

Drew University

**Poverty in the Midst of Plenty:  
Structural Violence, Liberationist Ethics, and the Right to Not Be Poor**

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by

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## **Abstract**

The 2008 economic crisis in the United States helped to reveal the structural violence of poverty. This dissertation aims to re-envision the role a liberationist Christian social ethics can play in responding to the crisis. I argue that the poverty experienced by a growing majority of Americans is not due to scarcity, but the result of a fundamental weakness of an economic order that has created abundance through dispossession. While the field of Christian ethics has remained largely silent about the chronic crisis of economic inequality in the United States, this project challenges American Christians to recognize the ways in which the ideological conflation of Christian and capitalist values have resulted in the justification of poverty. Drawing on critical lessons from Latin American liberation theology and liberationist social theory, I challenge the complex mechanisms of social control that have obscured basic notions of class struggle and deepened social division in the United States. In addition, this project seeks to re-imagine core Christian values of solidarity and a preferential option for the poor. Through an engagement with progressive efforts (of and with the poor) to unite the dispossessed and build a social movement to respond to growing inequality, this dissertation will examine the potential use of community based truth commissions as a model for developing a Christian praxis of liberation. Furthermore, this project contributes to efforts within Christian social ethics and liberation theology to create a counter-narrative to dominant assumptions that obscure Christians' understanding of poverty, class struggle, and racism in the United States.

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## Introduction

### Conditions, Consciousness, and Commitment

*If you can take away the right to work, the right to water, if you can poison people, what else can you do? The challenge is how we get from the telling of the devastation to real solutions. We have gone through the courts, through legislation, voting, all that...we have gone through the appropriate authorities and mechanism, because we are told that if you work through the process, things will work out. But in our experience... there is no justice in these systems.<sup>1</sup>*

— Maureen Taylor and Sylvia Orduño  
Michigan Welfare Rights Organization

Testimony to the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights

*The need to resolve the structural causes of poverty cannot be delayed, not only for the pragmatic reason of its urgency for the good order of society, but because society needs to be cured of a sickness which is weakening and frustrating it, and which can only lead to new crises. Welfare projects, which meet certain urgent needs, should be considered merely temporary responses. As long as the problems of the poor are not radically resolved by rejecting the absolute autonomy of markets and financial speculation and by attacking the structural causes of inequality, no solution will be found for the world's problems or, for that matter, to any problems. Inequality is the root of social ills.<sup>2</sup>*

— Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel*

Public perception regarding the polarity of wealth and poverty has been undergoing an intensified battle of ideas since the financial collapse in 2008, popularly known as the *Great Recession*.<sup>3</sup> What this most recent crisis and its aftermath revealed

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<sup>1</sup> Maureen Taylor and Sylvia Orduño, Consultation on the Conditions of Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights in the U.S. and Canada, ESCR-unit of the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights, Washington, DC, 27 January 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Catholic Church. *The Joy of the Gospel = Evangelii Gaudium: Apostolic Exhortation*, 2013, 143.

<sup>3</sup> The National Bureau of Economic Research records note that the U.S. recession began in December 2007 and ended in June 2009. September 2008 was marked by the federal government's take over of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, the filing of the largest bankruptcy case in U.S. history by Lehman Brothers, and the Fed's bail out of AIG. In October, President Bush signed a \$700 billion emergency bailout package, and the Dow suffered its worst weekly loss in history. "Timeline on the Great Recession," September 8, 2013, <http://www.csmonitor.com/Business/2013/0908/Timeline-on-the-Great-Recession>. 2008 also reported record high home foreclosure rates with over 3 million foreclosures filed. CNN Money reported that foreclosures rose 225% compared with 2006. Les Christie, "Foreclosures up a record 81% in

was that *the poor* today encompasses an ever-expanding portion of the population. Yet a majority of American Christians have failed to contest the economic, political, and social systems that are responsible for producing both extreme wealth and growing poverty. Many Christians have neglected to interrogate the root causes of the crisis or challenge so-called solutions that were imposed to regain financial stability of the U.S. economy. While some Christians voiced increased concern over the rise in economic inequality that was revealed by the Great Recession, many more blamed the irresponsibility of the poor for a declining quality of life in America. Perhaps most notably, although Christian scriptures are replete with appeals of justice for the poor and condemnations of wealth accumulation, the field of Christian ethics, both before and after the 2008 collapse, has remained largely silent about the chronic crises of economic inequality in the United States.

While voices like those of Pope Francis have begun to call out the contradictions of a free market capitalist system that prioritizes corporate profits over human life and the preservation of future resources, a majority of U.S. Christians have been paralyzed by the ideological conflation of Christianity and capitalism as upholding the American values of faith, freedom, and free enterprise.<sup>4</sup> Maintaining a belief that wealth is earned and poverty is either a result of the moral failure of the impoverished or an unfortunate

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2008,” *CCN Money*, January 15, 2009, [http://money.cnn.com/2009/01/15/real\\_estate/millions\\_in\\_foreclosure/](http://money.cnn.com/2009/01/15/real_estate/millions_in_foreclosure/). Unemployment was also climbing in 2008, rising from 4.7 percent in January 2006 to 7.3 percent by December 2008. Unemployment reached its highest levels in October 2009, 4 months after the National Bureau of Economic Research declared that the recession is over. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “BLS Spotlight on Statistics: The Recession of 2007-2009,” February 2012, Accessed July 6, 2015, [http://www.bls.gov/spotlight/2012/recession/pdf/recession\\_bls\\_spotlight.pdf](http://www.bls.gov/spotlight/2012/recession/pdf/recession_bls_spotlight.pdf). While the “official” economic crisis spanned from December 2007 – June 2009, this period has popularly become known as the global economic crisis, the Great Recession, and the 2008 financial crisis. It is this language that I will employ to reference the context of the crisis throughout this dissertation.

<sup>4</sup> See Kevin M. Kruse, *One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America* (New York: Basic Books, 2015).



mishap of an otherwise productive system, America's devotion to free market capitalism has blinded U.S. Christians from recognizing the deficiency of this economic system and understanding the depth of the economic crisis. As Christianity grows complicit to serious violations of rights and the justification of poverty and dispossession, its prophetic role, vitality, depth, and very meaning are threatened. Absent a serious affirmative relationship to human rights, religions lose the opportunity for the theological and practical growth needed to challenge religious and social practices that contradict dignity and equality. By the same token, when organized social efforts to respond to the crisis fail to understand and meaningfully relate to Christian social ethics, they separate themselves from a principle source of the moral values and concerns that give rise to their work to advance justice. The valuable insights that prophetic religious traditions can offer are overlooked. Insufficient work has been done to better understand and communicate the relationship of Christian social ethics and progressive efforts to unite the poor and respond to growing poverty and inequality. This dissertation seeks to fill these voids and develop a liberationist Christian social ethics that can advance knowledge, understanding, and dialogue between a liberationist Christian tradition and movement building efforts to illuminate and respond to the chronic crises of the U.S. capitalist economy and the paradox of poverty in the midst of plenty.

As of 2013, the official poverty rate was 14.5 percent. This means that 45.3 million people in the US live in poverty, up by over 8 million since 2008. An additional 97.3 million (33 percent) of people living in the United States are low-income, defined as incomes below twice the federal poverty line, or \$47,700 for a family of four.<sup>5</sup> The poor

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<sup>5</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, "Preliminary Estimate of Weighted Average Poverty Thresholds for 2013," <https://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/data/threshld/>.

and low-income, 1 in 2 people in the United States, live without adequate health care, housing, food, education, utilities and employment.<sup>6</sup> They are exploited by severe racial, ethnic, and gender discrimination and division. Environmental degradation is wreaking havoc on poor and vulnerable communities. And there has been a steady increase in war and violent conflicts, at home and abroad, which has left millions of poor people dead, displaced, and dispossessed since the mid-2000s.

During this same period, U.S. society has witnessed the acceleration of a newly globalized ruling elite and power structure that have created the globalized political, economic, and social systems that thrive on tremendous financial growth on one hand and a devastating production of poverty on the other. In 2010, the top 20 percent of the U.S. population owned 95 percent of financial wealth while the other 80 percent of the population owned only 5 percent of financial wealth. The economic crisis of 2008, while it has continued to cause devastating repercussions in local communities and for average citizens, resulted in a reality where 95% of the economic gains from the recovery went to the top 1 percent.<sup>7</sup> Marxist scholar and geographer David Harvey has characterized this phenomenon as “accumulation by dispossession.” This means that as a result of neoliberal capitalist policies and the mechanisms of financialization, privatization, and the manipulation of crises, a growing centralization of wealth and power is concentrated in the hands of a few through a dispossession of the wealth and land of the many.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Associate Press, USA Today, “Census shows 1 in 2 are poor or low-income,” <http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/nation/story/2011-12-15/poor-census-low-income/51944034/1>.

<sup>7</sup> “Growing Apart,” *The Economist*, September 21, 2013, <http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21586578-americas-income-inequality-growing-again-time-cut-subsidies-rich-and-invest>.

<sup>8</sup> David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

The disparity of wealth and poverty has not gone unnoticed and there is growing consensus that things need to change in the United States. In a 2013 survey conducted by the Atlantic/Aspen Institute on American Values, it was discovered that 59 percent of the population believed that this country is headed in the wrong direction. While a majority agreed that the economy is on the wrong track, less clarity existed about why U.S. society is facing current economic and social crises and what should be done to confront them. In fact, 6 in 10 Americans believed the country has grown more divided over the last decade, largely due to the failures of our political leadership.<sup>9</sup>

While the material conditions of the 2008 economic crisis posed an opportunity for a growing majority in U.S. society to recognize its shared dispossession, a complex history of social control continues to obscure the relationship that exists between super-structural forms of oppression and class struggle.<sup>10</sup> The outbreaks of Occupy Wall Street, the Tea Party Movement, and Black Lives Matter represent disparate responses to the immoral and unlivable conditions people in the United States are experiencing.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Bob Cohn, "The Divided States of America, in 25 Charts," *The Atlantic*, 28 June 2013, <http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2013/06/the-divided-states-of-america-in-25-charts/277303/>.

<sup>10</sup> I want to make a clear distinction between a discussion of "class" as defined by one's relationship to / ownership of the means of production and an understanding of "social class" as defined as people having a similar social, economic, and educational status. Class, understood in relation to production, rather than distribution, lends to our understanding of class struggle and the inherent conflict that exists between capital (those who own the means of production) and labor (those who must sell their labor power as a commodity, an increasingly precarious position) in a capitalist system. This concept of class struggle, however, should not be limited to conflicts within the labor market and the workplace. David Harvey's theory of accumulation by dispossession remind us that fighting for pension rights, health care, education, and social services (in their commodification) must be understood as part of class struggle. David Harvey, *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 67-68. Jose Miguez Bonino defines class struggle as, "a process through which the oppressed discover their identity and strength and consciously assume the struggle." *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 107.

<sup>11</sup> For more on polarization in American politics see "7 Things to Know About Polarization in America," *Pew Research Center RSS*, N.p., June 12 2014, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/06/12/7-things-to-know-about-polarization-in-america/>.

Whereas segments of the poor and communities of color have long questioned the ability of the government to respond to their most basic needs, waves of newly dispossessed segments of the population are just beginning to question long held assumptions that have maintained stability in the United States. Those in power recognize the weakness of the economic structure and the ideology that supports it. In a 2013 report entitled, “The Crisis of the Middle Class and American Power,” intelligence analyst George Friedman suggested that,

The greatest danger is one that will not be faced for decades but that is lurking out there. The United States was built on the assumption that a rising tide lifts all ships. That has not been the case for the past generation, and there is no indication that this socio-economic reality will change any time soon. That means that a core assumption is at risk. The problem is that social stability has been built around this assumption—not on the assumption that everyone is owed a living, but the assumption that on the whole, all benefit from growing productivity and efficiency.<sup>12</sup>

As economic conditions continue to intensify and predictions of another recession circulate, many Americans remain unclear about how they can respond to the growing disparity of wealth and poverty and what can be done to create the change they feel is needed.

Christian responses to the 2008 crisis and its aftermath have been no less varied. While a small segment of progressive churches and scholars have put forth critiques of these economic disparities, political scientist Shelia Collins maintains that the majority of those who call themselves Christian in the United States have continued to support dominant ideologies of Puritanism and classical liberalism that serve to legitimate the

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<sup>12</sup> George Friedman *"The Crisis of the Middle Class and American Power," Geopolitical Weekly*. January 8 2013, <https://www.stratfor.com/weekly/crisis-middle-class-and-american-power>.

existing socioeconomic system.<sup>13</sup> Many of the most vocal Christians discussing the problematic direction the country is heading in have denied Medicaid expansion, the causes of low wages and poor living conditions, and have criminalized immigrant and poor communities. Few religious leaders challenged congregants to question the mass accumulation of wealth that was taking place along side of wide spread evictions, job layoffs, and mounting debt. Christian theologian Joerg Rieger, who has spent much of his career developing a structural critique of capitalism, joins Collins in voicing concern that religious communities are overlooking the reality of class struggle in America. He explains that,

Although almost everybody agrees with the popular sentiment that ‘the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer,’ and the numbers confirm it, there is little examination of what it means and even less investigation of what the root causes are. The opposite appears to be the case: in times of economic inequality religious prosperity movements are on the rise, promising social mobility that is illusory.<sup>14</sup>

The crisis of poverty in the twenty-first century, as expressed by Pope Francis, must be understood by Christians as a social problem. While the statistics that chart the inequality of wealth and poverty in U.S. society seem clear, our inability to recognize the structural nature of this problem and to confront these conditions through a social response, challenge the field of Christian social ethics to recognize a greater complexity that surrounds the crisis of poverty in a country of abundance. How is it that the shame and individualist justifications of poverty that are promoted by capitalist ideologies also dominate Christian interpretations of inequality? Why is it that the responses of the poor

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<sup>13</sup> Sheila Collins, “The Myth of American Exceptionalism,” in *Religion, Theology, and Class: Fresh Engagements after Long Silence*, ed. Joerg Rieger (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 115.

<sup>14</sup> Joerg Rieger, “Introduction: Why Class Matters in Religious Studies and Theology,” in *Religion, Theology, and Class*, 8.

and dispossessed, people who out of necessity are pushing back against the injustice of poverty and inequality, continue to be demonized and marginalized in U.S. society rather than recognized as catalysts for social change?

This dissertation suggests that the lack of social mobilization in response to the 2008 economic crisis and its ongoing impact reveals that the challenge people in the United States are facing is not only an economic crisis, but a moral crisis of consciousness as well. I will argue that Christians, as the largest religious affiliation in the United States, have an important role to play in this critical moment in U.S. history and must be held accountable in doing so.<sup>15</sup> While acknowledging and standing alongside the plurality of religious beliefs and non-beliefs that exist across local communities, I will explore what distinctive Christian beliefs and practices, particularly those that emerge from a liberationist tradition, can help foster critical consciousness for social transformation. In addition, this dissertation will employ an interdisciplinary approach, engaging social theory and social movement studies that can challenge and expand Christian ethical understandings of wealth and poverty and the ideological assumptions that prevent us from recognizing our common human struggle.

Defining my approach as a liberationist Christian social ethics, I will attempt to develop a new ethical narrative that can critically respond to and build upon the moral outrage expressed by leaders of the poor and dispossessed across this country that have boldly named the injustice of poverty in the midst of plenty. This is a liberationist project because it stands with the oppressed, which I will suggest are a growing majority in the

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<sup>15</sup> While the number of adults in the United States who describe themselves as Christian has dropped eight percentage points since 2007, Pew research concludes that 70.6% of Americans still identified as Christian in 2014. "America's Changing Religious Landscape," *Pew Research Center*, May 12, 2015, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>.

United States. It is a Christian project because it attempts to take seriously the mission of human liberation as part of God's prophetic vision of salvation. And as a social ethics, this project will ground itself in understanding the revolutionary moment that I argue is building in the United States.

Set in the historical context of a twenty-first century U.S. economic crisis, I am committed to engaging the questions raised by social movement leaders like Maureen Taylor and Sylvia Orduño who are fighting back against a system where corporations like Nestlé are permitted to bottle and sell water from local Michigan municipal sources at minimal costs, while poor people in Detroit experienced water cut offs for nonpayment and children in Flint were poisoned by contaminated water sources.<sup>16</sup> The contradictions laid bare by the daily struggles in Michigan and other local communities around the country require a Christian social ethics to interrogate what is happening at this historic juncture and how people understand the economic conditions they are facing. It requires that American Christians look back in order to look forward and ask why the United States is where it is in this moment.

In moments of crisis, people will respond out of necessity. The question I am left asking is – how will they respond? A liberationist Christian social ethics must illuminate potential resources that can help to develop the critical consciousness necessary to bring about a true revolution of values in this country—values that place people before profits and ensures the life and dignity of all human beings. Below, I will highlight the theological, theoretical, and social movement resources this dissertation will employ in developing a new ethical narrative that can respond to the 2008 economic crisis. I will

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<sup>16</sup> “ ‘Thirsty for Democracy: The Poisoning of an American City’: Special Report on Flint’s Water Crisis,” *Democracy Now*, February 17, 2016, [http://www.democracynow.org/2016/2/17/thirsty\\_for\\_democracy\\_the\\_poisoning\\_of](http://www.democracynow.org/2016/2/17/thirsty_for_democracy_the_poisoning_of).

also define key terms that will be developed through the course of this dissertation. And I will lay out the liberationist method I employ to construct my argument.

### **Theological, Theoretical, and Social Movement Resources**

#### Signs of the Time: Reclaiming Liberation / Revisiting Class Struggle

*Only when Christians will have the courage to give a wholehearted revolutionary testimony will the Latin American revolution become invincible... [B]ecause up to the present they have allowed their doctrine to be instrumentalized by the reactionaries.*

— Che Guevara

The problem of poverty is not new. Yet structural shifts in the U.S. economy have resulted from a technological revolution that has globalized the world economy and has moved us from the cyclical crises of the industrial period to a chronic, systemic crisis in the current period. Such transformations are producing a poor and dispossessed class that is qualitatively different from the poor and dispossessed of the previous period.

Sociologist Mark Rank's research suggests that a majority of Americans living in the twenty-first century are, will, or have experienced poverty. Poverty is a pervasive reality, not a condition experienced by a marginalized group within the United States. Rank argues that the reality of poverty in U.S. society is widespread and dynamic in nature.

Narrow definitions of poverty as an entrenched underclass fail to capture the failings at the economic and political levels that produce the problem of poverty.<sup>17</sup> Christian liberationist Jung Mo Sung has illuminated the emerging conditions that people in the United States face arguing that, "Poverty as a mass social phenomenon is no longer just a 'privilege' of poor or emerging countries but has become part of everyday life in rich

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<sup>17</sup> Mark Rank, "Poverty in America is Mainstream," *The New York Times*, November 2, 2013, [http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/11/02/poverty-in-america-is-mainstream/?\\_r=0](http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/11/02/poverty-in-america-is-mainstream/?_r=0).



countries like the United States and Western European countries as well.”<sup>18</sup> He goes on to suggest that the social protests that have developed in the wake of rising inequality and the 2008 global economic crisis—uprisings in Spain, Portugal, Greece, and Italy as well as the Occupy movement in the United States—cannot be ignored.

Yet this is not the first time that the world, nor the United States, has experienced significant political, social, and economic evolutions that have resulted in a battle of ideas and revolutionary responses. While the concrete form of the economy may be different and people’s experiences of these conditions unique, important lessons can be drawn from former revolutionary moments.<sup>19</sup> The theological expressions that developed during the 1960s and 1970s (Latin American liberation theology, feminist theology, black theology, and others) emerged out of the widespread unrest that was taking place across the globe in response to colonialism, economic exploitation, and racial and gender discrimination. Though the times have changed, the tradition of liberation theology, particularly the reflections that emerged out of Latin America offer a valid and valuable starting point for U.S. Christians to engage a twenty-first century analysis of the structural violence of poverty. While Christian moral thought intersects with popular American ideologies regarding the pathological roots of poverty, moral justifications of inequality, and paternalistic solutions that overlook the agency of the dispossessed, liberation theology has stood as a critical voice within the Christian tradition in attempting to name the structural violence of poverty and call for a radical restructuring

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<sup>18</sup> Jung Mo Sung, “Save Us from Cynicism,” in *Religion, Theology, and Class*, 45.

