence of [its] revolutionary theories and blunting [its] revolutionary edge” (Lenin 1917: 7).

Although Pope Benedict XVI no longer occupies the papal office, it is not yet clear what changes—if any—will be made within the Vatican bureaucracy by his successor, Pope Francis. However, given the new pope’s historical stance in opposition to liberationist movements in Latin America, it is unlikely that liberation theology will receive any blessing from Pope Francis. Although he has taken the name Francis as a representation of that saint’s “poverty and peace” and has declared his desire to create a “poor Church, for the poor”, in the absence of any active effort to alleviate the suffering of the poor and oppressed beyond charitable campaigns that are wholly insufficient and are, according to Gustavo Gutiérrez, merely “palliatives” that, “in the long run actually consolidate an exploitative system” (Gutiérrez 1988: 65), there is no reason to expect any significant shift in official Church policy.

However, liberation theologians should not seek or expect approval from the Vatican. As a revolutionary political ideology, liberation theology is far more similar to Marxism than it is to the official interpretation of Christianity maintained by the Vatican. When Fidel Castro asserts that there are “10,000 times more coincidences between Christianity and communism than between Christianity and capitalism” (Castro 2006: 15), it must be understood that he is
speaking of the Christianity of liberation theology. Because neither Fidel Castro’s revolutionary legacy nor the socialist system in Cuba should be besmirched by any connection to the Christianity of the Catholic Church hierarchy. In the final analysis, just as Brazilian liberation theologian Frei Betto asserted that “there isn’t any similarity between the God in whom the Latin American workers and farmers and I believe…and the god of Reagan and the murderous Chilean generals, such as Pinochet”, there is, likewise, little similarity between the God of liberation theology and the God of a Catholic Church hierarchy that pays lip service to the poor while doing nothing to alleviate their plight. Liberation theology seeks the same ends that have been achieved by the Cuban socialist system—the eradication of poverty, illiteracy, malnutrition, and capitalist exploitation. The Vatican may issue formal condemnations of these injustices, but ultimately refuses to address the root causes. However, liberation theology, as a profound revolutionary ideology, seeks the establishment of a system based on solidarity and mutual aid, in which the great wealth of human society will be distributed according to the communist principle, “from each according to his ability, to each according to his need” (Marx 1891: 531). Liberation theology does not see a world divided between the religious and non-religious, good and evil, but recognizes a world divided between classes in a system built on exploitation. Thus, liberation theologians like Frei Betto are left to conclude that “[b]efore fearing Marxism because it declares itself to be atheist, we should ask ourselves what kind of fair society we have built in this world that declares itself to be Christian” (Castro 2006: 50). This realization makes it wholly apparent that liberation theology is not merely a scholastic reinterpretation of Catholic teachings focused on religious pursuits, but is, above all else, a revolutionary ideology intent on building a better, more humane world here on Earth.
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