

A DIALOGUE BETWEEN MARXISTS AND CHRISTIANS

TO TURN THE TIDE

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1. There is a common sense, sedimented over more than a century, for which the mere hypothesis of a dialogue between Marxists and Christians is a cause of strangeness, discomfort, or even revolt. The other side of this common sense is evidently the total lack of strangeness or discomfort (and much less revolt) if the hypothesis is that of a dialogue between Christians and liberals, conservatives, or nationalists.

In fact, this strangeness is limited to expressing the dominant discourses, sedimented for many decades, both in the Christian and Marxist fields that give voice to the conservative side of each of the two cultures. For these dominant discourses, Christianity and Marxism are, by definition, enemies of each other. In this framework of anathemas, Marxism is condemned by Christianity for professing a militant atheist materialism, which accepts violence presented as class struggle, and for being therefore 'enemy of religion.' In turn, Christianity is seen by Marxism as a disembodied spiritualism destined to alienate the masses and make exploitation and oppression tolerable, and thus is the 'opium of the people'.

In other words, the hegemony of conservatives, both in the Catholic and Marxist fields, has produced a common sense of irreconcilable incompatibility between the two worldviews, while devaluing what lay beyond the vision – the practice, public action, the daily intervention in society.

In this discourse, there is a confusion between hegemony and uniqueness. However, no culture is monochromatic. All cultures are internally composite and heterogeneous. Stating this principle of internal diversity requires distinguishing, within each culture, their elements of transformation and their elements of conservation. And, based upon this exercise of distinction,

we are challenged to foster dialogues between the transformative and emancipatory dimensions of different cultures, to find strong supports for struggles for the liberation of individuals and communities.

To carry out this exercise, Michael Löwy¹ employs the concept of "elective affinities" that Max Weber developed in his analysis of the relationship between Protestantism and capitalism. Löwy identifies six areas of general affinity between Marxism and Christianity (especially in its Catholic version): a) liberation of the oppressed; b) valorization of the poor as victims of an unjust relationship; c) internationalism/catholicity; d) emphasis on community against the primacy of selfish individualism; e) critique of the logic of reification and accumulation; and f) hope for a future of justice and freedom.

Michael Löwy emphasizes the need for "a peculiar constellation of events"² for a virtual affinity to become effective reality. It is based on this reasoning that Löwy identifies the 1960s as a first moment of realization of elective affinities between Christianity and Marxism, as mentioned above. The "peculiar constellation of events" that allowed this to happen was, on the Catholic side, the theological renewal resulting from the Second Vatican Council and the creation, in that context, of the Secretariat for Dialogue with Non-Believers, and, on the Marxist side, the critique of Stalinism carried out at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the emergence, both in the theoretical and political fields, of critical Marxist currents in which neo-Gramscianism has had a significant prominence. This "peculiar constellation of events" allowed for two concrete experiences of realizing elective affinities between Christianity and Marxism, as identified by Löwy. Firstly, the three rounds of dialogue between Marxists and Christians in Europe, organized by the Paulus Gessellschaft, led by Erich Kellner, which saw the participation of prominent figures from both fields: Rahner, Metz, Calvez, and Girardi in the Catholic field, and Garaudy, Bloch,

¹ "Marxismo e cristianismo na América Latina", *Lua Nova*, 1989, 19, 8-9.

² *Ibidem*, 10.

or Lombardo Radice in the Marxist field³. The second intense experience of dialogue was Liberation Theology: In fact, more than a dialogue between different groups, Liberation Theology assumes the Marxist reading of social contradictions as an analytical support for a more robust Christian commitment to social transformation guided by the Gospel.

The time we are living in constitutes, in my opinion, a second "peculiar constellation of events" that allows for the realization of the elective affinities between Marxism and Christianity previously outlined. I believe there are three peculiar events shaping this time. Firstly, the radicalization of the basic characteristics of capitalism, often referred to as late capitalism. The globalization of productive forces and relations, and the financialization of the global economy are peculiar events of late capitalism that stimulate responses of resistance and alternative with diverse origins (including Marxism and Christianity). Secondly, the globalization of capitalism is being sustained by an unstoppable predatory process of natural resources, leading to an irreversible framework of climate catastrophe with varying effects and responsibilities among the different peoples of the planet. Finally, thirdly, late capitalism constitutes a new phase in the relationship between labor and capital marked by the generalization of precariousness, labor segmentation, the consequent weakening of unions, the rise of gig economy, etc.