<sup>19</sup> I use the term “revolutionary moment” throughout this dissertation to broadly describe a period in history where challenges to the dominant political and socioeconomic order arise and the reordering of social relations is made possible (though not necessarily realized).

of a society that produces massive poverty. Gustavo Gutiérrez, in his pivotal work, *A Theology of Liberation*, suggests that,

To support the social revolution means to abolish the present status quo and to attempt to replace it with a qualitatively different one; it means to build a just society based on new relationships of production; it means to attempt to put an end to the domination of some countries by others, of some social classes by others, of some people by others. The liberation of these countries, social classes and people undermines the very foundation of the present order; it is the greatest challenge of our time.<sup>20</sup>

I claim in this dissertation that a major obstacle to abolishing the structural violence of poverty is connected to our inability to critique the unjust structure of capitalism and to recognize poverty as a social issue rather than an isolated problem of the poor. A materially grounded theology of liberation, as a historical project connected to a movement for social, political, and economic change, offers relevant resources for social ethics today. Significant work has been done to nuance the liberationist critique of power and domination. Feminist theologians like Marcella Althaus-Reid and Ivone Gebara have criticized liberation theology for homogenizing the poor and overlooking the way patriarchy and heterosexuality have shaped a grand narrative that ignored feminist, queer, and ecological issues.<sup>21</sup> Traci West has also intervened here and challenged liberation theology to recognize the importance of maintaining a link between the particular, socially and economically marginalized lives of women—facing the realities of racism and sexual violation—to the universal moral concerns of public ethics.<sup>22</sup> The importance of the particular has been further nuanced by an engagement with postcolonial theory.

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<sup>20</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 31.

<sup>21</sup> Marcella Althaus-Reid, *From Feminist Theology to Indecent Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2004); Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999).

<sup>22</sup> Traci West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics: When Racism and Women's Lives Matter* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006).

Christian theology scholars like Kwok Pui-Lan have moved liberation theology to explore what freedom and liberation look like in a non-Western, non-Christian world in the midst of globalization.<sup>23</sup>

Building on the work that has been done to expand our understanding of the complex lived experiences of people facing impoverishment, I will return to foundational texts of liberation theology to re-examine key concepts and a core method that I will argue is particularly relevant in relation to the shifting U.S. economic reality. I agree with Joerg Rieger's assertion that within the field of religious and theological studies, U.S. liberationist scholarship has done crucial work to confront issues of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and I would add globalization and even socioeconomic class.<sup>24</sup> But more limited work has been done to construct a deeper understanding of the relationship of gender, race, sexuality, and globalization to questions of class struggle in the U.S. context. The intention of twentieth century liberation theology to prioritize the conditions of the oppressed and the socially marginalized led U.S. liberationist toward a necessary focus on marginalized communities during a time when class consciousness in the U.S. context was shaped by the growth of the middle class and the added privileges of white heterosexual patriarchal power. The growing polarity between wealth and poverty in the twenty-first century U.S. context, however, challenges current liberationist scholarship to re-examine the perspective of class struggle that was established within early Latin American liberation theology and with new eyes, drawing on the lessons that have

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<sup>23</sup> Kwok Pui-Lan, "Liberation Theology in the Twenty-First Century," in *Opting for the Margins: Postmodernity and Liberation in Christian Theology*, ed Joerg Rieger (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>24</sup> Joerg Rieger, "Introduction: Why Class Matters in Religious Studies and Theology," in *Religion, Theology, and Class*, 1.

complicated and diversified our understandings of poverty and oppression, reconstitute a liberationist framework that can 1) analyze the conditions, 2) develop critical consciousness among the people, and 3) employ, with and from the poor, a commitment to change oppressive conditions.

### Expanding Critical Consciousness

While a structural understanding of capitalism is needed to critique widespread U.S. devotion to the free market capitalist system, womanist Christian ethicists such as emilie townes warn that economic studies of capitalism must not overlook the complex lived experiences of people struggling on the ground.<sup>25</sup> Liberation theologies (black theology, womanist theology, feminist theology, queer theology, and others) highlight super-structural forms of oppression and help us to recognize the intersecting mechanisms of social control that result from white supremacy, sexism, heterosexism, and economic exploitation. A liberationist Christian social ethics for social movement building must develop a deep understanding of such intersectional complexities revealed by liberation theologies. My approach acknowledges that such insights are necessary to engage in a better analysis and understanding of the disparate responses that have occurred among the masses in U.S. society in response to the 2008 economic crisis.

Two critical social theorists and social movement scholars whose work is often referenced within liberationist texts and who offer critical resources for exploring the complexities of social control and intersectionality are Antonio Gramsci and W.E.B. Du Bois. This dissertation will therefore return to the work of Gramsci and Du Bois, as activist scholars, to illuminate potential tools for overcoming the temptation to

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<sup>25</sup> Emilie townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (Gordonsville, VA: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

homogenize the struggles of the poor and for deconstructing the complex reality that prevents class struggle from taking root in U.S. society. The ability to develop critical consciousness that can respond to the economic and moral crisis people in the United States are facing requires American Christians to investigate the ideological and historical mechanisms that have been utilized by those in power to justify the growing disparity of wealth and poverty.

### **Defining Key Concepts**

#### Poverty as Structural Violence

The bodies of scholarship that take up questions of structural violence, institutionalized violence, and structural sin are necessary to engage if we are to challenge popular Christian discourse that limits conversations about poverty to an issue of charity and isolates the reality of poverty from broader understandings of the economy and inequality. Liberation theology's construction of structural sin and institutionalized violence offers a strategic intervention to popular conceptions of poverty. Christian ethicist Miguel De La Torre explains that many Euro-American Christians have understood sin as an act or omission committed by an individual that creates alienation between that individual and God.<sup>26</sup> This feeds on American ideologies of individualism and in this way, sin becomes an issue reserved to the field of what Jung Mo Sung calls subjective intent where ethical inquiry is limited to personal moral consciousness and personal accountability.<sup>27</sup> This personalistic moral framework does not provide

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<sup>26</sup> Miguel A. De La Torre, ed, "Structural Sin," *Hispanic American Religious Cultures* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2009), ProQuest ebrary, 538.

<sup>27</sup> Sung, 51.

Christians with the capacity to understand nor hold accountable structures that perpetuate poverty. Instead it blames the poor for their poverty and limits critiques of inequality to issues of personal greed.

Liberation theology's emphasis on structural sin and the role of institutionalized violence helps to reveal the power relationships and social structures that must be acknowledged and questions who benefits from the established structures that create suffering in U.S. society? It is not that personal sin does not exist. Personal sin plays an important role in recognizing one's personal responsibility in maintaining and restoring right relationship with both God and neighbor. But De La Torre explains that, "sin always manifests itself socially, through laws and regulations that permit the few to live in privilege and the many to live in want. Laws, customs, traditions, moral regulations, and so-called common sense are constructed by society to normalize and legitimize the prevailing power structures."<sup>28</sup> Learning to recognize the structural nature of sin reminds Christians that salvation cannot be achieved without addressing the reality of oppression and exploitation that exist in U.S. society. This liberationist framework of structural sin offers an essential first step towards recognizing the structural causes of both wealth and poverty.

A broader body of scholarship on structural violence, however, helps to further develop a liberationist critique, demystifying how it is the economic structure itself that is responsible for the sin of poverty. Turning to the social sciences, the discourse of structural violence in the fields of peace and conflict studies as well as sociology and anthropology helps to articulate how judgment can be passed against systems that

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<sup>28</sup> De La Torre, 538.

perpetuate violence when such violations are avoidable. Structural violence theorists like Johan Galtung, Newton Garver, and Paul Farmer provide additional resources that help to expose the way “normative” practices and beliefs in a society help justify a status quo that perpetuates structural violence.

I will build on the theoretical frameworks that reveal the nature of structural violence and structural sin. They provide a crucial lens for interrogating moral and social responses to the disparity between wealth and poverty that was illuminated by the 2008 economic crisis. Defining poverty as structural violence challenges Christian moral discourse to move beyond the limitations of a focus on personal greed and accountability toward developing a structural analysis and critique of the capitalist economic system. In establishing this framework of poverty as structural violence, I will be able to measure Christian responses to the 2008 economic crisis and highlight relevant resources from within Christian scholarship that further develop a structural critique that is needed to change the system that perpetuates poverty.

The socio-economic analysis of Latin American liberation theology and the political implications of this theological enterprise are not limited to Latin America. The analysis of U.S. based scholars like Christine Firer Hinze, Gary Dorrien, and Joerg Rieger on economic life similarly reject the relegation of religion in U.S. society to a personal, moral, and cultural realm. These U.S. based scholars help to reveal the ways our theology is used to justify the economic status quo and attempt to recover alternative visions of economic praxis that exist within the Christian tradition. I will examine this stream of Christian scholarship to highlight relevant critiques of the current capitalist system that exist in the field. However, in illuminating the critiques present in Christian

ethical and theological scholarship that respond to the structural realities that created the 2008 economic crisis, this dissertation will also recognize that economic studies of the crisis may overlook broader realities of social control that prevented masses of Americans from responding to the financial collapse.

### The Right to Not Be Poor

God's preferential option for the poor is a central tenant of Latin American liberation theology. This understanding of the poor has deep roots in the Bible's condemnation of people and structures that cause impoverishment and deprive the poor of justice. Yet the construction of liberation theology's preferential option for the poor must be understood within the larger construction of the liberationist method. The belief that poverty is contrary to the will of God, as a theological reflection, is dependent on first recognizing the historical conditions of the impoverished and what the poor are doing to fight back against this unjust reality. The attention to the poor in liberation theology is not about what the Church can do for the poor, but rather is a recognition that the poor—who are often made invisible by the larger society, whose rights are often denied, and whose dignity is overlooked—are responding out of necessity to the contradictions of inequality through their lived experiences. The second step of the liberationist method is then a responsive and reflective step that seeks to work with the poor to ask what should the world look like and how does that compare to the world we are currently living in? It is here that God's preferential option for the poor can be claimed as a direct condemnation of the structural sin that has created the conditions of poverty. The final step in the liberationist method is an action step that challenges a liberationist ethics to ask, if as Christians we have affirmed the theological principle of a



preferential option for the poor, what are we to do? It is here that I will suggest that a liberationist ethics must build on the moral outrage of the poor and dispossessed who are demanding “the right to not be poor” in a country and an age of great abundance. In examining of the conditions that were revealed by the 2008 economic crisis and interrogating the ideological assumptions that prevent us from recognizing the class struggle that exists in the United States, I will begin to construct a new ethical narrative that rejects the stigmatization of poverty and illuminates a message that seeks to ensure the right to not be poor as a call not only for the poor, but for the whole of society.

### **A Liberationist Method**

I approach this dissertation as both a Christian social ethicist and a committed activist in a growing effort to end poverty. For the past twelve years, I have been working with religious and community leaders across the country and around the globe to organize, educate, and unite the poor in building a social movement to end poverty.<sup>29</sup> At the center of this work there has existed a deep commitment to developing leadership among those most affected by the crisis of poverty and to building a critical consciousness needed to construct creative strategies for radical social change. The leaders I have met and worked with since 2004 have challenged and emboldened me to engage in a scholarship that is politically relevant, intellectually rigorous, morally grounded, and socially accountable. This work has shaped my scholarly method and

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<sup>29</sup> The Poverty Initiative, part of the Kairos Center for Religions, Rights, and Social Justice at Union Theological Seminary, has fostered my analytical understanding, theological consciousness, and social justice commitment to the work of building a movement to end poverty, led by the poor. I have volunteered and worked as a staff member of the Poverty Initiative since 2004. It is through my work with the Poverty Initiative and the network we have built across the United States and connections we’ve made around the world that the significance of developing and connecting leaders among the poor and dispossessed has continually been affirmed.

moved me to adopt a liberationist commitment to a dialectic of theory and practice. I will therefore place academic discourse on liberation theology, Christian ethics, and social theory in conversation with the lived conditions and responses of organic intellectuals who emerge from the revolutionary struggles of historical and contemporary social movements.<sup>30</sup> I will employ a method that revolves around core liberationist themes – *examining conditions, developing consciousness, and committing to change*. My engagement of this method reflects the concrete struggle for power to change the imbalanced social relationships that produce poverty in the midst of plenty that lies at the heart of a movement to end poverty.

I will begin by laying the theoretical groundwork on which I have built my research. My commitments as a Catholic activist scholar have led me to take up the lens of liberation theology and ethics as the starting point for understanding the structural violence of poverty and for developing a liberationist Christian social ethics that can deconstruct the moral assumptions that prevent us from upholding God's preferential option for the poor. Establishing a liberationist framework, my research will develop through an examination of the economic conditions that have continued to intensify since the financial crisis in 2008 (chapter 2) and Christian responses to the crisis (chapter 3). From there, I will move into an interrogation of popular ideologies at work to maintain the U.S. capitalist system that perpetuates the structural violence of poverty through an engagement of critical social theory and revisionist history (chapter 4). Finally, I will conclude by bringing together an analysis of the conditions and a confrontation of assumptions through an exploration of the Poverty Truth Commission (PTC) model, a

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<sup>30</sup> Antonio Gramsci defines organic intellectuals as leaders, educators, and organizers who emerge from the struggle and who consciously ground their ideas in the struggles of a particular class.

process where the moral imperatives of religious and civil life can intersect to examine how movement leaders, community advocates, and power holders can bring the diversity of their experiences together to deconstruct the causes that maintain structural inequality and develop concrete strategies for social transformation (chapter 5).

An ongoing engagement of theory and praxis will be essential to the development of a liberationist Christian social ethics that clings not merely to abstract concepts of dignity and justice, but one that is grounded in what such concepts ought to look like in the lived realities of the poor and dispossessed. It requires core principles of a liberationist tradition in Christian ethics and critical social theory and social movement studies. This dissertation seeks to develop conceptual and practical tools that can reframe the dominant moral assumptions about wealth and poverty and construct a new ethical narrative that lifts up a right to not be poor.

## Chapter 1

### Mining Resources from Latin American Liberation Theology

*Para el pueblo  
Lo que es del pueblo  
Porque el pueblo se lo ganó  
Para el pueblo  
Lo que es del pueblo  
Para el pueblo liberación*

*For the people  
What rightfully belongs to the people  
Because the people earned it  
For the people  
What rightfully belongs to the people  
For the people liberation<sup>31</sup>*

— Piero “Para el pueblo, lo que es del pueblo”

*Latin America is obviously under the sign of transformation and development; a transformation that, besides taking place with extraordinary speed, has come to touch and influence every level of human activity, from the economic to the religious. This indicates that we are on the threshold of a new epoch in this history of Latin America. It appears to be a time of zeal for full emancipation, of liberation from every form of servitude, of personal maturity and of collective integration.<sup>32</sup>*

— Medellín, “Introduction”

A reality of crisis and struggle, of oppression and a fight for liberation, define the period out of which liberation theology emerged. Social unrest and calls for revolution echoed around the world in the 1960s and 70s. The particular character of struggle across Latin America was marked by a concern for the massive poverty that was impacting a great majority at a time when global capitalism was producing tremendous wealth. In this chapter, I will illuminate how a theological response to this crisis, in the context of a

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<sup>31</sup> Piero, “Para el pueblo, lo que es del pueblo,” in *The Militant Song Movement in Latin America: Chile, Uruguay, and Argentina*, ed. Pablo Vila (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), 219-220.

<sup>32</sup> Medellín, “Introduction,” 4 cited in Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, xvii.

broader historical project, was able to reshape long-held theological and socio-cultural assumptions about the poor and the problems of wealth and poverty in Latin American society.<sup>33</sup>

I will explore how the conditions faced by poor people in Latin American during the mid-twentieth century and the conflict that was revealed by their lived experiences became a catalyst for theological inquiry, ethical reflection, and social action. To better understand how liberation theology was able to shift dominant assumptions about the poor by redefining poverty as a social problem rather than a problem of individual poor people, I will examine the historical context out of which Latin American liberation theology emerged, core concepts that guided liberationists' responses to injustice, and the materially-grounded method that was committed to a radical restructuring of Latin American society.

In redefining poverty and wealth in structural terms and criticizing the system that promotes disparity, the problem of poverty is not isolated to those who experience its harsh realities, but becomes a problem of society as a whole. This ideological reformation demonstrates that the movement to transform the structures that produce poverty is a movement not *for* the poor but a movement *of* and *with* the poor for the benefit of the whole society. The poor are not agents of their liberation alone (while personal liberation is also accomplished through social liberation). Liberation theology, as a praxis imbedded in a movement for social transformation, is about creating spaces where the leadership of the poor can come together with revolutionaries from other sectors of society to develop a

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<sup>33</sup> Ivan Petrella suggests that liberation theology ought to be understood in relationship to the larger historical project to change the material structures of society. Liberation theology, through this material struggle, gave new meaning to theological terms. *The Future of Liberation Theology*, (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2004), 11.

shared strategy for social change. My work to bring liberation theology and social movement studies together helps to critically examine the strategic role that the organized poor can play in a movement for social change. The theological development of the preferential option of the poor reframes dominant Christian narratives about wealth and poverty and highlights the epistemological privilege of the poor. Illuminating the evolution of the global economy and the distinct characteristics of a twenty-first century context, my work further expands early liberationist definitions of who are the poor, complicates the multidimensional reality in which they live, and emphasizes the need for developing strategic unity across sectors of society if concrete social change is to be achieved.

### **Doing Liberation: Latin American Liberation Theology In Historical Context**

*Before we can do theology we have to 'do liberation.' The first step for liberation theology is pre-theological. It is a matter of trying to live the commitment of faith: in our case, to participate in some way in the process of liberation, to be committed to the oppressed.*<sup>34</sup>

— Leonardo and Clodovis Boff

Latin American liberation theology arose out of a context of economic, political, social and religious revolution. It was a response to conditions of human suffering and oppression taking place in early and mid-twentieth century Latin America on the one hand, and consciousness enacted through people's denunciation of abandonment in the midst of abundance on the other. In direct relationship to the active resistance of the poor, liberation theology challenged the Christian tradition to take a stand against injustice. In mining the lessons of Latin American liberation theology, the role of the Latin American

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<sup>34</sup> Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987), 22.

people and the social, economic, political, and religious context in which their struggle emerged is central. The liberation movement, of which liberation theology was a critical part, evolved to counter a particular set of conditions and the development of these conditions over time.<sup>35</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, one of the “founders” of liberation theology, described the historical context out of which liberation theology emerged explaining that,

Because of urbanization and increased industrialization, the Latin American popular movement grew from 1930 on, demanding greater participation in the economic and political life of its respective countries. Political parties of a populist bent capitalized on this basically urban movement. But the crisis of developmentalist policies to which we have referred, the rise of multinational businesses and their growing control of the economy of Latin America, and the appearance of militant peasant masses on the political scene—all these were responsible for the loss of political leadership, at different times in different countries, which the different forms of populism held up to that point. After a period of disorientation, an intense process of political radicalization began. In this regard, the Cuban revolution has played a catalytic role. With certain qualifications, this revolution serves as a dividing point for the recent political history of Latin America.<sup>36</sup>

Gutiérrez, like other liberationists of the time, recognized the contradiction of Latin American liberation in relationship to the developmental strategy of global capitalism and the persistent poverty that plagued Latin American families.<sup>37</sup>

The political and economic shifts that took place across Latin America between 1930–1960 had a profound impact on society broadly and the Church in particular.

Enrique Dussel, analyzing the history of the Church in Latin America, suggests that the

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<sup>35</sup> The contexts out of which liberation theology emerged are not monolithic. Latin America is made up of twenty sovereign states and has a population of over 604 million people. The geography, politics, demographics and culture varies greatly from country to country and the history of struggle has taken many shapes. For the purpose of this chapter, however, I will not focus on such particularities. Instead, I will explore a body of work and experience that stretches beyond the boundaries of nation state and examine the core method and principles that lie at the heart of the liberation project.

<sup>36</sup> Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 54–55.

<sup>37</sup> Sebastian Edwards notes that, “In 1970— three full decades after the initiation of the import substitution development strategy—40 percent of all Latin America’s families still lived below the poverty line; in the rural sector the incidence of poverty was an astonishing 62%. *Left Behind: Latin America and the False Promise of Populism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 51.

1929 world economic crisis changed the fundamental alliance that had existed between Latin America's bourgeois oligarchy and the United States and England. On the political front, the economic evolution that followed the Great Depression and continued up through 1960 set the stage for the rise of military takeovers and right-wing political parties across Latin America. While the global economic recovery that followed promoted the expansion of industrialization in Latin America, it also produced increasing inequality across the region.<sup>38</sup>

By the late 1940s, "the public in an increasing number of Latin American countries became frustrated by the lack of progress in social conditions and by the brutality of authoritarian and dictatorial regimes."<sup>39</sup> Revolutionary struggles began to emerge in response to the failure of reformist efforts. As Gutiérrez has argued, emergent groups believed that, "there can be authentic development for Latin America only if there is liberation from the domination exercised by the great capitalist countries, and especially by the most powerful, the United States of America."<sup>40</sup> The paradox of dependency and liberation were the conditions that would become the roots of popular movements across Latin America.

While the Catholic Church had historically played a pivotal role in establishing and maintaining power throughout Latin America, the rise of liberalism in Latin American countries and the separation of church and state challenged the Church's

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<sup>38</sup> Enrique Dussel, *A History of the Church in Latin America: Colonialism to Liberation (1492–1979)*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1981), 106, 128–129. Victor Bulmer-Thomas also suggests that the economic destabilization of the global economy in the wake of the Great Depression led to a drastic fall in the price and volume of exports upon which the Latin American economy. These global economic trends produced profound instability in the region. *The Economic History of Latin America since Independence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 225–233.

<sup>39</sup> Edwards, 48.

<sup>40</sup> Gutiérrez, 54.



authoritative position in Latin American society.<sup>41</sup> The institutional Church attempted to protect its position on two fronts. On one hand, it aligned itself with conservative governments and the landowning class, while on the other it worked to encourage a resurgence of loyalty from among the laity. Enrique Dussel explains that the development of Catholic Action and new youth groups in the 1930s represented an effort by the Church to revive the Catholic faith in Latin America.<sup>42</sup> Reflecting on the fact that by 1930, the ratio of 1 priest per 5,000 laypersons within the Catholic Church was a reality in Latin America, the function that everyday people served in the formation of liberationist praxis was essential.<sup>43</sup> While the goal of the Catholic Church was to revitalize the institution, the formation of Catholic Action and similar religious groupings, served to activate and educate the laity, establishing a foundation for the future development of base Christian communities in the 1960s. Members of Catholic Action groups, including Paulo Freire and Gustavo Gutiérrez, were influential leaders engaged in social and political change across Latin America.<sup>44</sup>

The General Conference of Latin American Bishops (CELAM) would eventually come to affirm base communities and their ability to bring to life Vatican II's *Lumen*

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<sup>41</sup> Home to many indigenous populations, Latin American political and economic history is steeped in the expansion of colonialism and slavery. The role of Spanish and Portuguese colonizers was one of domination and evangelization. The institutional church, from its outset in Latin America, gained tremendous wealth and control of the land and its people through this history of domination. See Dussel, *A History of the Church in Latin America*.

<sup>42</sup> Dussel, *History and the Theology of Liberation: a Latin American Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1976), 106.

<sup>43</sup> Arthur F. McGovern, *Liberation Theology and Its Critics: Toward an Assessment* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), 4.

<sup>44</sup> See Timothy J. Steigenga and Edward L. Cleary, *Conversion of the Continent: Contemporary Religious Change in Latin America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 159 and Michelle Gonzalez, *A Critical Introduction to Religion in the Americas: Bridging the Liberation Theology and Religious Studies Divide*, (New York: NYU Press, 2014), 35. Gonzalez notes that the "see, judge, act," method attributed to liberation theology was developed in the 1940s by Catholic Action.

*Gentium*.<sup>45</sup> However, at the general assembly in Medellín, Columbia 1968, the development of liberation theology was rooted in the reality of revolutionary struggle and the practices of the base communities some forty years earlier. The revolutionary movement of the 1950s and 60s as well as the Church's thrust to take up the struggles of the poor and practice of living with and among the poor were the roots of liberation theology. What emerged was a new way of doing theology that was committed to revolutionary change. Liberation theology was not the catalyst for social change. The people were already in motion, fighting back against unjust social conditions. However, liberation theology, in relationship to a movement of the poor, called the Christian tradition to respond to the reality of injustice and the necessity for structural transformation.

### **Beyond Charity: Exploring Core Concepts of Latin American Liberation Theology**

It is essential to understand the socio-historical context out of which Latin American liberation theology originated. Without the context of a historical crisis and the popular movement that grew to address it, liberation theology may not have materialized. At the same time, Gutiérrez suggests that the core principles of liberation theology can overcome the boundaries of time and culture. The preferential option for the poor and the significance of building God's kingdom in the material world remain essential truths for Christianity today. Core principles within liberation theology can help guide the development of a liberationist response to a twenty-first century economic crisis in the United States. Three core concepts which emerge in early liberationist texts and which I

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<sup>45</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, Latin for "Light of the Nations," was a Vatican II document that emphasized the Church as a living organism of and for the people of God. Pope Paul VI, November 21, 1964.

will explore in this section include: 1) a preferential option of the poor as a stimulus for redefining the problem of poverty, 2) poverty as structural sin as a means for understanding the disparity of wealth and poverty, and 3) the agency of the poor as a catalyst for moving society toward the transformation of the exploitative relationships that impede our connection to God and to one another.

### A Preferential Option for the Poor: Re-defining the Problem of Poverty

*Poverty, [as] a lack of the goods of this world necessary to live worthily as men, is in itself evil. The prophets denounce it as contrary to the will of the Lord and most of the time as the fruit of the injustice and sin of man.*<sup>46</sup>

— Latin American Bishops, *Poverty of the Church*

*When I first began to work with the poor years ago I discovered three things, “I discovered that poverty was a destructive thing, something to be fought against and destroyed, not merely something which was the object of our charity. Secondly, I discovered that poverty was not accidental. The fact that these people are poor and not rich is not just a matter of chance, but the result of a structure. It was a structural question. Thirdly, I discovered that poor people were a social class. When I discovered that poverty was something to be fought against... [I]t became crystal clear that in order to serve the poor, one had to move into political action.”*<sup>47</sup>

— Gustavo Gutiérrez

When striving to abolish the structural violence of poverty in the midst of a twenty-first century economic crisis, inevitably people will ask the questions: who are the poor and how do you define poverty? They will establish many categories to assess the problem of poverty, moving from extreme and relative poverty to the labels of low-income, destitute, and working poor. Such subdivisions serve to isolate the poor and divide them from recognizing their common interests as a social class. Christianity further complicates these definitions. Lifting up material poverty as a religious ideal and

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<sup>46</sup> Latin American Bishops, *Poverty of the Church*, Medellín, September 6, 1976  
<http://www.shc.edu/theolibrary/resources/medpov.htm>.

<sup>47</sup> Robert McAfee Brown, *Gustavo Gutiérrez* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1980), 23.

affirming spiritual poverty for its renunciation of worldly material goods, Christian conceptions of poverty become a source for further ambiguity. Latin American liberation theologians, however, held a distinct desire to name the poor as a social class and to understand why people were poor. Early liberationists like Gustavo Gutiérrez in Peru, José Míguez Bonino in Argentina, and Leonardo and Clodovis Boff in Brazil recognized the organized response of the poor to the material conditions of poverty and thus required the Christian tradition to clarify its understanding of poverty. They asserted that discussing material poverty was the first step toward illuminating the contextual reality of the poor in Latin America. At the most basic level, these early liberationists identified the poor as all those who lacked the means to sustain life.<sup>48</sup> When people's access to food, shelter, basic health care, education, and jobs are limited or denied, people are forced into poverty.

Within the liberationist tradition, poverty is not something to be understood as a religious ideal for sacrificial Christian life and *the poor* are not to be thought of as an object of Christian mercy. In *A Theology of Liberation*, Gutiérrez argues that maintaining an ambiguity around poverty causes us to fall into a pattern of sentimentalism, one that fails to examine the root causes of poverty and allows us to justify the status quo. Liberationists in the 60s and 70s resisted this pattern and looked for the places where people were beginning to recognize the consequences of poverty in the midst of abundance and rebelling against such conditions. It was in this moment that liberationists

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<sup>48</sup> See Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 163–164; José Míguez Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation*, 112–113; Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, 2–3. Gutiérrez further notes that the Medellín document attempted to articulate three distinct meanings of the term poverty: “real poverty as an evil—that is something that God does not want; spiritual poverty, in the sense of a readiness to do God’s will; and solidarity with the poor, along with protest against the conditions under which they suffer.” And it was at Medellín that the preferential option for the poor was affirmed, xxv.

lifted up a *preferential option for and solidarity with the poor*. Following the resistance of the people on the ground, liberationists called upon the Church to affirm the “epistemological privilege of the poor.” Bonino, in *Toward a Christian Political Ethics*, explains that, “the poor are not morally or spiritually superior to others, but [what is meant by a preferential option for the poor is that] they do see reality from a different angle or location—and therefore differently.”<sup>49</sup> Experiencing the dispossession and exploitation inflicted on them by the existing socio-economic and political order, the lived experience of the poor illuminates the inconsistencies of a system that can produce massive wealth and prosperity for a few, while producing great suffering and misery for many.

Liberation theologians and Christian movement leaders explored their own historical context of poverty in relation to experiences of poverty in the Bible. They recognized poverty as a central theme in both the Hebrew Bible and the Christian scriptures. In exegeting the Bible’s interpretation of poverty, liberationists argued that the Bible spoke of the existence of poverty as a scandalous condition, a condition contrary to the will of God. The poor are not poor as a result of fate or a mere fact of one’s existence. The poor are made poor through the exploitation of unjust human systems. Demanding that the church be the church of the poor, liberation theologians joined the masses rising up in Latin America to argue that one could not be committed to the poor if they were not also against poverty. The creation of a just social order that promoted authentic liberation would become an eminently Christian task.

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<sup>49</sup> José Míguez Bonino, *Toward a Christian Political Ethics* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 43.

### Poverty is a Sin: Understanding Poverty as Structural Violence

Another core concept that builds on God's preferential option for the poor is liberation theology's interpretation of sin as structural sin. Taking a stand that poverty was the result of an unjust system, liberation theology countered popular Christian interpretations of sin that defined suffering in the world as a direct result of personal sinfulness. Arguing for a structural construction of sin rejected justifications of poverty that blamed the suffering of masses of people in Latin American society on the moral failures of the poor. Latin American liberation theology refused to see the suffering and misery produced by the global economic system of neocolonial capitalism as a justifiable consequence of the system. It is the existence of poverty that is the scandalous condition. Gutiérrez argued that, "the existence of poverty represents a sundering both of solidarity among persons and also of communion with God. Poverty is an expression of a sin, that is, of a negation of love. It is therefore incompatible with the coming of the Kingdom of God, a Kingdom of love and justice."<sup>50</sup>

Liberationists deemed the basic human rights violations experienced by the poor—structural or institutionalized violence. Poverty, in turn, could no longer be understood as a natural state of existence, but rather a reality that results from unjust human decisions. Jon Sobrino explains that, "The poor of the world are not the causal products of human history. No, poverty results from the actions of other human beings."<sup>51</sup> Unfair wages, exploitation, and starvation tactics should be understood as clear indications of evil. Oppressive structures prevent people from living with dignity and

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<sup>50</sup> Gutiérrez, 168.

<sup>51</sup> Jon Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation: Toward Political Holiness*, (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1988), 31.

assuming their own destiny. Liberationists, therefore, argued that if God's will is to protect all creation, Christians must see the continued existence of poverty as a sin.

Gutiérrez notes,

Sin—a breach of friendship with God and others—is according to the Bible the ultimate cause of poverty, injustice, and the oppression in which persons live... [It] emphasize[s] the fact that things do not happen by chance and that behind an unjust structure there is a personal or collective will responsible—a willingness to reject God and neighbor.<sup>52</sup>

In naming the sinful conditions of poverty created by exploitative structures, liberation theologians at Medellín moved toward an acknowledgement of the role Christianity played in the experience of suffering among the oppressed.<sup>53</sup> Those gathered at Medellín were critical of traditional theology that focused on religious piety and abstract doctrines. They argued that if the Church remained silent about the abuses people were forced to endure, then the Church must be understood as supporting the status quo.<sup>54</sup> In this way, the problem of poverty becomes a theological as well as a sociopolitical problem. Liberation theology brought to light how a Christian concept of human salvation was as much about the current earthly life as it was about the not yet heavenly salvation. The Church in this context must choose a side. Bonino explained that, “in today's world there is only one way to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the sick and imprisoned... [that is] to change the structures of society which create and multiply every day those

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<sup>52</sup> Gutiérrez, 24.

<sup>53</sup> The Latin American Episcopal Conference (CELAM) met in Medellín, Columbia in 1968 to debate how the teaching of Vatican II would be applied throughout Latin America. This conference and the documents it produced were strongly influenced by liberation theology and helped to affirm the work of liberation theology within the institutional church.

<sup>54</sup> Christian Smith, *The Emergence of Liberation Theology: Radical Religion and Social Movement Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 18–19.

conditions. This is revolution.”<sup>55</sup> The Church could no longer remain neutral. To stand with the poor would require the Church to name the institutionalized violence of poverty.

Base Christian Communities: The Poor as a Catalytic Force for Social Change

*What is the most urgent position from which to view reality today? What is the position from which we shall have the surest view of that reality? In Latin America today the answer is clear: the viewpoint of the poor. In Latin America reality must be regarded from where the poor live—from the place of the poor... The questions raised by the poor affect us all.*<sup>56</sup>

— Leonardo Boff

At the heart of liberation theology is the idea that the poor are the driving force of revolutionary change and historical salvation. Out of the global economic, political, social, and theoretical upheavals that shook Latin America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries came the mobilization of masses of people beginning in the 1930s and gaining momentum following World War II. Processes of urbanization and industrialization shifted the consciousness of the Latin American peasant population as it began to recognize basic contradictions of an accumulation of wealth by a few and massive poverty experienced by many. Returning again to Bonino’s discussion of the “epistemological privilege of the poor,” he argued that the lived experiences of the poor, through their daily suffering, reveal the basic contradictions of an unjust society.

Lifting up the poor as a social force that could ignite a process of social transformation for the whole of society, the liberationist movement in Latin America emphasized the relationship between conditions and consciousness. One’s heightened awareness of exploitative conditions moved them towards a process of conscientization. This development of critical self-consciousness and an understanding of the root causes

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<sup>55</sup> Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation*, 44.

<sup>56</sup> Leonardo Boff, *When Theology Listens to the Poor*, translated by Robert R. Barr (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1970), ix.



of dispossession and dehumanization were essential in the formation of base Christian communities. Building on the work of the Young Christian Workers groups and the Base Education Movement, base Christian communities focused on the cyclical relationship of action and reflection through the process of see, judge, and act.<sup>57</sup> These intersecting elements of action and reflection became a living praxis for liberation. At the heart of the see, judge, act praxis was an attempt to analyze conditions with the goal of developing a more effective response that could lead to structural change.

The preferential option for the poor, which was affirmed by progressive segments of the institutional Church, became a foundational principle of liberation theology. It should be noted, however, that liberation theology was not embraced by those in power in Latin America, nor by the Catholic hierarchy. The struggles of base Christian communities did not emerge as a voice for change without opposition. Penny Lernoux's *Cry of the People* is but one text that depicts the stories and statistics of thousands of people (peasants and clergy) across Latin America who were arrested, tortured, "disappeared," and executed while fighting for liberation.<sup>58</sup> Standing in solidarity with the poor, the Boffs suggested that, "the best way of evangelizing the poor consists in allowing the poor themselves to become the church and help the whole church to become truly a poor church and a church of the poor."<sup>59</sup> The leadership of the poor challenged traditional religious responses to poverty that were based on charity and failed to confront the consequences they faced. Connecting with the movement of the people and their

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<sup>57</sup> See Smith, 80–81 and McGovern, 31.

<sup>58</sup> Penny Lernoux, *Cry of the People: United States Involvement in the Rise of Fascism, Torture, and Murder and the Persecution of the Catholic Church in Latin America*, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980).

<sup>59</sup> Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, 59.

response to the social, political, and economic upheaval of the times, liberation theology saw the poor, in a moment of crisis, as revealing the deficiency of a political and economic system that produced poverty in the midst of growing abundance.

Emphasizing a preferential option for the poor was in turn, a step for all of humanity to change structures that promote exclusion, exploitation and the destruction of all natural bases of life. Through a process of conscientization, the leadership of the poor challenged traditional Christian teachings that suggested it was the duty of the poor to be humble and the duty of the rich to be generous. Arguing that God had not willed or created suffering and oppression, the preferential option for the poor compelled the entire Church to break its ties with the status quo and recognize that it could not hope to transform society if it did not seek to transform the social structures that perpetuated the status quo. Gutiérrez explained that liberation theology, following the leadership of the poor, took up the goal to liberate

the Church from temporal ties and from the image projected by its bonds with the powerful. This separation will free the Church from compromising commitments and make it more able to speak out. It will show that in order to fulfill its mission, the Church relies more on the strength of the Lord than on the strength of Power.<sup>60</sup>

The transformation of social institutions was part of a larger process of politicization and people moving to participate in their own emancipation. Through the process of conscientization and the praxis of action and reflection, the experience of the poor was not to be romanticized, but rather was to be the foundation from which the community could move from an abstract idea of liberation to developing a plan for implementation and change. The work of Leonardo Boff and Sobrino highlights that, “If a new humanity is desired, then all persons must be moved to a new position; therefore, not only are the

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<sup>60</sup> Gutiérrez, 69.

oppressed liberated from their obvious oppression, but oppressors are also liberated from their more subtle, though no less real, oppression.”<sup>61</sup> This revolutionary process itself would become a humanizing activity that encouraged and affirmed the participation of all members of the base Christian communities. The liberationist movement in Latin America was not a movement of the poor for the poor, but rather a movement of the poor to move the whole of society.

### **Liberationist Praxis: Examining the Method of Latin American Liberation Theology**

*It is only the rich world that believes it can start from abstract concepts in finding meaning.*<sup>62</sup>

— José Bonino

While liberation theology has become a subject studied, discussed, and debated in the academy, the essence of liberation theology is rooted in the everyday struggle of the poor and dispossessed. The context of revolutionary struggle for change must be understood as the primary location where liberation theology is happening. As the Boffs suggest, “Before we can do theology we have to ‘do liberation.’”<sup>63</sup> Rather than developing a new theological method, liberation theology can be better understood as a new way of being a theologian—of being in relationship with a movement of the poor and dispossessed to change the dehumanizing and exploitative conditions of society.

While distinctions can be made among different practitioners of liberation theology, its groundedness in the abject conditions of most Latin Americans and the need

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<sup>61</sup> Donald Waltermire, *The Liberation Christologies of Leonardo Boff and Jon Sobrino: Latin American Contributions to Contemporary Christology* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1994), 8.

<sup>62</sup> José Míguez Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation*, 72.

<sup>63</sup> Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, 22.

to develop a Christian response to these conditions lie at the center of liberationist praxis. Arguing that established methods of doing theology could not address the discrepancy of poverty in the midst of plenty, liberation theologians worked to develop a *social analysis*, *a critical consciousness*, and a *covenantal commitment to change* the institutionalized violence that oppressed the poor in Latin America during the twentieth century.

Traditional theology maintained that charity was the appropriate response to poverty and reaffirmed a belief that the “the poor will always be with us.” Witnessing the revolutionary movement of the poor to resist this reality, liberation theologians such as Juan Luis Segundo, Gutiérrez, Ivone Gebara and the Boffs, rejected this idea and took up the conviction that God’s power called for and could aid us in changing society here and now.