There are significant signs indicating that these "peculiar events" have a very relevant impact both in the Marxist and Catholic fields. In the latter, it should be emphasized, first and foremost, the recognition by the Social Doctrine of the Church of the existence of "structural sins" or "structures of sin," that is, modes of "normal" functioning of structures such as international trade or the international division of labor that objectively result in a massive denial of God in the other (sin, in the Catholic tradition). Secondly, the Social Doctrine of the Church has been making its condemnation of capitalist economy and

³ The first round took place in 1964 in Salzburg, the second in 1965 in Munich, and the third in 1966 in Marienbad. The debates were organized around three general topics: man and religion; the future of humanity; society of tomorrow. For more information on these initiatives, see Leonard Swidler "Christian-Marxist dialogue: an uneven past, a reviving present, a necessary future", *Journal of Peace and Justice Studies*, 1990, 29-59.

social organization more unequivocal: "this economy kills," wrote Francis in the Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*. Finally, thirdly, it is undeniably relevant the emphasis, in the recent teaching of the Catholic Church, on the place of the poor and the care for the common home as theological categories. Texts like "Laudato Si" or "Fratelli Tutti," coming from the Church, give voice to an inclusive critical thought that many Marxists identify with.

2. A dialogue between the transformative and emancipatory components of both Christianity and Marxism to make the elective affinities between them a common ground for changing social relations – this must be the sense of an encounter between the two cultures.

In his speech of 10th January 2024, during the audience with a delegation of DIALOP – Platform of Dialogue between Marxists and Christians, Pope Francis stated that “at a time marked by conflicts and divisions at various levels, let us not lose sight of what can still be done to turn the tide.”

Ten years before, in a meeting with a delegation of transform! which launched DIALOP as a formalized process of dialogue between Christians and Marxists, Francis had stated that no single power in the entire world had enough forces to respond alone to the then most decisive problems of humankind: the care for the Earth, our common home, the struggle against the dominant culture of discard and the need to place the poor at the core of all politics.

The tide, to use the Pope’s words, did not cease to get more and more threatening since that historical meeting. A global threat made of a triple hegemony or perverse forces. First, the hegemony of war and violence as continuation of politics by other means. During the three decades of unipolarity that followed the end of the Cold War, liberal interventionism in both the internal and external peripheries of the world-system was wrapped in a discourse of transformation without war. The illusion that the world was approaching Kant's ideal of perpetual peace was just that: an illusion. Global liberalization was a social war cohabiting with military peace. In other words,

the Cold War was succeeded by a cold peace, as all victors' peaces are cold. However, the problem is that to this cold peace of the unipolar moment now succeed scenarios of hot war, because of the replacement of unipolarity by the typical disorder of multipolar reality. This is the time of the "Third World War in pieces," as Pope Francis has called it. And this includes, with increasing likelihood, scenarios of nuclear destruction.

The second hegemony that constitutes the threatening tide we must face is the hegemony of resignation among governments and the most powerful political and economic actors in the face of the climate catastrophe. Despite repeated warnings from the global scientific community, political practice and economic dynamics are steadily diminishing nearly all commitments made by states in successive international agreements. The courage and creativity required for an effective and just energy transition are being replaced by stubbornness in preserving a mode of production and wealth accumulation that is responsible for the environmental disaster. The apparent peace of irresponsibility is the disguise of war against the climate.

The third hegemony that constitutes the threatening tide is the growing hegemony of the far right and its responses to the challenges of diversity, migration, women's rights, and the rights to autonomy for all. The rise of the far right worldwide is fueling strategies to retract equality and difference rights and deeply threatens social cohesion and the democratic construction, replacing them with violent polarization and populist superficiality. The ideological war fueled by the far right is a war against a society open to the rights of all individuals and against a social transformation that expands the universe of these rights.

The dialogue between Marxists and Christians makes sense as a common pursuit of counter-hegemonic perspectives that enable turning the tide and building a transversal social ethics whose central references are the full emancipation of individuals and peoples, integral ecology, and positive peace.

3. Can peace be another elective affinity between Christianity and Marxism? If so, in what terms? And is there a peculiar constellation of events that paves the way to turn that affinity into concrete proposals?

“The world is being traversed by a growing number of conflicts that are transforming what I have repeatedly defined as the Third World War in pieces into a true global conflict” – warned the Pope in his address to the diplomatic corps accredited to the Holy See earlier this year. And he added: “If we could fix each one of them [the civilian victims of wars] in our eyes, call them by name, and evoke their personal story, we would see war as it is: nothing more than a huge tragedy and a useless massacre that wounds the dignity of every person on this earth.”