As the previous section highlighted strategic concepts that are foundational to the praxis component of liberation theology, I will now move forward and examine key methodological elements employed by liberation theologians. While some variances in the method exist, I engage Arthur McGovern’s assessment that the following elements lie at the heart of the liberationist method and are utilized across the field: 1) the use of social analysis (a study of conditions) 2) the need to question ideologies that support the status quo, including ideologies within the Christian tradition (a development of critical consciousness) and 3) the focus on praxis (a commitment to liberation).<sup>64</sup> The goal of this method was not to create a new theological discipline, but rather to connect and respond to the social realities of the world. Liberation theology claimed that the spiritual practices of faith were inextricably linked to a material path toward economic, social, and political liberation. Gebara defined this task as the need to reflect on the human

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<sup>64</sup> McGovern, 24.

experience, to “accept the challenge of becoming creators of ourselves and of the entire living world, and to be capable of overcoming the growing isolation imposed on us by economic liberalism and the transnational capitalist system.”<sup>65</sup> Emphasizing the material reality, salvation should no longer be viewed as something otherworldly. In turn, sin ought no longer be understood as an impediment to salvation in the afterlife. In its Christian vision, the structural sin of poverty and political oppression, where humans exploit other human beings, must be confronted in the here and now. What was central for Latin American liberation theology was the rejection of the current political realities, the suffering they caused, and a need to take action to change such conditions. Through its commitment to the base Christian communities and its turn toward the social sciences, liberation theology would diagnose and critique sinful economic and political structures in an attempt to produce a Christian praxis that could help transform the material world.

#### Understanding Conditions: Employing the Tools of Social Analysis

Latin American liberation theology believed that traditional methods of doing theology were inadequate in confronting the crises the poor were facing during the twentieth century. While the dominant mode of doing theology begins with universal truths and church doctrine, which are then followed by questions of application, liberation theology inverted this process and started first with concrete experience. Engaging disparate features of the actual historical moment, the task of theology from a liberationist perspective was first to critique the material context and from there to construct an understanding of faith that could strengthen an emancipatory praxis. Theory and practice exist in a dialectical relationship. Bonino explains that, “There is no truth

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<sup>65</sup> Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999), 67.

outside or beyond the concrete historical events in which [human beings] are involved as agents. There is, therefore, no knowledge except in action itself, in the process of transforming the world through participation in history.”<sup>66</sup>

Engaging the concrete historical reality in Latin America moved liberation theologians to argue that poverty and human suffering were not a natural state of existence. Turning to the social sciences, liberation theology recognized the need to illuminate the root causes of oppressive conditions and to reveal the hypocrisy of poverty in the midst of plenty.<sup>67</sup> In order to not only talk about justice, but further to enact it, liberation theology employed the social sciences to question how the production of wealth functions, how wealth is distributed, and how individuals exist in relation to capital, employment and participation.<sup>68</sup>

The tools of social analysis were employed by liberationist with people in struggle to develop a structural understanding of how poverty and social injustices are produced by an organized system of exploitation. McGovern explains that the socio-analytical mediation of liberation theology, drawing on dependency theory and Marxist analysis, reveals that, “poverty results from an economic system (capitalism) that exploits workers and excludes others (the unemployed or underemployed) from the whole productive process.”<sup>69</sup> Boff and Boff are clear to claim, however, that liberation theology used the

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<sup>66</sup> Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation*, 88.

<sup>67</sup> For a deeper discussion of Latin American church history see Enrique Dussel, *History and the Theology of Liberation: A Latin American Perspective*; For an in depth examination of how liberation theology make use of the social sciences see Clodovis Boff, *Theology and Praxis: Epistemological Foundations* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987).

<sup>68</sup> Leonardo Boff, *Church: Charism & Power: Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1985), 134.

<sup>69</sup> McGovern, 36.

analytical tools of Marxism not as an end in and of itself, but as a means for understanding the ways the economic factors and dominant ideologies maintain systems of oppression. It is through the use of a “dialectical” or “historico-structural” explanation of socio-economic poverty that liberation theology is able to define poverty as “the product of economic organization of society itself... as a *collective* and also *conflictive* phenomenon, which can be overcome only by replacing the present social system with an *alternative* system.”<sup>70</sup> Liberation theologians employed the tools of socio-analytical and historico-analytical interpretation to understand the conditions the poor of Latin America faced and to develop a viable Christian perspective that could confront the complex social forces upholding the death dealing structure of neocolonial capitalism. The Boffs explain that, “the situation of the oppressed is defined not only by their oppressors but also by the way in which they react to oppression, resist it, and fight to set themselves free from it.”<sup>71</sup> In this way, the liberationist method goes beyond tactics of reform and points toward the construction of a qualitatively new society.

### Building Critical Consciousness

*Liberation theology at its best is a worldly theology—a theology that not only opens our eyes to the social misery of the world but also teaches us to understand it better and to transform it.*<sup>72</sup>

— Franz Josef Hinkelammert

Liberation theology is an attempt with and by the poor and dispossessed to reconceptualize the Christian faith. An enhanced awareness of the economic and socio-

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<sup>70</sup> Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, 26-27.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, 27.

<sup>72</sup> Franz Josef Hinkelammert, *The Ideological Weapons of Death* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986), v.

cultural situation resulted from an intensifying climate across Latin America in the twentieth century as well as the activation of grassroots movements to educate and politicize the poor in response to these conditions. McGovern notes that the Young Christian Students, Young Christian Workers and Freire's popular education movements were critical for the development of conscientization among the poor. These groupings recognized that poverty and oppression were not inherent condition of modern society. As a liberationist movement grew, it employed a process of conscientization to counter the dominant ideologies that perpetuated the disparity of wealth and poverty, domination and exploitation. Ideology, for liberation theology, has to do with a system of ideas and symbols that promote the values and interests of a particular group or culture. The liberationist movement in Latin America places particular attention on the role of conscientization as a process of education and organization that can raise grassroots counter-consciousness to the dominant ideologies and build people's commitment to a movement for liberation.

The process of conscientization begins with an awareness of the casual factors that produced poverty and name it as "a *collective* and also *conflictive* phenomenon, which can be overcome only by... *revolution*, understood as the transformation of the bases of the economic and social system."<sup>73</sup> This awareness was not inherent to the experiences of the poor. Instead, the process of conscientization was about building on one's understanding of the experiential conditions of poverty to name why poverty exists and explaining its causes. Sociologist Christian Smith notes that the liberationist movement recognized that revolutionary liberation would not be a short-term accomplishment. Instead, it focused on a long-term process and developing leaders who

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<sup>73</sup> Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, 27.



could analyze the situation at hand and become agents in confronting and changing structures of oppression. It was this process of conscientization, as a means to challenge the dominant worldview and change the consciousness of Latin American society, that became the central goal of the liberation theology movement.<sup>74</sup>

Liberation theology further rejects the belief that theology is independent of current conditions and ideologies. Segundo strongly argues that theology is not exempt from the influence of dominant ideologies; instead it is influenced by the prevailing values and beliefs of dominant culture. In turn, one must continually question and reflect on varying interpretations of the Christian message as it relates to an understanding of the current situation. Segundo named this process of action and reflection within the Christian theological tradition the hermeneutical circle, “the continuing change in our interpretation of the Bible which is dictated by the continuing changes in our present-day reality, both individual and societal.”<sup>75</sup> This process of action and reflection is necessary to illuminate the ways dominant ideologies are conflated with Christian faith and used to justify the suffering a majority of people face.

#### The Importance of Praxis: A Commitment to Liberation

*The Church cannot cease to be involved with Politics; that is, it cannot be indifferent to the justice or injustice of a cause nor can it be silent in the face of the obvious exploitation of any people. There is no neutrality in Politics: one is either for change in the direction of greater social participation or one is in favor of the status quo, which in many countries marginalizes a vast majority of people.*<sup>76</sup>

— Leonardo Boff

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<sup>74</sup> Christian Smith, *The Emergence of Liberation Theology*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 57.

<sup>75</sup> Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1976), 8.

<sup>76</sup> Leonardo Boff, *Church, Charism, and Power*, 27.

What did it mean to be in favor of change, to choose the side of the oppressed in the context of Latin American liberation theology in the 20<sup>th</sup> century? For liberation theologians, to be on the side of the poor meant committing to the construction of a just society. Smith suggests that the liberation movement was “an attempt to mobilize a previously unmobilized constituency for collective action against an antagonist to promote social change.”<sup>77</sup> The necessity of political action, based on a commitment to the poor and a theological reflection on the true meaning of Jesus’ teaching, was an essential element in the liberationist method. Boff argued that apoliticism results in the manipulation and mutilation of the Gospel.<sup>78</sup> In turn, one could not do theology without committing to the work of a movement for social change.

The action step of liberation theology built on a social analysis of conflict in Latin American society and attempted to invert the traditional power relationship and organizing a church of the people. McGovern notes that, “Commitment should manifest itself in time spent working directly with the poor in the struggle for liberation.”<sup>79</sup> Advancing the ability to actively live out one’s faith, the role of the theologian and the role of the institutional church were to build a church of the poor and, in the spirit of Vatican II, to respond to the signs of the time. Gutiérrez explains that liberation theologians can be characterized by their “determination to commit themselves to the process of liberation and by their desire for radical change both in the present internal structures of the Latin American Church as well as in the manner in which the Church is

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<sup>77</sup> Smith, 25.

<sup>78</sup> Boff, *Church, Charism, and Power*, 27.

<sup>79</sup> McGovern, 30.

present and active on this continent of revolution.”<sup>80</sup> Liberation theology’s commitment to social change was a call to recognize the relationship that exists between faith and political action, between the Kingdom of God and building up God’s Kingdom here on earth. A focus on praxis begins with action, with a concrete historical context in which the people are struggling. It draws on the tools of social analysis and critical consciousness to better understand that context and to challenge the systems that perpetuate oppression. Through this circle of action and reflection, the base of a liberating praxis for change is established.

### **Critiques of Liberation Theology and Engaging a Twenty-First Century Sociopolitical Economic Context**

Latin American liberation theology emerged from the revolutionary reality of the early and mid-twentieth century. One’s understanding of the core ideas and values of this theology cannot be divorced from the radical response of the Latin American people awakening to conditions of oppression and exploitation that birthed this praxis of faith. However, having moved into a new historical moment, it is helpful to take up the self-critical dimension of liberation theology. Doing so helps us to recognize the contributions a liberationist Christian response can make towards current efforts to challenge structural injustice and to pursue social transformation.

#### Limitations of Dependency Theory and a Twenty-first Century Global Economy

Early Latin American liberation theology drew heavily on the socio-economic analysis put forth under dependency theory, a belief that Northern development was built on third-world underdevelopment. Boff defined dependency theory in terms of “the

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<sup>80</sup> Gutiérrez, 61.

affluence and advanced scientific and technological development of the Northern hemisphere... [which] has meant the impoverishment and marginalization of the dependent, underdeveloped nations.”<sup>81</sup> Liberationist took up this social scientific theory as a way to best explain the conditions of Latin America in the mid-twentieth century. They argued that U.S. and European economic development and expansion dictated the economic conditions in Latin America and created a dependent structure based on exploitation and underdevelopment. Dussel was an early critic of dependency theory. While developmentalists argued that underdeveloped countries could overcome dependency through development by imitating the dominant means of development, Dussel argued that they would never be able to gain economic independence by replicating the approach of “advanced” nations. He noted pragmatically that, “The price of manufactured products increases steadily while the price of raw materials provided by the underdeveloped countries declines.”<sup>82</sup> Dussel, on a practical level, recognized that the global economy was evolving and that development could not answer to the economic and political problems Latin America faced.

Gutiérrez later joined Dussel in recognizing the limitations of dependency theory when he takes note of the inadequacy of this theory to account for the internal dynamics of individual Latin American countries as well as the evolution of the world economy.<sup>83</sup> Gutiérrez recognized, in looking forward to the reality of neoliberal global capitalism, that the problems of the poor in Latin America must be examined within a complex

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<sup>81</sup> Leonardo Boff, *Liberating Grace* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979), 29.

<sup>82</sup> Dussel, *History and the Theology of Liberation*, 115.

<sup>83</sup> Gutiérrez, “Introduction to the Revised Edition: Expanding the View,” in *A Theology of Liberation*.

international context. Pablo Richards further highlighted the devastating impact of globalization on the poor in Latin America writing, “The great majority of the South is in total abandonment. It can no longer be called dependent, but is simply nonexistent. We have moved from dependency to dispensability; today being dependent even seems to be a privilege.”<sup>84</sup> The evolving, technologically advanced, global, capitalist economy is creating massive impoverishment across the globe (in both rich and poor countries) and is rendering the poor of all nations superfluous.

Yet it is Dussel’s criticisms of dependency theory that illuminates a deeper philosophical problem that exists in the fundamental structure of capitalism. He argues that built into the exploitative system of global capitalism, there exists a dialectical relationship between wealth and poverty in which the poor are constituted as other.<sup>85</sup> The reality of dependency in his analysis cannot be limited to economic and political dependency, but must include the cultural oppression and dependency that has been conditioned within the thinking of the oppressed as well. Dussel’s challenge to uncover the ideological and philosophical roots of capitalism and imperialism that are absorbed by both the oppressor and the oppressed is an important intervention that I further develop when applying the lessons of Latin American liberation theology to a twenty-first century U.S. context.

As more people in the United States join the ranks of the global poor the influences of an evolving global economy continues to illuminate the limitations of dependency theory and the nuances that must be added to a center vs. periphery and rich

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<sup>84</sup> Pablo Richard, “Liberation Theology Today: Crisis or Challenge?” *Envío* 11, no. 133 (August 1992): 26.

<sup>85</sup> Dussel, “Liberation Philosophy from the Praxis of the Oppressed,” *The Underside of Modernity*, trans. and ed. Eduardo Mendieta (New York: Humanities Press, 1995), 3.

vs. poor nations analysis. In developing a liberationist Christian response to the economic, social, political, and moral crises people face today in the United States, it should also be noted that dependency theory was constructed in the 1960s when the U.S. middle strata was on the rise. A narrative of American exceptionalism that was built on an abundance of natural resources, industrial capacity, and supposed absence of a class based society was reaffirmed by the appeal of low unemployment, strong labor unions, and growing home ownership in the post-WWII era. While issues of discrimination and inequality were rampant during this period of U.S. history, particularly in relation to the economic equality of people of color and other marginalized populations, the U.S. economy and the incomes of its mainstream white majority were growing. Today, however, conditions have changed. The ever-expanding ideology of a global neoliberal economy is built on mass exploitation of both the “already poor” and the “newly poor” of all nations poor and rich. The destruction of organized labor, the technological revolution, and the growing dispossession of human beings from the ability to meet their most basic needs must be taken into account. New economic analysis is required, which I will take up in chapter two. What liberation theology offers is recognition that an economic analysis that is rooted in diverse lived experiences of those affected by the current conditions is essential in responding to the signs of the time. One need not take up the specific tool of dependency theory, but rather the core concept that in order to develop an adequate response to rising inequality, one must first work to understand the complex conditions at hand.

### Interpreting a Preferential Option for the Poor

A preferential option for the poor is a founding principle upon which Latin American liberation theology was built. Emerging out of a radical solidarity with the poor and a critique of social, economic, and political structures that create poverty, liberationists ground the preferential option for the poor in both the Hebrew Scriptures as well as the reign of God revealed through Jesus Christ.<sup>86</sup> Yet how this core concept is interpreted varies widely within the Christian tradition and Catholicism in particular. There remains a distinct need to clarify the relationship that exists between the theological enterprise of liberation and the historical project of social transformation.

One of the strongest critiques of Latin American liberation theology came from those who believed that the preferential option for the poor reduced faith to politics and salvation to earthly progress alone. Arguing that liberation theology too narrowly focused on the political commitment of the church, critics like Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger and Cardinal López Trujillo saw the liberation movement as promoting Marxist revolution rather than true Christian liberation. Pushing back against its political engagement, the 1974 International Theological Commission retorted that, “We gain true freedom through grace and the sacraments, by being freed from sin and restored to communion with God.”<sup>87</sup> In turn, Cardinal Ratzinger reasoned that liberation theology’s option for the poor was too exclusive and omitted the universality of God’s love. The underlying concern was that liberation theology was committed to class conflict rather than reconciliation. Liberationists disputed such claims and maintained that the very use of the word “preference” demonstrates that a commitment to the poor is not exclusive, but

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<sup>86</sup> Gutiérrez, xxvii.

<sup>87</sup> McGovern, 54–55.

rather exists as a means to lift up those on the bottom. Liberation theology's commitment was to changing the whole of society for the betterment of all God's people through a demand for change from those at the bottom.

The Latin American Episcopate at Medellín (1968) and Puebla (1979) took an opposing stance to the orthodox clergy and endorsed liberation theology's call for a preferential option for the poor. Recognizing liberation as a central theme of Christian theology, the final document at Puebla affirmed Pope John XXIII's statement preceding the opening of Vatican II, that the church is called to be the church of the poor.<sup>88</sup> Yet even within this initial document, there was controversy over the meaning of "preferential option for the poor." McGovern, in discussing the conference history, explains that the language of "preferential option for the poor" as well as the poor as "the object of a love of preference on the part of the church" and the poor as "the little ones" who "endure poverty and affliction" existed in the language of the final document.<sup>89</sup> The contradiction that lies at the heart of these linguistic differences is connected to the role of the poor and the agency of those living in poverty. Were the poor to be subjects of their own destiny or were they confined to be objects of the Church's compassion?

The discrepancy between the poor as an agent for change and the poor as a subject of charity would continue for years to come. John Paul II's encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* suggested that the preferential option for the poor was a "special form of primacy in the exercise of Christian charity to which the whole tradition of the church bears

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<sup>88</sup> Gutiérrez, xxvi.

<sup>89</sup> McGovern, 17.



witness.”<sup>90</sup> This charitable interpretation, however, fails to parallel liberation theology’s revolutionary desire to challenge the status quo. John Paul II calls the Church to care for the poor and the dispossessed in our society, but he neglects to fully recognize the struggle of the poor. His interpretation overlooks the potential that exists for the poor to become revolutionary subjects that in collaboration with other sectors of the movement can change the social relationships for all of society.

Contending interpretations of the preferential option for the poor are essential to explore if U.S. Christians are to understand the resources liberation theology can offer to the struggle for social change today. In *Latin American Liberation Theology: The Next Generation* Ivan Petrella contemplates how liberation theology can move from a discourse about liberation to the pursuit of liberation. The challenge to enliven material liberation remains as a central task of social movement building today. Petrella suggests that moving from a theological discourse to the pursuit of liberation will require specifications that involve socioeconomic and political analysis, political demands, and strategic and tactical plans that can ensure the implementation of such demands. This shift requires that one’s theological and ethical constructs be grounded in a historical movement working for change in the here and now. It is at this point that my own interpretation of “a preferential option for the poor,” gains relevancy. Turning to liberation theology’s radical roots and its emergence from the leadership of the poor and dispossessed on the ground, the preferential option for the poor can be understood in today’s U.S. context as an ethical demand for *the right to not be poor*. By acknowledging the increased dispossession of a global poor and the destruction of the middle class in the United States, American Christians can expand their understanding of the identity

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<sup>90</sup> John Paul II, Encyclical Letter, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 1987.

markers of the poor and what it means for “the poor” to be a revolutionary subject that can push the whole of society towards social transformation.

The poor are not objects of charity in this paradigm. The poor instead become a social force that highlights the inconsistencies of the social, political and economic systems that produce both great abundance and tremendous poverty. Taken this way, a preferential option for the poor is a strategic vision that sheds light on the reality that twenty-first century society has the resources and scientific capability to provide for all of God’s creation. Moving from this theological assumption of a *preferential option for the poor* toward the ethical practice of ensuring *the right to not be poor* is about recognizing how a movement to end poverty is not just about a movement of the poor for the poor. Rather, it is a movement for the whole of society to respond to the basic contradictions of a twenty-first century advanced capitalist system.

#### Expanding the Social Context of the Poor

If liberation theology is to begin in the concrete lived experiences of the poor, how can it balance its class-based analysis with an accounting for the diverse experiences of growing impoverishment? Contemporary liberationists have been critical of early liberationists’ use of a class struggle frame that overlooks the particularity of struggles around gender, race, and culture within Latin America. There is a concern that the heterogeneity that evolved from the employment of dependency theory failed to address the epistemological and cultural conflicts that strengthened the status quo and prevented real material liberation for the people of Latin America. In her exploration of liberation theology and human rights, Ethna Regan writes that, “In the first two decades of the movement, liberation theologians... tended to overlook this complexity of the poor, being

mainly silent about children and women, about the black and indigenous poor, and about the multidimensional nature of poverty.”<sup>91</sup> This critique suggests that a universal call for the liberation of the poor created an illusion of a homogenous group who experienced universal suffering at the hands of unjust capitalist and imperialist exploitation.

Gutiérrez argues, however, that emphasizing the social and economic aspects of poverty was not part of early liberation theology’s original intention. He explains that,

‘[D]ominated peoples,’ ‘exploited social classes,’ ‘despised races,’ and ‘marginalized cultures’ were formulas often used in speaking of the poor in the context of liberation theology (there was repeated reference also to discrimination against women). The point of these formulas was to make it clear that the poor have a social dimension. But the turbulent situation in Latin America has caused many to place an almost exclusive emphasis on the social and economic aspect of poverty.<sup>92</sup>

Dialogue between Latin American liberation theology and U.S. Black Theology, attempted to address early iterations of the *class* vs. *race* debate within liberation theology.<sup>93</sup> Civil rights and women’s rights activist Pauli Murray suggested that the liberation theologies that arose in the 1960s were attempting to respond to on the ground movements of oppressed people for liberation. Reflecting on the development of liberation theologies she wrote,

Theologies of liberation are specific; they were usually written out of the concrete situations and experiences of particular groups. Black theology focuses on the black experience under white racism; feminist theology is concerned with the revolt of women against male-chauvinist structures of society; Third World theologies develop out of the struggle for national liberation. Their common

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<sup>91</sup> Ethna Regan, *Theology and the Boundary Discourse of Human Rights*, (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2010), 153.

<sup>92</sup> Gutiérrez, xxi.

<sup>93</sup> See “Black Theology and Latin American Liberation Theology: Excerpts from a Symposium of the World Council of Churches,” in *Black Theology: A Documentary History Volume One: 1966-1979*, ed. James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993).

purpose is to commit Christians to radical political and social change, and to transform society in order to create a new and more humane world.<sup>94</sup>

While Murray pointed to the common purpose that ought to exist between the varied manifestations of liberationist struggles, she also noted the tensions that have endured within liberation theologies to recognize the interstructural elements that remain within systems of domination.<sup>95</sup> Feminist theologian Elina Vuola suggests that liberation theologians' adoption of the term "theology of life," takes a step toward, "[an] understanding of the poor as the multiply marginalized and excluded, deprived of the fullness of life, in need of economic, political, racial and sexual liberation."<sup>96</sup>

Within the U.S. context, a thick analysis of the socio-cultural reality of the poor and dispossessed is essential to developing strategic and contextual practices of liberation. The realities of those experiencing the conditions of economic poverty are essential to revealing the discrepancies within dominant power relations as well as the structural and historical practices that continue to proliferate the disparity of wealth and poverty in the United States. It is here that my work to bring together a liberationist Christian social ethics with the critical reflections of social movement studies offers a relevant intervention for the U.S. context. The struggles of those on the ground cannot be separated from their multidimensional reality. Yet at the same time, a consciousness of

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<sup>94</sup> Pauli Murray, "Black Theology and Feminist Theology: A Comparative View," in *Black Theology: A Documentary History Volume One: 1966-1979*.

<sup>95</sup> The concept of intersectionality, a theory with roots in the black feminist movement of the 1960s and a term introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, has been used in contemporary scholarship to confront this complex reality of oppression and domination. There continues to be an ongoing debate regarding the term intersectionality within contemporary scholarship. While some will argue that intersectionality undermines notions of class struggle in support of identity politics, others will argue that intersectionality; in its inception was a critique of and alternative to identity politics.

<sup>96</sup> See Elina Vuola, *Limits of Liberation: Praxis as Method of Latin American Liberation Theology and Feminist Theology* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1997), 65.

how these intersecting experiences of oppression work together to reinforce the dominant power structure is not automatically apparent. I acknowledge the ideological and historical mechanisms that have been utilized by those in power to maintain hegemony of the ruling elite and mask the structural violence of poverty. In an attempt to disrupt these mechanisms of control, my work engages a liberationist method that roots the development of critical consciousness within the complex, concrete reality of what it looks like for social movement leaders on the ground to fight to develop strategic unity for social change.

### **Conclusion: Redefining the Problem of Poverty Then and Now**

Liberation theology was an essential philosophical current of the liberation movement that developed throughout Latin America in the mid-twentieth century. It critiqued the socioeconomic and political structures that created poverty and caused tremendous suffering for masses of people. At its core, liberation theology emphasized a commitment to and solidarity with the poor to change the whole society. The context of concrete struggle became the starting point for doing liberation theology. As voices within worldwide liberation movements have grown, there exists a need to examine the multifarious experiences of the poor and exploited. Liberation theology within the Latin American context has been challenged to recognize how engaging factors of race, culture, gender, and other social dimensions can provide a more accurate analysis of the conditions that the poor are facing. In the United States, liberation theologies were grounded in the emergence of movements for black liberation and women's liberation and challenged traditional theological enterprises to respond to realities of race and

gender. As the system of global capitalism evolves towards the proliferation of poverty (including industrialized countries like the United States), poverty within the U.S. context can no longer be understood as a problem on the margins of U.S. society or a problem reserved for the “Third” world. Tools from Latin American liberation theology can be used to reshape long held theological and socio-cultural assumptions about the poor and the problems of wealth and poverty in the United States.

Acknowledging the principle within liberation theology that grounds its analysis, reflection, and action in a concrete historical context, chapter two will focus on examining the conditions of the twenty-first century United States in the wake of the 2008 economic crisis. There were many forces at work to maintain the status quo and prevent the majority of people in the United States from recognizing their shared interests from breaking their isolation, and from working together to change the structures that produced the Great Recession and its consequences. In turning to the material lives of the poor and the diversity of their experiences, the next chapter will take seriously the needs to understand the structural nature of poverty and to highlight the epistemological privilege of the poor in revealing the contradictions that remained hidden in spite of the 2008 crisis. Drawing on a liberationist method I will contextualize the struggles of the poor and dispossessed in the United States and challenge the American Christian consciousness to ask, why the crisis of poverty is multiplying in an age of great abundance.

## Chapter 2

### **A War on Poverty or a War on the Poor?: Poverty as Structural Violence**

*The emergency we now face is economic, and it is a desperate and worsening situation. For the 35 million poor people in America—not even to mention, just yet, the poor in the other nations—there is a kind of strangulation in the air. In our society it is murder, psychologically, to deprive a man of a job or an income. You are in substance saying to that man that he has no right to exist. You are in a real way depriving him of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, denying in his case the very creed of his society. Now, millions of people are being strangled that way. The problem is international in scope. And it is getting worse, as the gap between the poor and the ‘affluent society’ increases... The dispossessed of this nation — the poor, both white and Negro — live in a cruelly unjust society. They must organize a revolution against the injustice, not against the lives of the persons who are their fellow citizens, but against the structures through which the society is refusing to take means which have been called for, and which are at hand, to lift the load of poverty. There are millions of poor people in this country who have very little, or even nothing, to lose. If they can be helped to take action together, they will do so with a freedom and a power that will be a new and unsettling force in our complacent national life.<sup>97</sup>*

— Martin Luther King Jr. “Trumpet of Conscience”

Liberation theology is rooted in the reality of revolutionary struggle. The history, method, and tradition of Latin American liberation theology, which I explored in chapter one, highlighted how a faith commitment to the process of liberation requires an engagement of the revolutionary moment as it reveals emerging contradictions in social, political, and economic structures. It calls for an unearthing of the root causes that produce human suffering and demands a commitment to work for revolutionary change to abolish all suffering. The theology that emerged out of Latin America in the mid-twentieth century was not about creating a new theological discipline, but about engaging the revolutionary times of that period. Similarly, it was a connected yet distinct

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<sup>97</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., “Trumpet of Conscience,” in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), Massey Lectures, November-December, 1967.

revolutionary moment that the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was responding to within the context of the United States in 1967. In a lecture he gave as part of the 1967 Massey Lecture series in Canada, King named the conflict of poverty in the midst of growing abundance as a defining characteristic of the times. The post-World War II period, often defined as the “Golden Age of Capitalism,” was a period of tremendous economic growth and high employment for a growing middle class in the United States.<sup>98</sup> It was during this same period, in the late 1960’s, that King began to shift from a position of civil rights to human rights. As protests against the Vietnam War and calls for Black Power surged, King recognized that the concept of opportunity, as a value promoted within the American ideology, could not ensure a reality where the basic needs of all human beings were met. Life long anti-poverty organizer and Poverty Initiative Scholar-in-Residence Willie Baptist, in his book *Pedagogy of the Poor*, explains that, “In King’s assessment the period had moved from the era of civil rights—dealing with merely racial relationships [questions of exclusion]—to human rights—dealing with the inseparability of racial relationships, economic exploitation, and foreign policy, especially as expressed in the Vietnam War at that time.”<sup>99</sup> It was in this moment of massive social unrest that King, along side national and grassroots leaders like Peggy Terry, Myles Horton, Reis Tijerina, Robert Kennedy, Marian Wright Edelman, and Johnnie Tillmon began to think about ways to organize with dispossessed and marginalized communities across racial and geographic divides to confront the underlying structures that perpetuated misery in

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<sup>98</sup> The Golden Age of Capitalism began at the end of World War II and continued through the early 1970’s. Also known as the Long Boom, it was a period defined by sustained economic growth and high levels of employment in the United States, Western Europe, and East Asian countries. The height of this period of economic prosperity spanned from 1945-1952, while overall growth continued through 1971.

<sup>99</sup> Willie Baptist and Jan Rehman, *Pedagogy of the Poor* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2011), 71.



their communities.<sup>100</sup> Recognizing the interconnected evils of racism, economic exploitation, and militarism, King's 1967 call for a Poor People's Campaign echoed the multiracial spirit of former revolutionary moments like the Bonus March on Washington in 1932, the struggles of the Southern Tenant Farmers, and the General Strike of 1934 that had attempted as their primary goal to improve the economic conditions of all those involved in these efforts. The move towards a Poor People's Campaign was a moment to name the contradictions of the economic, political and social systems in the United States in the late 1960s. It was a moment to acknowledge that the modern capitalist economy had developed the means and productivity to ensure that the basic necessities for all human beings be met. The turn toward global imperialism and the war in Vietnam was a turn away from a War on Poverty and the beginning of a declaration of a War on the Poor. The question that emerged for Dr. King in 1967, and the question that remains for liberationist Christian social ethics is: if the United States has the means to eradicate poverty, why is the crisis of inequality multiplying?

Indeed, the aftermath of the 2008 global economic crisis has revealed that we are once again embarking upon a revolutionary moment. Far from the "Golden Age of Capitalism," we have moved into a forty-year period of chronic economic instability and the continued development of massive inequality.<sup>101</sup> From the Saffron revolution in Burma, to the Arab Spring, to the uprisings in southern Europe, Turkey and Brazil, streets

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<sup>100</sup> Peggy Terry (Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), Economic Research and Action Project (ERAP), and Jobs or Income Now (JOIN) Chicago); Myles Horton (Highland Folk School, TN); Reis Tijerina (Chicano and Indo-Hispano Movements, New Mexico), Robert Kennedy (New York Senator and Democratic Presidential Candidate), Marian Wright Edelman (Children's Defense Fund), and Johnnie Tillmon (National Welfare Rights Organization).

<sup>101</sup> See the Global Policy Forum's "Perpetual Crisis: A Timeline of 40 years of Economic Instability," <https://www.globalpolicy.org/social-and-economic-policy/the-world-economic-crisis/general-analysis-2/51104-financial-and-economic-crises-a-timeline.html?itemid=id#1303>.

and squares across the world have been engrossed by massive demonstrations, strikes, occupations, and rebellions. In the United States, we have experienced glimpses of this scale of social unrest. From the emergence of the Tea Party movement in 2009 and the Occupy protests of 2011 to the Moral Mondays Movement that gained momentum in 2013 and the Black Lives Matter protests that fostered growing responses in 2014, a battle of ideas has been underway in the public consciousness within this country.<sup>102</sup> American journalist and activist Chris Hedges suggests that more and more people are beginning to recognize the injustice and inequality present in the current system. While people aligned on the right and left differ in their responses, Hedges argues that they share a revulsion for the ruling class. As the corporate state refuses “to address even the minimal grievances of the citizenry, along with the abject failure to remedy the mounting state repression, the chronic unemployment and underemployment, the massive debt peonage that is crippling more than half of Americans, and the loss of hope and widespread despair,” Hedges concludes that revolt will be an inevitable outcome.<sup>103</sup> The concern that emerges for liberationist Christian ethicists is: as social, political, and economic discontent rise, what beliefs and ideas will capture the imagination of the masses? Will people continue to believe the myth of the American dream and the promise of economic opportunity propagated by the ruling elites? Will people stand by while austerity economics and regressive extremist politics decimate both our civil and economic human rights? Or, will people wake up and view reality from the perspective of

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<sup>102</sup> The ruling elites are concerned that the current level of inequality will result in massive social unrest. As the middle class continues to be absorbed into the global poverty class and their social, political, and economic foundations are lost, those in power fear that revolts and rebellion will ensue. See Nafeez Ahmed, “Pentagon preparing for mass civil breakdown,” *The Guardian*, June 12, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/earth-insight/2014/jun/12/pentagon-mass-civil-breakdown>.

<sup>103</sup> Chris Hedges, “Our Invisible Revolution,” *Truthdig*, October 28, 2013, [http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/our\\_invisible\\_revolution\\_20131028](http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/our_invisible_revolution_20131028).

the poor and growing dispossessed? Will people realize that the poor no longer stand on the margins of our society, but are part of the growing masses who have been rendered superfluous by technological innovations and a global capitalist system that values profit above all else?

Because liberation theology demands an engagement with the revolutionary moment and the oppressive conditions that are moving people to take action, it challenges us to analyze these conditions and how they are expressed in the lived experiences of the dispossessed. I will, therefore, begin with a liberationist critique of the growing inequality revealed by the 2008 financial crisis. Highlighting economic disparities of wealth and poverty that followed the 2008 financial crisis, I will explore how the problem is not one of scarcity or the inability to meet people's needs due to a lack of resources, but one of abandonment in the midst of abundance. From there, I will engage with the epistemological privilege of the poor and challenge narrow definitions that limit our analysis of who are the poor in the twenty-first century U.S. context. Building on sociologist Mark Ranks theory that the poor are no longer reserved to the margins, but rather make up a growing majority of the population, I move to illuminate the structural reality of poverty and its relationship to the sinful over-accumulation of wealth. Finally, employing structural violence theory, I will suggest that poverty is structural violence and a violation of our most basic human rights. Therefore, a liberationist Christian social ethics must develop a new ethical narrative that can confront the infallibility of the global capitalist system and call out the immorality of the structural violence of poverty.

## **A Cruel and Unjust Society: Naming the Contradictions of Wealth and Poverty in Light of the 2008 Economic Crisis**

*Although almost everybody agrees with the popular sentiment that ‘the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer,’ and the numbers confirm it, there is little examination of what it means and even less investigation of what the root causes are. The opposite appears to be the case: in times of economic inequality religious prosperity movements are on the rise, promising social mobility that is illusionary.<sup>104</sup>*

— Joerg Rieger

The year 2014 marked the fiftieth anniversary of President Lyndon Johnson’s “War on Poverty.” While the U.S. government has spent more than \$16 trillion dollars to “help fight poverty” over the last 50 years, in 2012, there were still 49.7million Americans grappling with the economic and social hardships of living below the poverty line, including 13.4 million children. The global financial crisis that developed in response to the bursting of the U.S. housing bubble in mid-2007, and has become known as the Great Recession, is said to be the worst recession the world has witnessed for over six decades. From a housing crisis, to a global financial crisis, to a jobs crisis, to a debt crisis; the impact of the Great Recession has continued to plague the poor and pushed millions more into to poverty. In 2012 the official poverty rate was 15 percent, meaning 46.5 million people in the US are living in poverty, up by over 9 million since 2008. The same year, the official unemployment rate for the United States was 8.1 percent, and rates were even higher for Blacks (13.8 percent) and for American Indians and Alaska Natives (12.3 percent).<sup>105</sup> An additional 97.3 million (33 percent) of people living in the United

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<sup>104</sup> Rieger, *Religion, Theology, and Class*, 8.

<sup>105</sup> It is important to note that while the official unemployment rate was 8.1 percent, 86 million people were jobless in 2012. CNN Money reported that the official unemployment statistics do not include nonworking adults who are no longer looking for jobs. Annalyn Censky, “America’s Job Crisis: The 86 Million Invisible Unemployed,” *CNN Money* May 4, 2012, <http://money.cnn.com/2012/05/03/news/economy/unemployment-rate/>.

States are low-income, defined as incomes below twice the federal poverty line, or \$47,700 for a family of four. Taken together, this means that 48 percent of the U.S. population is poor or low income, or nearly one in every two people. Children of all races are hindered by poverty in the United States: 64 percent of black children—6.5 million; 31 percent of Asian children—1.0 million; 63 percent of American Indian children—0.4 million; 63 percent of Hispanic children—10.7 million; and 31 percent of white children—12.1 million live in low-income families.

A liberationist perspective challenges American Christians to not only examine the reality of poverty, but to interrogate the structures that are producing poverty. Turning then to the economic structure as a whole in the aftermath of the Great Recession, it becomes important to recognize that while poverty has multiplied for masses of people under what has become known as a “jobless recovery,” there has also been a concurrent concentration and centralization of wealth in this period. Christine Cumming, First Vice-President and Chief Operating Officer of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York explains that, “When you think about the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, even the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the problem in the financial world was the scarcity of capital and the search for where’s that capital that can be used to invest. Today, we have lots of wealth.”<sup>106</sup> The discrepancy revealed through the 2008 economic crisis is that although the United States has the material means to produce an unheard of abundance, it continues to witness a massive expansion of poverty and deepening economic inequality. The reality of poverty that is experienced in the twenty-first century is not a reality of scarcity, but the result of a fundamental weakness of an economic order that has created abundance through the

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<sup>106</sup> “Ensuring Stability in an Age of Globalized Finance,” Council on Foreign Relations, May 13, 2014, <http://www.cfr.org/financial-markets/ensuring-stability-age-globalized-finance/p32997>.

production of poverty. Indeed, the Great Recession did not produce hardships for all. In fact, the largest corporations were able to use the recession as an opportunity to restructure and “become more efficient, taking advantage of low interest rates, cheap labor, and a period of high productivity.” *Time* magazine suggested that such restructuring was a positive result of the crisis, with financial analyst Michael Sivy stating, “In every economic system, there have to be occasional corrective phases, where inefficient and uncompetitive businesses and services are eliminated, costs are lowered, and ground is cleared for new growth.”<sup>107</sup> While the question of economic growth is central for the free market economist, a liberationist Christian social ethics must ask who benefits from such “corrective” practices? Sivy argued that the long-term success of the economy depends on large corporations ability to take advantage of opportunities that emerged from the Great Recession. Yet from whose vantage point is such restructuring understood as a success? When “twelve of the nations largest Fortune 500 companies, while making \$170 billion in profits during the period of The Great Recession, paid an effective tax rate of *negative* 1.5 percent,” can we really suggest that such “adjustments” serve the interests of everyday people and our broader society?<sup>108</sup>

From the perspective of the people who lost their homes, lost their jobs, and any sense of financial security, the “winner take all” politics of the Great Recession followed the trends of growing inequality that had been occurring over the past 40 years in this country. In 1980, the CEO of a major corporation made 42 times that of the average

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<sup>107</sup> Michael Sivy, “The Big Winner of the Great Recession Is...,” *Time Magazine*, January 18, 2012, <http://business.time.com/2012/01/18/the-big-winner-of-the-great-recession-is/>.