The alternatives outlined by Francis in the face of the escalation of global war involve reallocating resources destined for armaments to establish a global fund for the eradication of hunger and the promotion of sustainable development, political investment in multilateral disarmament negotiations, and the demand for compliance with International Humanitarian Law in ongoing conflicts.

But what stands out in this Pope's thinking about the Third World War in pieces is that it does not arise merely, nor primarily, as an expression of the personal wickedness of political and personal leaders, nor of a state-centric geostrategic thinking feeding power at all costs. In Francis, war is one of the components of a (de)regulated social system by a culture of discard. It is this culture of discard that manifests in the preservation of a capitalist economic system that produces poverty and precariousness - the 'economy that kills,' as he wrote, and that assaults the Earth, our common home, pushing it towards the climate catastrophe that will affect everyone, but especially the most vulnerable: the poor and future generations. It is this culture of discard that forces the desperate flight of multitudes of migrants, exposing them to slavery, human trafficking, and even death.

War as an expression of a system rooted in a culture of discard is a formulation that brings Christians and Marxists closer. The Marxist conception of war as a result of imperialism, with this being conceived as an

advanced stage of capitalist voracity for supply and consumption markets, ultimately grounds war in the exploitative essence of the capitalist mode of production. Exploitation in Marxist theory, discard in Catholic construction - but in both, the same concern to see war as a social structurally founded phenomenon.

But this convergence between explanations of war is just one dimension of the possible common ground between Marxists and Christians in the face of the globalization of the Third World War in pieces. The policies of response and alternative to war are the other dimension where there is room for debate and it is more necessary than ever. Marxism and Christianity both refute the liberal fiction of war to end the wars which, in practice, have only been a device for legitimizing successive imperial wars. And both also distance themselves from a passive pacifism disconnected from social and economic reality. To both fictions, Marxism and Christianity oppose the urgency of social justice and positive peace.

4. Struggle among classes, peace among peoples. At the core of the Marxist culture lies the notion that social conflict is the engine of history, that the contradiction of interests between the ruling class and the dominated class is the central element of social reality, and that it is the permanent dialectic between these interests that leads to long advances and short setbacks in the historical process.

This positive and dynamic view of social conflict challenges a superficial and naive outlook, often embraced in the Christian area, which opposes it with a sort of universal call to a light harmony that confuses conflict with violence and, covertly, seeks to stifle conflicts and the differences of interests they express.

Now, Francis does not adopt this harmonistic view and proposes a much more complex conception which he calls 'political love,' in the encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*: *"(...) love, overflowing with small gestures of mutual care, is also civic and political, and it makes itself felt in every action that seeks to build a better world. For this reason, charity finds expression not only in close and*

intimate relationships but also in macro-relationships: social, economic and political. This political charity is born of a social awareness that transcends every individualistic mindset: social charity makes us love the common good, it makes us effectively seek the good of all people, considered not only as individuals or private persons, but also in the social dimension that unites them"(pars. 181 and 182). At the core of political friendship - as the antithesis of the exacerbation of individualism and the tendency to take inherent competition to the limits of the impulse for subjugation or even elimination of the other - is therefore social justice that gives cohesion and creates community.

The dialogue between Marxists and Christians finds in the identification of convergences on social justice policies that nullify the culture of war a privileged ground in our time. What gives meaning to the centrality attributed by both Marxists and Christians to this strategic function of social justice is their common reference to the notion of positive peace. Conceptualized by Johan Galtung as the antithesis of violences - in plural, to encompass not only physical violence but also structural and cultural violence - positive peace assumes a programmatic nature, a process, a dynamic of construction rather than simply a static denial of war. Positive peace is this program of social, economic, and cultural transformation that has emancipation as its guiding value and that aspires not only to end the most evident expressions of violence but also to act on the deeper and systemic determinants of violent conflict. Positive peace is peace far beyond pacification.

5. Yes, there is a peculiar constellation of events that not only allows but also demands for the elective affinity between Christians and Marxists concerning peace to become a concrete program of action. It is nothing less than a terrifying constellation: the acceptance of nuclear war as a possible scenario by political leaders in Europe, the assumption of the investment in the arms industry as a priority for the leading economies of global capitalism, the impunity of genocidal strategies as the one being implemented in Gaza.

Against this terrifying tide of militarization and radicalization of the Third World War in pieces, Christians and Marxists are called to join forces around a counter-hegemonic perspective that gives absolute priority to social justice and positive peace in all scales.