<sup>108</sup> Rick Ungar, “How Our Largest Corporations Made \$170 Billion During Great Recession and Paid No Taxes,” *Forbes*, June 1, 2011, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/rickungar/2011/06/01/how-our-largest-corporations-made-170-billion-during-great-recession-and-paid-no-taxes/>.

worker; in 2012 they earned over 400 times the pay.<sup>109</sup> Wealth accumulation during this period is even more distorted. In 2011, the top 1 percent of the US population owned 43 percent of wealth (\$24.4 trillion); the top 5 percent of the population owned 72 percent of wealth (\$40.8 trillion); the bottom 80 percent of the population owned 7 percent of wealth (\$3.9 trillion). Globally the richest 1 percent has seen their share of wealth increase from 44 percent in 2009 to 48 percent in 2014. As reported by Oxfam, “the wealth of the poorest half of the world’s population has fallen by a trillion dollars since 2010... [M]eanwhile the wealth of the richest 62 [people] has increased by more than half a trillion dollars,” leaving 62 individuals holding the same amount of wealth as half the world’s population, or 3.6 billion people.<sup>110</sup>

The economic inequality that has been revealed in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis, a crisis that King presciently predicted, is clearly not a problem of scarcity.<sup>111</sup> Therefore, for a liberationist Christian social ethicist, the problem is not a question of means, but a question of will and a question of conscious. If God has created an abundance that can meet the needs of all God’s creation and the means to end poverty exist, why is the problem of poverty so pervasive? Taking up the liberationist method, it becomes relevant to examine the current conditions from the perspective of a growing global poverty class. It becomes imperative to redefine who are the poor in the context of

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<sup>109</sup> Mark Rank, Thomas A. Hirschl, and Kirk A. Foster, *Chasing the American Dream: Understanding What Shapes Our Fortunes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>110</sup> Oxfam, “62 people own the same as half the world, reveals Oxfam Davos report,” January 18, 2016 (<https://www.oxfam.org/en/pressroom/pressreleases/2016-01-18/62-people-own-same-half-world-reveals-oxfam-davos-report>).

<sup>111</sup> In his introduction to *Religion, Theology, and Class*, theologian Joerg Rieger notes the severity of inequality in the current historical moment by comparing contemporary U.S. wealth inequality to that of Ancient Rome. He states that while the top 1 percent in Ancient Rome controlled 16 percent of society’s wealth, today the top 1 percent in the United States control 40 percent of society’s wealth. Rieger, 7.

the twenty-first century United States and relevant to examine the current conditions from the perspective of the emerging class of the global poor. The epistemological privilege of the poor reminds us that it is the experiences of the poor and dispossessed that can best illuminate the paradox of a system that is globalizing poverty on one hand and centralizing wealth on the other.

Who Are the Poor in the Twenty-first Century U.S. Context?: Voices of the Dispossessed

Regardless of the monetary threshold used to define poverty in the United States, the precarious conditions that have continued to grow since the economic collapse of 2008 are resulting in people's basic necessities of life not being met.<sup>112</sup> People lack a basic sense of security as a result of this ongoing crisis. Persistent attacks on health care, public education, women's health choices, high rates of unemployment, and lack of affordable housing threaten the human rights of not only those categorized as poor under the established poverty line, but also of the millions of Americans who knowingly and/or unknowingly live on the verge of poverty. Economic inequality and social immobility can no longer be ignored. The myth of the American Dream—and the vision of the United States as a land of opportunity for all—is being forcefully challenged as more and more people face conditions of economic instability and downward economic mobility. The 1964 War on Poverty has shifted into a growing assault on the poor. In order to confront such an attack, Christian liberationist ethics must examine this reality from the place and position of those struggling against economic hardship and insecurity.

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<sup>112</sup> According to the current poverty threshold, a family with two adults and two children under 18 whose total income is \$22,811 is *not* poor. If the same family makes \$22,810, everyone in the household is poor (based on 2011 threshold data). This equation was developed in 1963 by Mollie Orshansky and was calculated based on the assumption that a family would spend one-third of their income on food. Simone Pathe, "Who Counts as Poor in America," *PBS Newshour* January 8, 2014, <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/making-sense/who-counts-as-poor-in-america>.



*“I’m On Food Stamps, Don’t Hate Me For It”*

A 2012 NPR report suggested that 18 million Americans had to apply for food aid since the economic crisis began. Jason DeParle, a reporter for the *New York Times*, explained that “more Americans depend on food assistance now than at any other time in modern history: 1 in 6 people, or almost 50 million Americans.”<sup>113</sup> Vicki Jones was one of these Americans. Jones told her story in the *Chicago Sun-Times* after reading countless posts on Facebook and receiving political emails describing people on food stamps as dependent, useless, and lazy. She explained that while studying to become a chiropractor when the economy crashed in 2008, her (now ex-) husband was laid off from his job. It took him over a year and a half to find a new job, and during that time they lost their house, had to declare bankruptcy, and their marriage fell apart. By 2012, she was living with her 7-year-old son, Jack, in a one-bedroom apartment just outside Chicago and struggling to survive on \$60 a week. She went to school from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. almost every day. Then she would come home to take care of her son and study. She concluded her reflection saying, “I never imagined this would be my story. I was an A student, top of my class. I went to college, got a job and continued my education toward a post-graduate degree. I did everything I was supposed to do...Life doesn’t always turn out the way it does in storybooks.”<sup>114</sup>

*“After Training Still Scrambling for Employment”*

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<sup>113</sup> “Poverty In America: Defining the New Poor.” *National Public Radio* April 22, 2012, <http://www.npr.org/2012/04/22/151166529/poverty-in-america-defining-the-new-poor>.

<sup>114</sup> Vicki Jones, ‘I’m on food stamps. Don’t hate me for it.’ *Chicago Sun-Times*, March 19, 2012, <http://www.suntimes.com/news/otherviews/11336524-452/im-on-food-stamps-dont-hate-me-for-it.html#.U8L1C7HCf1k>.

Once an executive assistant earning \$18 an hour, Israel Valle found himself standing with hundreds of people at the city work force center in Downtown Brooklyn in February 2009. While there, Valle's caseworker encouraged him to take advantage of post-crisis funding from the federal government for a job training program that could help further develop his skills and help her arrange job interviews for him. However, after six weeks of training and revamping his résumé, the only interviews available to him were for low-wage jobs mobbed by desperate applicants. The result, one year later Valle had joined the ranks of the 6.8 million Americans who had been officially jobless for six months or longer. Reflecting on his situation Valle said, "Training was fruitless... I'm not seeing the benefits. Training for what? No one's hiring."<sup>115</sup>

*"Tapped Out and Fighting for Water"*

Living next to one of the largest fresh bodies of water in the country, Nicole Hill of Detroit, Michigan was without water service for over two months when NBC News reported her story in July 2014. After challenging her water bills, which totaled \$5,700, the city water department shut off Hill's water while failing to investigate her case. Hill explained that she had "questioned the water department on several occasions about [it] and got no remedy to what could possibly be causing it." She said. "Every time I contradict something, they come up with another explanation as to why my water bill is supposedly accurate."<sup>116</sup> Hill was one of the 12,500 customers in Detroit who was without water after the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department began shutting off water

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<sup>115</sup> Peter S. Goodman, "After Training, Still Scrambling for Employment," July 18, 2010, [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/19/business/19training.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/19/business/19training.html?_r=0).

<sup>116</sup> Imaeyen Ibanga and Ron Mott, "Tapped Out Detroit Residents in Water Fight with City," *NBC News* July 6, 2014, <http://www.nbcnews.com/nightly-news/tapped-out-detroit-residents-water-fight-city-n149196>.

service in March 2014. As of July 2014, another 300,000 customers were in jeopardy of having their water shut off.

Aligning with a Movement of the Poor: Drawing Connections and Illuminating the Contradictions

In these times ripe with both crisis and abundance, empathy for the poor is not enough. Instead, a liberationist Christian response to the persistence of poverty in one of the world's wealthiest countries must work to uncover the enigma of mass poverty in the presence of immense wealth. Poverty is not a problem isolated to any one individual or one community, but must be seen as an indicator that the economic and political systems of our day are not working. The voices of Vicki, Israel, and Nicole, if seen as individual stories, can be understood as unfortunate obstacles to economic success or momentary glitches in an otherwise flourishing system. But together, their stories, and millions of others just like them, help to illuminate social trends that are resulting from a system that produces poverty in the midst of plenty. If American Christians can see these stories in relation to one another, they can begin to recognize that job training alone cannot account for the fact that since 2008, 60 percent of all jobs created paid minimum wage. Or that 25 percent of retail clerks have a college degree.<sup>117</sup> If American Christians can begin to analyze the structure rather than the individual, they will see that unemployment and underemployment force people to rely on food assistance programs and cause people to choose between paying their rent and paying their water bill. Furthermore, if American Christians follow the lead of organizing efforts on the ground like the Fight for \$15 (that

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<sup>117</sup> David Van Arsdale, "The Temporary Work Revolution: The Shift from Jobs That Solve Poverty to Jobs That Make Poverty," *WorkingUSA: The Journal of Labor and Society* 16 (March 2013).; Peter Brown, "The Digital Disruption—Technology & Economics for the 99% (Full Length Film)—YouTube," March 9, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aJnF8URsFus>.

confronts the trend of low-wage employment) or the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization (that fights back against massive water shut offs), they can begin to challenge this structure and not just question the accountability of individuals.<sup>118</sup> They can begin to ask why it is that the employees of a \$200 billion fast food industry are forced to rely on public assistance programs to provide for their families and obtain healthcare for their children. They are moved to inquire why Detroit’s commercial and industrial users, who owe over \$30 million in unpaid water bills have not had their water shut off.<sup>119</sup> When American Christians align ethical analysis with the organizing efforts of everyday people who are working to illuminate the basic contradictions of the current economic system, a liberationist Christian ethics challenges the whole society to recognize that it is economic systems—and not just individuals—that are sinful. The organized efforts of the poor move people in the United States to recognize that a system that yields tremendous profits for a few while also producing massive poverty for many is intolerable. If the resources to meet the demands of food security, housing, medical care, living wages, and quality education for all exist, people must begin to ask who profits from these needs going unmet?

### **Poverty as Structural Sin, Poverty as Structural Violence**

*Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees, to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people, making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless. What will you do on the day of reckoning, when disaster comes*

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<sup>118</sup> Fight for \$15 is an organizing effort of fast food workers across the United States who have been fighting since 2012 for a \$15/hour living wage and the right to form a union without retaliation. The Michigan Welfare Rights Organization is a union of public assistance recipients and low-income workers who have been fighting against water shutoffs in the city of Detroit since 2005.

<sup>119</sup> Martin Luckas, “Detroit’s Water War: a Tap Shut-Off That Could Impact 300,000 People,” *The Guardian*, June 25, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/true-north/2014/jun/25/detroits-water-war-a-tap-shut-off-that-could-impact-300000-people>.

*from afar? To whom will you run for help? Where will you leave your riches? Nothing will remain but to cringe among the captives or fall among the slain. Yet for all this, his anger is not turned away, his hand is still upraised.*

— Isaiah 10: 1-4

In a 2012 study of vacant properties in New York City conducted by Picture the Homeless (PTH) in collaboration with researchers at Hunter College, a crucial question was posed: “who benefits from vacancy in New York City, and does that benefit outweigh the social and economic costs of the housing emergency?”<sup>120</sup> In asking this question, the homeless and formerly homeless members who make up PTH, as well as the students and community leaders who joined PTH in conducting this study, took up the task of counting vacant properties across the city of New York to illustrate that the existing housing crisis was not an issue of scarcity. This study revealed that people were homeless, not because there was not enough housing; indeed, the city was full of vacant buildings and lots. And yet the city was spending \$750 million a year to keep homeless people in shelters. The study found that the neighborhoods with the highest vacancy rates were also the same neighborhoods whose residents had the highest rates of homeless and families being forced into the New York shelter system. Their research further revealed that, in most of these neighborhoods, there was enough vacant space to house ten times as many people as were currently housed in shelters in that district. The report demonstrated that, “Citywide, vacant property could house the entire shelter population five times over.”<sup>121</sup> The question that remains for a liberationist Christian social ethics is, if New

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<sup>120</sup> Picture the Homeless is a grassroots organization, founded and led by homeless people. They organize around social justice issues including housing, police violence, the criminalization of the homeless, and the shelter-industrial complex. Picture the Homeless, “Banking on Vacancy: Homelessness and Real Estate Speculation,” (Published Reports, Picture the Homeless, 2012), 4. [http://www.picturethehomeless.org/Documents/Reports/PH01\\_report\\_final\\_web.pdf](http://www.picturethehomeless.org/Documents/Reports/PH01_report_final_web.pdf).

<sup>121</sup> Picture the Homeless, 5.

York City has the material ability to house every person who is currently without a home, what prevents it from doing so?

### Poverty as Structural Sin

Liberation theologians, as addressed in chapter 1, took up the notion of structural sin to dispute common assumptions that no one is to blame for the unfortunate yet “inevitable” violence of poverty. Countering the belief that poverty is natural and that no single assailant can be blamed for the regrettable reality of poverty, liberation theologians lifted up the importance of social responsibility. Liberation theology challenged the structural sin of unjust laws and practices that produced suffering and misery for the poor. And they called out the institutionalized violence of a neocolonial capitalist system that attempted to claim that poverty ought to be seen as a justifiable consequence of the system.

Picture the Homeless’s vacant property study revealed the structural sin present in an intolerable system that creates poverty even when abundance exists. This recognition counters the notion that poverty and homelessness are individual problems reserved to a marginalized section of the U.S. population. Linking an investigation of growing impoverishment to a broader analysis of the excess that is produced within an advanced capitalist system helps us to name the *structural violence of poverty* and challenge “normative” practices that justify the status quo.

### Poverty as Structural Violence

The idea that violence occurs *when a violation that is avoidable, fails to be avoided* is, according to Johan Galtung, the definition of structural violence. Founder of the field of peace and conflict studies, Galtung developed this notion of structural

violence to explain that while there is no direct actor, avoidable violations—products of an unequal distribution of resources or unequal power to decide how resources are distributed—result in structural violence.<sup>122</sup> The example offered by PTH’s study of the housing crisis in New York City reveals that keeping properties vacant and promoting speculation in gentrifying neighborhoods is perfectly legal and encouraged under government policies. Yet according to Galtung’s analysis and the viewpoint of liberation theory, the existence of homeless families in the face of vacant property must be understood as structural violence, because these families’ and individuals’ right to housing can, in fact and materially, be met. It is the economic capitalist system, however, that prioritizes the property interests of the few at the expense of these basic human rights. Consequently, as a form of violence that is structurally created and imposed, homelessness comes to be seen as a natural and acceptable state of existence in our society, as natural as the air around us.

Newton Garver, another foundational thinker regarding this concept of structural violence, further explains that violence is not only those actions, which disrupt the “good order of society,” but also includes the actions and ideology that defend the *status quo*.<sup>123</sup> Expanding the conversation on violence beyond a definition that confines violence to an act of physical force, like Galtung, Garver sets in motion a need to expose the “norms” that make the violations of structural violence invisible. According to Garver, the challenge in working to reveal institutional violence is assigning responsibility for such violence, as there is often no singular agent who is enacting direct physical assault on

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<sup>122</sup> Johan Galtung, “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research,” *Journal for Peace Research* 7 no. 3 (1969).

<sup>123</sup> Newton Garver, “What Violence Is,” *The Nation* (24 June 1968).

one's person or property. Citing slavery, colonial oppression, and life in American ghettos as examples of institutional violence, Garver notes how once the structure itself is established, the use of overt physical force is less required to maintain this structure.

Confronting the institutional violence of racism, Garver notes the way structural violence is used to uphold the status quo in American society. Writing in the context of black urban uprisings of the late 1960's, Garver is clear to explain that the every day violence and systematic denial of social and economic options to people living in black ghettos was more violent than any of the social uprisings in Watts, Detroit, or New York. Yet the public media defined violence at that time as the social unrest that arose in urban black communities in the late 60's as violent rebellion. Focusing on the physical violence enacted in the 1960's "riots," the media failed to recognize the structural violence that plagued members of these communities. Poverty Initiative Scholar-in-Residence Willie Baptist, in reflecting on his experience as a black youth in Watts at the time of the uprising, explains that few recount the reality that black youth were experiencing unemployment rates as high as seventy percent at that time. Paired with police discrimination and brutality, the uprisings in Watts and other cities across the U.S. were direct responses to the structural violence enacted on these communities.<sup>124</sup>

Garver's framework helps reflect on the need to expose social and economic conflicts that exist in U.S. society. Whether analyzing the socio-economic reality of Watts in the 1960s, the encroachment of gentrification of Harlem in the early twenty-first century, or the structures that have lead to the recent eruption of protests against policy brutality imposed on African Americans across the United States, American Christians are moved to question why communities most basic needs continue to go unmet and

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<sup>124</sup>Baptist and Rehmann, *Pedagogy of the Poor*, 19.



people's basic sense of security is continuously threatened when we are living in the wealthiest period of human history.

Paul Farmer, an American medical anthropologist who has applied the principles of liberation theology to the field of public health, argues that violence often does not happen randomly. It is inflicted on people through poverty, racism, gender inequality, homophobia, and xenophobia. He argues that such violence is institutionalized through unjust social arrangements. In his book *Pathologies of Power*, Farmer explains that, "Human rights violations [particularly economic and social rights] are not accidents; they are not random in distribution or effect. Rights violations are, rather, symptoms of deeper pathologies of power and are linked intimately to the social conditions that so often determine who will suffer abuse and who will be shielded from harm."<sup>125</sup> At a moment in history where modern society has the material capacity to house, cloth, feed, and provide necessary health care to all, Farmer's position illustrates that the human rights violations of poverty can be avoided. It is structural violence that they are not. This application of the construct of structural violence helps Christians recognize that when we normalize poverty, we fail to acknowledge the laws and social patterns that have created it. A Christian liberationist ethics must, therefore, challenge the inevitability of poverty and move us to envision solutions that go beyond what is currently political or economically expedient.

### Shedding Accountability and Criminalizing the Poor

The laws tied to global capitalism are death dealing to many at the bottom of the economic system. Liberation theologian Jung Mo Sung argues that, "in the consciousness

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<sup>125</sup> Paul Farmer, *Pathologies of Power: Health, Human Rights, and the New War on the Poor* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 7.

of those who obey the law, because they believe in the social structure in which they live, there is no sin in their acts because they fulfill the law.”<sup>126</sup> Naming the structural violence of poverty is necessary to understand that the laws that govern U.S. society are not natural, but rather have been created to support the logic of a global capitalist economy. Today as more and more people are thrust into the ranks of a global poverty class, the system is finding new ways to shed its accountability and to criminalize the poor. As the aftermath of the 2008 housing crisis continues to be felt by millions of Americans and the reality of homelessness grows, cities across the country have passed legal measures to restrict assistance for those struggling to make ends meet. The National Coalition for the Homeless released a report that claims that since January of 2013, twenty-one cities around the country have passed laws restricting people from feeding homeless people.<sup>127</sup> While the Bible mandates that it is our Christian duty to feed the hungry, the laws of the free market, focused on increasing economic development and tourism, are refusing to enable people’s basic needs to be met. An understanding of structural sin and structural violence moves us to ask again, who profits from this reality? Community organizer and religious leader Aaron Scott makes a glaring critique of the predatory situation homeless people in the United States face today. She states,

It's time to stop categorizing the mistreatment of homeless people as cruelty and start categorizing it as political repression. What we have is a much bigger problem than individually heartless politicians and assailants. What we have is a society lethally invested in silencing the people best able to see and name the terrifying depths of the failure of capitalism. Unhoused people are not targeted by the system because they are weak and helpless. Unhoused people are targeted

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Michael Stoops, “Food-Sharing Report: The Criminalization of Efforts to Feed People In Need,” *National Coalition for the Homeless* 2014, <http://nationalhomeless.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Food-Sharing2014.pdf>.

because their struggles reveal the fundamental lie of this economy. They are targeted because when they speak up, the foundations shake. They are targeted because their lives and stories have the power to break this system.<sup>128</sup>

As a voice from below, Scott illuminates the necessity of maintaining the epistemological privilege of the poor. Her position does not suggest that the stories of the homeless are more important than those struggling in the “middle class.” Rather it offers a shocking critique that foreshadows a reality experienced by the middle, the reality that you might be next. The stories of those in abject poverty, when understood not as a matter of personal failure but as the breakdown of the current system, must be put in conversation with those falling from the ranks of the middle class to illuminate the inadequacies of the free market capitalist system and to name it as structural violence. Liberation theology lifts up the preferential option of the poor because it believes human dignity must take precedence over corporate and private gain; but it must also highlight the epistemological privilege of the poor as a position that can name the failure of the current system and the scandal of poverty in the midst of plenty. As more people die each year as a result of structural violence than all armed conflicts,<sup>129</sup> the ideology of free market capitalism is well at work in masking class conflict and justifying the “faultless” violation of people’s basic human rights. In turn, it is not enough to leave ethical questioning to the sphere of subjective intent. A Christian liberationist ethics instead requires that we analyze the consequences of the economic system and name the exploitative structures that produce unnecessary suffering as sinful.

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<sup>128</sup> Aaron Scott, “Chaplains on the Harbor,”(presentation, Poor People’s Campaign National Organizing Call, June 24, 2015).

<sup>129</sup> Edward O’Neil Jr., “Poverty, Structural Violence, and Racism in a World Out of Balance,” *Race/Ethnicity* 3 no. 1 (Autumn 2009).

## No One to Blame?: Wealth, Poverty, and the “Faultless” Hand of the Market

*Problems ‘arise not because some people are rich but because private profit and the power of capital are the highest priorities in the economic system.’<sup>130</sup>*

— Michael Zweig

The objective reality that a massive disparity between rich and poor exists can no longer be ignored; yet the question of power and who is to blame for the growing inequity that exists in U.S. society is met by ambiguous responses, most of which refuse to challenge the social relationships at work to preserve the vitality of the global capitalist system itself. Billionaires like Warren Buffet urge the government to increase taxes on the super-rich arguing that while Middle America is struggling to make ends meet, Washington law makers continue to feel compelled to protect the wealthy from tax burdens.<sup>131</sup> At the same time the Financial Crisis Inquiry Commission charged with investigating the 2008 economic crisis, placed fault on the greed of financial institutions and the ineptitude of government regulations for causing the economic breakdown from which many everyday people have yet to recover.<sup>132</sup> While the “unfortunate results” of the 2008 crisis are acknowledged by Buffet and the Commission, the deeper discrepancies of the system of global capitalism remain unexamined. Buffet alludes to the power relationships that exist between global capital and national laws that help to protect the power of capital, but the challenge to illuminate who are the poor today, why

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<sup>130</sup> Economist Michael Zweig, cited in Joerg Rieger, *Religion, Theology, and Class: Fresh Engagements after Long Silence*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 2.

<sup>131</sup> Warren Buffet, “Stop Coddling the Super-Rich” *New York Times*, August 14, 2011, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/15/opinion/stop-coddling-the-super-rich.html?\\_r=1&hp](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/15/opinion/stop-coddling-the-super-rich.html?_r=1&hp).

<sup>132</sup> Sewell Chan, “Financial Crisis Was Avoidable, Inquiry Finds,” *New York Times*, January 25, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/26/business/economy/26inquiry.html>.

the poor are poor, and the impact the protection of capital has in creating poverty go unexplored.

A concept of social responsibility and a critique of the social and political relationships that guide the U.S. economic system are repeatedly missing from theoretical analyses of economic conditions and the causes of poverty. Modern economic theory often confines its understanding of the economy to a study of production, distribution, and the consumption of wealth in society. This is why in 2014, five years after the economic crisis of 2008, economists were able to definitively say that the economy had recovered. While everyday people suffer the reality of unemployment, depressed wages, expanding homelessness, increased criminalization, forced overtime, and a continued reduction of benefits, the global economy is growing. Faith in free market capitalism is founded on a belief that the market “will always produce the best solution to optimize the use of scarce economic resources, generate the maximum economic growth possible, and always produce a fair distribution of wealth and the common good for society.”<sup>133</sup> In this realm of the abstract, economic theory dismisses the relationship of the economic structure to everyday human life and the laws of the market are governed by numbers alone.

Under this justification of global capitalism, liberation theologian Jung Mo Sung explains that the free market system is not tied to empathy for or solidarity with the poor. He argues that global capitalism is governed by the objective necessity to maximize profit for the capitalists. It is based on a belief that the market itself is good. The market, therefore, sits outside the field of ethical judgment as something absolute or even ethically neutral and not subject to ethical reflection. The social institutions of society are

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<sup>133</sup> Sung, 46–47.

constructed to support this economic system and are designed to preserve these social and economic relationships. The problem that arises in this ethical formation is that the inevitable consequences of a system that requires the production of poverty to produce profit is obscured to an ethics of subjective intent. If the system itself is infallible, human selfishness and individual intentions are the limits of ethical inquiry.

The shortcomings of this analysis are that individual intentions cannot alone account for the material crisis that millions of people in the United States are facing. It is necessary to understand the disconnect between personal objectives and structural processes if we are to begin to develop a social response to the ever growing disparity of wealth and poverty. A Christian liberationist ethics must ask where does the “faultless” hand of the market break down? In March of 2013, the city of Philadelphia closed twenty-three public schools in an effort to reduce a \$1.35 billion budget deficit. While hundreds of Philadelphians came out to protest the closure of these schools, holding hunger strikes, staging school walk outs, and performing civil disobedience, the chairman of the School Reform Commission, Pedro Ramos explained that the “closings were ‘excruciating, difficult and emotional for all of us,’ but that they helped to restore financial stability.”<sup>134</sup> Under the current structure of global capitalism, the budget deficit of Philadelphia makes it an unviable market to attract the resources of global capital.

The decision to close twenty-three schools must be understood in relationship to a “need” of local officials to decrease debt in order to attract new resources that might encourage long-term development in the city of Philadelphia. This is the demand of the

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<sup>134</sup> Jon Hurdle, “Philadelphia Officials Vote to Close 23 Schools,” *New York Times – Education*, March 7, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/08/education/philadelphia-officials-vote-to-close-23-schools.html>.

free market. Put simply, the city must project the opportunity for economic profit, which can then be shared to produce equality for all. The bottom line for the School Reform Commission was the reduction of debt. As noted by the chairman, no ill intentions were present. Rather, these closures ought to be understood as an “inevitable” process of the market. Under the current laws of global capital, no one is at fault for what Philadelphia parents called an attack on their schools. Claiming to ensure the long-term interest of the Philadelphia economy, the decision to close 10 percent of Philadelphia schools necessarily overlooked the consequences reported by the Media Mobilizing Project<sup>135</sup> that explained that school closures resulted in the layoffs of almost 4,000 people.<sup>136</sup> In turn, these closures affected not only students and workers, but also whole communities. If our analysis is beholden to a theory of “economic necessity,” what are we to do with the contradictions inherent in this ideology?

In this example, it is the logic of global capitalism that necessitated the closure of twenty-three public schools in Philadelphia. The personal intentions of the school policy makers who voted on these closures were within the jurisdiction of the law. While the basic needs of students, parents, and teachers in the community were jeopardized by these decisions, the outcome was a “faultless” violation of their basic human rights under the current economic and political system.

The proponents and participants in a global capitalist system that is ever evolving to ensure the production of surplus value justify poverty as an unfortunate yet acceptable

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<sup>135</sup> Media Mobilizing Project (MMP) is a grassroots organization committed to using media to organize poor and working people to tell our stories to each other and the world, disrupting the stereotypes and structures that keep our communities divided.

<sup>136</sup> MMP, “The Fast for Safe Schools,” August 5, 2013, <http://www.mediamobilizing.org/updates/fast-safe-schools>.

consequence of an otherwise productive and prosperous system of human innovation. Lifting up the virtues of technological advancement, medical innovation, and global trade, high tech global capitalism is looked at as the most successful and enduring economic system in modern history. Yet the glorification of this system fails to acknowledge that it is unable to fully utilize its own productive capacity. It overlooks or even accepts the reality that in a capitalist system, the inherent design is that some and potentially many will lose—that some, or indeed many, will not be housed, educated, or employed. Mark Rank in his book *One Nation Underprivileged* offers a helpful analogy:

Let us imagine eight chairs and ten players. The players begin to circle around the chairs until the music stops. Who fails to find a chair? If we focus on the winners and losers of the game, we will find that some combination of luck and skill will be involved. In all likelihood, the losers will be those in an unfavorable position when the music stops, those who are somewhat slower, less agile, and so on. In one sense, these are appropriately cited as the reasons for losing the game. However, if we focus on the game itself, then it is quite clear that, given only eight chairs, two players are bound to lose. Even if every player were suddenly to double his or her speed and agility, there would still be two losers. From this broader context, it really does not matter what the loser's characteristics are, given that two are destined to lose.<sup>137</sup>

In struggling to alleviate the immediate pain and suffering of the ever increasing ranks of the poor and dispossessed, are we simply trying to add in a chair or two to the game of musical chairs or are we willing to acknowledge that there is a fatal flaw in the game itself if all players are to flourish? A Christian liberationist ethics must ask who makes the rules of this game and who benefits from the rules that have been established? Do we have the mechanisms in place within U.S. society that can challenge unjust laws that support the violation of people's basic human rights? Under the current economic system, the power relations that place profit over people are made invisible by a legal

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<sup>137</sup> Mark Rank, *One Nation Underprivileged: Why American Poverty Affects Us All* (New York: Oxford Press, 2005), 75.



system created to reinforce the logic of global capitalism. As economist Michael Zweig proposes, the crisis people in the United States face today is not that some people are rich, but that for the last 40 years, the driving priorities in U.S. society have been to ensure private profit and the power of global capital at the expense of the American and global masses.

### **Conclusion: Challenging the Infallibility of the U.S. Capitalist Economy**

The 2008 economic crisis shined a spotlight on the deficiency of the capitalist free market system and the systemic injustices that had been building since the 1970s. It produced a moment where people were moved from complacency to question the infallibility of the modern capitalist economy and the institutions that continue to promote its legitimacy. While debates over what caused the crisis and what long-term impact the financial crisis will have on U.S. livelihoods continue, there are few thinkers who turn to the epistemological privilege of the poor to understand the problem U.S. society is facing and to project an alternative vision for how it can respond to the unjust systems that produced the Great Recession.

The aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis posed an opportunity to recognize that we can no longer analyze the problem of poverty in the twenty-first century in isolation from an understanding of the accumulation and centralization of wealth taking place on a global scale. Yet the ability to take advantage of this opportunity, and to engage this revolutionary moment, remains in question. Dr. King argued in 1967 that there were millions of poor people in this country who, if helped to take action together could become a new and unsettling force that could galvanize a critical mass of the American

people needed to move this country toward the abolition of all poverty. In the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis, as the poor have moved from the margins towards a growing majority, Dr. King's call for a new and unsettling force lies pregnant with possibility. It is a deeper analysis and fresh consciousness from within a burgeoning movement that is needed to direct feelings of discontent and develop strategic unity among masses of people across the country that have been systematically divided. The questions I will take up in the following chapters include what was the Christian responses to the 2008 economic crisis, who is talking about the role of the poor in the aftermath of the Great Recession, how can U.S. Christians recognize the poor as a social force that has the possibility if organized to bring about revolutionary change, and why, in the midst of this global revolutionary moment, are people seeing only glimpses of unrest in the United States? Most immediately, chapter 3 will examine official responses offered by U.S. Roman Catholics and Mainline Protestants to the 2008 economic crisis. I will also engage the work of critical Christian scholars who have attempted to illuminate the causes of the 2008 financial collapse and investigate the role Christian beliefs played in contributing to and contesting the economic system that produced the Great Recession.

## Chapter 3

### A Concern for the “Least of These”: Christian Perspectives on the 2008 Financial Crisis

*For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, <sup>36</sup>I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me. Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.<sup>138</sup>*

— Matthew 25: 35-36, 40

The economic crisis of 2008 that erupted in the United States and eventually spread throughout the entire world revealed both economic and ethical challenges that underlie the foundations of our economic and social lives. However, the material consequences that have resulted from the concentration and centralization of wealth on one hand and an increasing expansion of globalized poverty on the other did not begin nor end in 2008. Scholars across academic disciplines have been studying the shifts in political-economic practices and the continued expansion of the global marketplace since the 1970’s.<sup>139</sup> Trends of deregulation, privatization, and the dismantling of the welfare state have been tracked alongside the decoupling of economic growth from household incomes in the United States. The material consequences experienced by those negatively impacted by these political-economic shifts moved liberationist Christian theologians and social ethicists to challenge the morality of the modern capitalist economic system and

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<sup>138</sup> Matthew 25: 35-36, 40, New International Version.

<sup>139</sup> For research on the evolution of wealth and inequality in the modern capitalist economic system see Thomas Piketty and Arthur Goldhammer, *Capital in the Twenty-first Century* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2014). David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).; John Cassidy, *How Markets Fail : The Logic of Economic Calamities*, 1st ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009).; Richard D. Wolff, *Capitalism Hits the Fan : The Global Economic Meltdown and What to Do About It*, New updated ed. (Northampton, Mass.: Olive Branch Press, 2013).

question economic theory that excluded the value of human livelihood from basic understandings and practices of the free market system. U.S. Christian theologians and ethicists like Beverly Harrison, Douglass Meeks, and Kent A. Van Til began interrogating the implications of the contemporary capitalist economy in the 1980's.<sup>140</sup> Other theologians like Sallie McFague and Kenneth Himes criticized the growing consumerist mentality of the U.S. middle class while social ethicists such as Pamela Brubaker and Rebecca Todd Peters turned their critical eye toward the impact of globalization on the daily lives of people across the world.<sup>141</sup> These contributions laid the foundation for U.S. Catholic and Mainline Protestants understandings of the political economy in the midst of the 2008 economic crisis. Furthermore, this scholarship opened the doors to interrogating the relationship that exists between Christian beliefs and a defense of the current economic system.

What was revealed by the severity and breadth of the 2008 global economic crisis, or what has become known as the *Great Recession*, was the paradox of growing inequality present in our global capitalist system and the tremendous acceleration of such contradictions that occurred since the early 1990's. Ethical implications are rarely

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<sup>140</sup> M. Douglas Meeks, *God the Economist: The Doctrine of God and Political Economy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989); Beverly W. Harrison, "The Fate of the Middle 'Class' in Late Capitalism," in *God and Capitalism: A Prophetic Critique of the Market Economy*, ed. Norman Gottwald, Mark Thomas, and Vern Visick (Madison, WI: A-R Editions, 1991); Kent A. Van Til, *Less Than Two Dollars a Day: A Christian View of World Poverty and the Free Market* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2007). For a political theological perspective that takes into account the impact of the current political economy on the lives of women and children see Elizabeth M. Bounds, Pamela Brubaker, and Mary E. Hobgood, *Welfare Policy: Feminist Critiques*, Pilgrim Library of Ethics (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 1999).

<sup>141</sup> Sallie McFague, *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001) and Kenneth R. Himes, O.F.M., "Consumerism and Christian Ethics," *Theological Studies* 68 (2007) 132–53. Pamela Brubaker, *Globalization at What Price?: Economic Change and Daily Life*, Rev. and expanded. ed. (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2007); Rebecca Todd Peters, *In Search of the Good Life: The Ethics of Globalization* (New York: Continuum, 2004). To further explore the relationship between globalization and its ecological implications see Cynthia D. Moe-Lobeda, *Healing a Broken World: Globalization and God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002).

considered significant arbiters to decision making by mainstream society during periods of economic expansion. And economic ethics remains largely on the margins of the study of religion. But, moments of crisis like the Great Recession made economists, religious scholars and religious institutions alike pause to question the integrity of the capitalist free market economy and to offer responses to the fear, anxiety and distrust millions of everyday Americans were expressing. In my own attempt to reimagine a liberationist Christian social ethics that can respond to the chronic nature of the economic crises that was amplified by the Great Recession and to uncover the structural violence of poverty, this chapter will move forward to examine the official responses offered by U.S. Roman Catholics and Mainline Protestants to the 2008 recession.<sup>142</sup> I will also engage the work of Christian scholars Gary Dorrien, Christine Firer Hinze, and Joerg Rieger, their examination of the causes of the 2008 financial collapse and the role that Christian beliefs played in contributing to and contesting the economic system that produced the Great Recession. I will employ principles of liberation theology to interrogate how these Catholic and Mainline Protestant responses understand the Great Recession, its relationship to the chronic crisis of global capitalism, the growth of poverty in the midst of plenty, and the role of the poor as a social force for revolutionary change.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> There are additional Christian responses that deserve attention but go beyond the scope of this dissertation. Individual responses from Christian leaders like Sister Simone Campbell, executive director of NETWORK and leader of the “Nuns on the Bus” project; Rev. William Barber II, President of the North Carolina NAACP and Disciples of Christ Minister; and Jim Wallis, founder and editor of *Sojourners* magazine offer important contributions that will require further investigation. In addition, the need to interrogate more conservative Christian responses, particularly those promoting the values of the Prosperity Gospel, by leaders like T.D. Jakes, Joel Osteen, and Rick Warren remains. My intention here, however, is to examine institutional rather than individual responses to the 2008 economic crisis.

<sup>143</sup> In chapter one I highlighted the preferential option for the poor and the importance of a liberationist project being grounded in the material world as core beliefs of a liberationist Christian ethics. I further noted that a liberationist analysis requires that the root causes of poverty be illuminated, the structural sin of poverty in the midst of plenty be named, and the agency of the poor as a catalyzing force for change in society be acknowledged.

In liberationist Christian social ethics, structural analysis must attend to the disunity that exists between personal intentions and structural processes that produce death-dealing results for millions of people across the United States. Arguing that the 2008 crisis illuminated that the disparity of wealth and poverty is neither natural nor inevitable, I suggest that Christian leaders and institutions must be willing to challenge the supremacy of the logic of global capitalism that legalizes the violation of people's basic human rights. A Christian ethics that is truly concerned about the "the least of these" in our society must question the structural violence of poverty and ask why poverty continues to exist in an age of great prosperity.

### **Roman Catholic and Mainline Protestant Denominations Respond to the Economic Crisis in 2008**

*Today it is not enough simply to address the misdeeds of those who bear significant responsibilities for this crisis, or to respond to the problems and anxieties of the middle class, as important as they may be... Our Christian faith calls us to give particular attention to our most vulnerable neighbors, to children, and to people living in extreme poverty.<sup>144</sup>*

— National Council of Churches, October 13, 2008

The fear and anxiety expressed by people across the United States as they faced job loss, unemployment, foreclosures, evictions, health-care crises and bankruptcy in the midst of the Great Recession moved national bodies of denominational leadership to voice their belief that these problems were not only economic problems, but were also

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<sup>144</sup> National Council of Churches, October 13, 2008, [http://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/unitedchurchofchrist/legacy\\_url/26998/20081014-NCCC-letter-to-candidates.pdf?1418457033](http://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/unitedchurchofchrist/legacy_url/26998/20081014-NCCC-letter-to-candidates.pdf?1418457033).

moral problems that had tremendous impact on those most vulnerable in our society.<sup>145</sup> While many political and economic analysts focused on the threat the 2008 crisis posed to middle class stability in the United States, mainline religious institutions, organizations often connected to the most vulnerable members of our society through social and spiritual services, stepped in to remind the political sphere that it must not overlook the long standing suffering experienced by those living in poverty in the United States.<sup>146</sup> In a pastoral letter put forth by the Conference of Bishops of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), the need to stand in solidarity with the poor and powerless was lifted up as a constitution of the denomination. Voicing deep concern for the impact the current financial crisis was having on families across the country as they “struggle to put food on the table and gas into their cars,” the bishops called the church to work toward an economic system that could serve the common good and in particular the needs of the poor.<sup>147</sup> The desire to give priority to the poor and most vulnerable in our society

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<sup>145</sup> Here, I examine official statements issued by 5 mainline Christian institutions regarding the financial crisis of 2008: the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, The Conference of Bishops of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, The General Board of Church and Society of the United Methodist Church, Presbyterian Church U.S.A. General Assembly, and the National Council of Churches. These statements were produced as denominational responses at the height of the Great Recession, September–October 2008.

<sup>146</sup> See George Friedman, “The Crisis of the Middle Class and American Power,” *Geopolitical Weekly*, January 8, 2013, <http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/crisis-middle-class-and-american-power> and Andrew Gavin Marshall, “The Global Economic Crisis: Riots, Rebellion and Revolution,” *Global Research*, April 7, 2010, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/the-global-economic-crisis-riots-rebellion-and-revolution/18529>. In the midst of the financial crisis of 2008 and the disappearance of the social safety net in the United States, those most affected by the crisis often turned to religious institutions for emergency assistance. While state and local governments responded with austerity measures, religious institutions were left to fill the gap for those in need. Curtis Valentine, “Filling the Government Gap: Churches and Community Coping,” *Huffpost Religion*, October 5, 2010, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/curtis-valentine/remaining-awake-through-a\\_b\\_748652.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/curtis-valentine/remaining-awake-through-a_b_748652.html).

<sup>147</sup> “A Pastoral Letter from the Conference of Bishops of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America,” October 7, 2008, [http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/COB\\_Pastoral\\_Letter\\_On\\_Financial\\_Crisi\\_2008.pdf?\\_ga=1.215245524.290595270.1434381474](http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/COB_Pastoral_Letter_On_Financial_Crisi_2008.pdf?_ga=1.215245524.290595270.1434381474).

was a principle further affirmed by the Conference of Catholic Bishops in their September 2008 letter to the U.S. Senate leadership.<sup>148</sup> Lifting up the principle of solidarity, the U.S. Catholic Bishops argued that the pursuit of private gain and economic advantage must not take precedence over the pursuit of the common good. When private institutions fail to ensure this, forces of society and the state must step in to assure the basic needs of the whole population are met. The National Council of Churches U.S.A. (NCC) followed suit in asking presidential candidates John McCain and Barack Obama to pay particular attention to the problem of poverty in the lead up to the 2008 election. And while the Methodist's "Statement on the Financial Crisis" noted that "the rich have grown richer and the poor poorer," they focused less on the impact the crisis was having on the poor and more on the need for greater corporate responsibility and for the government to create fiscal and monetary policies that would use market forces to establish equity in society.<sup>149</sup>

While the financial crisis that began in 2007 spurred denominational leaders to speak out about the growing polarization of wealth and poverty and to illuminate the consequences that arose when our financial system failed to promote the common good, a liberationist lens helps to further interrogate the institutional responses to this historical moment of crisis. A Christian liberationist lens asks who are the poor and why are they poor. Naming poverty as structural sin in a world where abundance exists, a liberationist critique emphasizes the structure violence of poverty and the epistemological privilege of

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<sup>148</sup> Most Reverend William F. Murphy, "Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development United States Conference of Catholic Bishops," September 26, 2008, [http://www.episcopalcafe.com/catholic\\_bishops\\_on\\_moral\\_aspects\\_of\\_financial\\_crisis/](http://www.episcopalcafe.com/catholic_bishops_on_moral_aspects_of_financial_crisis/).

<sup>149</sup> General Board of Church & Society of the United Methodist Church, "GBCS Statement on Financial Crisis," September 30, 2008, <http://umc-gbcs.org/press-releases/gbcs-statement-on-financial-crisis>.



the poor in revealing the deficiency of the current system. Using these core principles of liberation theology, I return to the denominational statements to again examine their responses to the economic crisis in 2008 and to explore how the Christian tradition is used to both challenge and support the status quo.<sup>150</sup>

### The National Council of Churches

I begin with an ecumenical response, examining the NCC 2008 Letter to the presidential candidates in light of the financial crisis. While noting the particular economic hardships that arose in 2008, the letter states clearly that poverty was a crisis in the United States and around the world long before the most recent recession.<sup>151</sup> The NCC challenged presidential candidates John McCain and Barack Obama to focus on the plight of America's poorest citizens as they talked about bailouts and recovery plans. Responding to the candidates focus on the middle class, the NCC letter highlighted structural problems that exist in the ways our current system inaccurately tracks poverty rates and noted the deterioration of the 'safety-net' that had taken place 10 to 15 years before economic collapse in 2008.

Through this analysis they named the poor as those most intensely experiencing the consequences of the economic downturn that led to continued job loss, termination of or lack of health insurance, and growing austerity measures. The NCC letter argued that the economic crisis brought additional challenges to emergency services like food banks

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<sup>150</sup> The audience for these statements ought also be acknowledged. Official statements and reports of this nature are often used in the denomination's work with legislators and government to pursue more ethical, inclusive, and humane legislation and policy. They also become resources for press releases and portions may be shared through blogs and social media. These statements do not often receive wide circulation at the local church level.

<sup>151</sup> The National Council of Churches is made up of Protestant, Anglican, Orthodox, Evangelical, historic African American and Living Peace churches. With 37 member communities, this body represents over 45 million people in more than 100,000 local congregations across the United States.

that were already struggling to meet the needs of many suffering the consequences of the financial crisis. The priority given to the poor in this document places it in alignment with the principles of the liberationist tradition. However, while the NCC argued that the financial crisis was making the condition of poor people worse and potentially made more people poor, they also ascribed that the economic crisis was not the cause of poverty. What then was? Though the NCC letter critiques austerity measures that were making it harder to offer services to the poor, their statement does not clarify why the poor are poor or how understanding the basic economic relationship between wealth and poverty might further point to the underlying conflict that exists within the current economic system.<sup>152</sup> Their letter leaves the questions of whether poverty is an inevitable and natural state of existence unexamined. A liberationist interpretation must illuminate the root causes of poverty in relationship to the overall economy.

#### U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops

While the NCC letter focused on the plight of America's poorest citizens, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops focused on the moral paradox that exists between the economic turmoil threatening the lives of everyday people and egregious practices of economic speculation and exploitation being utilized in the free market. Drafting a response to the Bush Administration and Congress on behalf of the Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development and the Catholic Bishops, Bishop William Murphy argued that U.S. society must consider the human impact and ethical dimensions of the crisis. As people lost their homes, their retirement, jobs and benefits, others received excessive economic rewards. The Catholic Bishops argued that this

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<sup>152</sup> To better understand the way in which capitalism requires the production of poverty, see Barbara Harriss-White's, "Working Paper Number 134," *Department of International Development*, December 2005, Oxford University, <http://www3.qeh.ox.ac.uk/pdf/qehwp/qehwps134.pdf>.

contradiction of wealth accumulation in the midst of growing poverty revealed the need for responsibility and accountability in our economic system.

The problem U.S. society faced, the problem that created poverty and wealth, was a problem of greed, speculation, and the exploitation of vulnerable people. This argument pointed us toward the root causes of the problem in linking the relationship between wealth and poverty. However, in proposing that the appropriate response to the problem was for the government to promote a renewal of financial responsibility, accountability and increased transparency, the position of the Catholic Bishops limits the scope of the problem to the deplorable actions of a select group of greedy people. In assessing the situation they suggested, “Many blameless and vulnerable people have been and will be harmed. Those who directly contributed to this crisis or profited from it should not be rewarded or escape accountability for the harm they have done.”<sup>153</sup> The bishops argued that the Catholic tradition is not against the market itself, but that private actors and institutions operating within the market must be held accountable to ensure the basic needs of the whole society are met. The question that remains is whether the logic of capitalism seeks to protect all of God’s creation. Does the fundamental structure of our capitalist system offer a possibility for eradicating poverty? A liberationist Christian ethics would agree that meeting peoples’ basic needs must lie at the heart of any just economic system. However, the foundation of the free market system is the demand for an ever increasing production of surplus value, which inevitably creates and re-creates poverty. The need remains for a serious challenge to the structural sin that produces poverty within our contemporary free market system.

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<sup>153</sup> William F. Murphy, Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Conference of Bishops of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America stepped into this conversation by drawing on its 1999 social statement, “Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All.” Their response lifted up four key principles: a concern for people in poverty, the need for personal and corporate responsibility, the need for good government and the benefits and limits of free markets. With these assumptions in mind, the bishops turned to the task of understanding the causes and effects of the 2008 financial crisis. Like the Catholic Bishops, the ELCA highlighted the need for “individuals to live responsibly and within their means and to beware of the dangers of over-consumption and unnecessary accumulation, which draw us beyond authentic need into excess and destructive indebtedness.”<sup>154</sup> The appropriate solution to the economic crisis in turn was the intervention of good government to play a constructive role in holding corporations accountable.

While the ELCA called for a concern for people in poverty and challenged society to work towards an economic system that could serve the needs of the poor, they overlooked the connection between the economic system and the production of poverty. The ELCA document suggests that, “For many people, the current market-based economy has proven to be effective as a system to meet material need, generate wealth, and create opportunity... Those who have been blessed by the fruits of our economy are called to be generous in giving to those who have lost much and to advocate for

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<sup>154</sup> Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Conference of Bishops, “A Pastoral Letter on the Financial Crisis,” October 7, 2008, [http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/COB\\_Pastoral\\_Letter\\_On\\_Financial\\_Crisi\\_2008.pdf?\\_ga=1.253977291.290595270.1434381474](http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/COB_Pastoral_Letter_On_Financial_Crisi_2008.pdf?_ga=1.253977291.290595270.1434381474).

accountability and appropriate regulation in this system.”<sup>155</sup> The poor in this assessment are objects of Christian charity. The ELCA did not question why some are blessed by the fruits of the current economy while others lives are shattered by that same economic system. Such disparity, under this logic, is seen as inevitable and must be met with appropriate regulations and charitable actions.

United Methodists Global Board of Church and Society

The United Methodists also stressed the principles of government responsibility and finding a legislative remedy for the financial crisis. Its Global Board of Church and Society’s (UMGBCS) statement on the financial crisis adamantly called for the accountability of a corrupt financial system. It suggested that the role of an economic system must be to ensure that all God’s children can lead a full and productive life free from suffering and poverty. While the statement was brief, it highlighted the way the system works to create both wealth on the one hand and poverty on the other. Critiquing the accumulation of wealth in the hands of a few, UMGBCS linked wealth accumulation to the over compensation of failed corporate executives and tax structures that benefited the wealthy at the expense of the rest. It also illustrated the relationship of poverty to the functions of the current economic system. The statement noted that, “the number one cause of personal bankruptcy is due to health-care expenses... People are using their financial resources to pay for health care due to lack of coverage and are therefore unable to pay mortgages on their home.”<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> General Board of Church & Society of the United Methodist Church.

The poor, it seems, are poor because of the system itself. Moving, therefore, to change this system, the UMGBCS statement suggested legislative actions that could help encourage balance in the current economic system. Naming measures like full employment, adequate income, limitations on corporate compensation, repealing tax cuts to the wealthy, and single-payer health care, the UMGBCS placed demands on the current economic system that would require a radical restructuring of the system itself. This analysis comes into alignment with a liberationist perspective on the 2008 crisis and its relationship to the chronic crisis of global capitalism. The one challenge a liberationist critique would make to the UMGBCS response to the problem is to question what role those most affected by the systemic injustice of the current economic system play in changing it. While the GBCS focuses on holding elected officials accountable for finding a legislative remedy for the financial crisis, it leaves unexplored the role of the poor as a social class that can become a driving force for revolutionary change.

#### The Presbyterian Church U.S.A.

While the UMGBCS document offered critical insights toward addressing the economic relationships that produced not only the 2008 crisis but also the growing disparity of wealth and poverty in the United States, the final documents I will examine return to a focus on the 2008 economic crisis and its impact on the conditions faced by low income people across the U.S. On October 1<sup>st</sup> and October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2008 the Presbyterian Church U.S.A (PCUSA) issued two letters to Congress drawing on longstanding principles that the Presbyterian Church put forth in 1934 in the wake of the first Great Depression. Establishing the need for a just economic order, the Presbyterian General Assembly had called for economic relationships that, “[Set] aside the motives of money-

making and self-interest, [reexamined] competition as a major controlling principle in our economic life, and [valued] human worth above material riches as the primary asset of a community.”<sup>157</sup> In addition, the 1934 General Assembly urged that the nation’s natural resources be utilized not for private gain, but to serve the interests of all. Lifting up these values during the rise of the Great Recession in 2008, the PCUSA advised Congress to recognize the impact the financial crisis was having not only on major corporations and large banks, but also on the livelihoods of everyday Americans “who work hard, save carefully, and yes, rely on the credit industry, which is in such turmoil.”

In focusing on the direct impact the financial crisis was having on low-income Americans, the PCUSA letters to Congress also took note of the responses that those most impacted were already waging in light of the 2008 economic crisis. The need to recognize the contributions people in communities on the ground was a position not addressed by most other official denominational responses. The PCUSA proposal included a provision for public oversight that involved the participation of the community in re-establishing economic relationships. It stated, “With this social vision it will still be up to our communities—with our strong participation—to deal with these problems for the long term.” The PCUSA letters acknowledged that those most impacted by the crisis needed to be included in developing a response that would address their needs.

#### Further Reflections on Denominational Responses

Overall, the denominational responses to the 2008 financial crisis offered significant critiques of the current state of economic life in the United States and argued that the crisis was not only a financial issue but also a moral one. All five responses

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<sup>157</sup> Sam Hodges, “Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) responds to U.S. financial crisis,” *Dallas Morning News*, October 7, 2008, <http://religionblog.dallasnews.com/2008/10/presbyterian-church-usa-respon.html/>.

offered a general critique that the “poor were getting poorer while the rich were getting richer,” and each touched upon, in different and sometimes limited ways, the core principles of the liberationist tradition. While the NCC and the Catholic Bishops focused on how economic hardships impacted the poorest among us, the ELCA turned their attention to the importance of personal and corporate responsibility in maintaining good stewardship to ensure the well-being of God’s creation. All three, while targeting different entry points to the conversation, emphasized the constructive role the government should play in renewing regulations and ensuring the common good. The UMGBGM, while also encouraging government officials to devise an equitable response, took up a more radical examination of the crisis and moved from a conversation on effects to an interrogation of the system and the ways it continues to produce poverty while also benefiting the wealthy. The PCUSA returned to an exploration of the impact that the financial crisis was having on low-income people, but in doing so placed particular focus on the contributions people on the ground could make to generate an alternative response to the financial crisis.

What was clear from the institutional responses issued by U.S. Catholic and Mainline Protestant bodies is that the 2008 economic crisis and the broader economic system that produced the crisis needed to be interrogated. Their collective voice demonstrated that it was both appropriate and necessary for Christians and Christian institutions to participate in that exploration. While acknowledging the suffering that the most vulnerable members of U.S. society were facing, the need to stand in solidarity with the poor and powerless would require a deeper understanding and examination of the economic system that produced the Great Recession. To further investigate Christian



interpretations of why the 2008 economic crisis took place, I will explore to the work of Christian scholars Gary Dorrien, Christine Firer Hinze, and Joerg Rieger.

**Christian Social and Economic Ethics: Gary Dorrien and Christine Firer Hinze  
Analyze What Caused the 2008 Economic Crisis**

While denominational responses hinted at the underlying structural problems that created great disparity between wealth and poverty and often suggested that greed and inequity were responsible for both long term poverty and the 2008 economic crisis, this next section turns to religious scholarship that, in light of the crisis, attempted to take a deeper look at the root causes of the economic crisis in 2008. I begin with the analysis offered by Gary Dorrien and Christine Firer Hinze rooted in the ecumenical Protestant and Catholic traditions, which reject a vision of global capitalism that promotes the unrestricted liberty to acquire wealth. Drawing on principles of the social gospel, Christian realism, and Catholic social teaching, both Dorrien and Firer Hinze interrogated the economic and political steps that led to the financial collapse in 2008. Further more, both scholars argued that the Christian tradition offers resources to critique economic globalization that overlooks the common good. Their ability to assess the social, political and economic systems that produced the Great Recession is key to developing a liberationist response to the economic crisis. However the liberationist principals yield two further questions for Dorrien and Firer Hinze. How do they recognize and name the underlying contradictions of the current system? And how does their understanding of the relationship between wealth and poverty illuminate the role of the poor in challenging the basic logic of the global capitalist system?

Investigating the Second Wave of Economic Globalization and a Move Toward Economic Democracy

As a Christian social ethicist that has spent his career tracing the roots of the social gospel tradition, the evolution of liberal theology, the design of U.S. Empire, and a hope for economic democracy, Gary Dorrien was quick to respond to ethical challenges the Great Recession posed to U.S. society. As a historical thinker, Dorrien's approach to the economic crisis of 2008 focused on both historical Christian responses to the first Great Depression as well as uncovering the political and financial shifts over the last thirty years that led to the most recent crisis. In his 2008 article, "Lessons from the Social Gospel: Financial Collapse," Dorrien drew a parallel between the first wave of economic globalization that led to the Great Depression and the period from the late 1970s through 2008 that he names the second wave of economic globalization that resulted in 2008 financial collapse. His intention behind highlighting this connection seemed not only to illuminate the economic patterns of greed that lead to economic collapse, but to demonstrate the role that ecumenical U.S. Christianity might play in developing a response to such critical historical moments. Dorrien drew on the ethical values of the social gospel and Niebuhr's Christian realism to argue against the suggestion by economist Thomas Friedman's theory of "turbo-capitalism" and a belief that no alternative political economy is possible. Instead, he contends that it is in a moment of crisis, when the deficiencies of the current economic model were revealed, that an opening emerged to think about what a good society could look like. And in his 2010 article entitled, "Turbo-Capitalism, Economic Crisis, and Economic Democracy," Dorrien emphasized the social gospel principle that the vision of Christianity is to "transform the structures of society in the direction of social justice," that in turn could

not be paired with the predatory spirit of capitalism.<sup>158</sup>

In order to put forth an alternative political and economic vision, Dorrien first examined the second wave of economic globalization as experienced in the U.S. context.<sup>159</sup> He explained that while the U.S. economy was on the rise and those at the top accumulated tremendous wealth between 1980 and 2008, the reality for many Americans was flat or falling wages, a deterioration of the rights to organize in the workplace, the cutting of Medicaid, the mounting of debt, and the general evisceration of the middle class. As capitalism commodified everything that it touched, the wealth garnished at the top was fueled by tax policy redistribution, the rise of derivatives and speculation, market deregulation, and corporate flight to low-tax and cheap-labor markets. While the supporters of neoliberal economics proclaim a universal rejection of the intervention of government on behalf of a free market, Dorrien points out that, “The neoliberal boosters overlooked that governments played huge roles in setting up this system, defending and perpetuating it, deciding whether to regulate it, and dealing with its implications for equality, trade agreements, human rights and the rights of workers, immigration, and the environment.”<sup>160</sup> Despite the rhetoric of *lasse-fair* state policies, these key government

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<sup>158</sup> Gary Dorrien, “Turbo-Capitalism, Economic Crisis, and Economic Democracy,” *Anglican Theological Review*, 92, no. 4 (2010), 649. Note that Dorrien develops his argument in support of the Social Gospel’s interpretation of Christianity and in opposition to a version of Christianity practiced in the United States that both intentionally and unconsciously support the “turbo-capitalism.” Dorrien argues that, “For the Christian right, American capitalism folded seamlessly into the Christian gospel. Mainline churches, on the other hand, struggling to stay in business, took the therapeutic option, providing undemanding communities of care for religious consumers and preaching an innocuous gospel that threatened nobody.” Gary Dorrien, “No Common Good?” *The Christian Century*, 128, no. 8 (2011), 23.

<sup>159</sup> I draw on several articles that Dorrien published between 2008 and 2012. Often times these articles cross-reference his general analysis of the global economic system. Gary Dorrien, “No Common Good?,” “Occupy the Future,” *America* 206, no. 8 (2012); “Financial Collapse: Lessons from the Social Gospel,” *The Christian Century (1902)* 125, no. 26 (2008); “Turbo-Capitalism, Economic Crisis, and Economic Democracy.”

<sup>160</sup> Dorrien, “Turbo-Capitalism, Economic Crisis, and Economic Democracy,” 653.

interventions make “turbo-capitalism” possible. As I argued in chapter two, the crisis of capitalism that ensued in 2008 did not arise from nowhere. The consequences Dorrien described were not the unfortunate accident of the “faultless hand” of an otherwise productive market. In both his article on “Turbo-Capitalism” and portions of his book *Economy, Difference, Empire: Social Ethics for Social Justice*<sup>161</sup>, Dorrien extensively identifies not only the activities of the political and financial sectors that led to the Great Recession but also the intention and consciousness behind those actions. What Dorrien drew out, what is essential from an social ethical perspective, is that decisions were made by financial investors and political officials over a thirty year period that directly led to great hardships in the lives of everyday people.

For Dorrien, the 2008 crisis was not just a moral failing of greedy elites. It was produced by structural problems within the globalized capitalist economy. The deterioration of the industrial base in the United States, the flattened wages and growing debt-financed consumption, and enormous trade deficits accrued by the U.S. government happened alongside the rise of a global capitalist oligarchy made possible by systematic political and economic shifts. The deregulation of the financial system, tax policy redistribution for the wealthy, the development of derivatives markets, and military expansion created the conditions that produced the severe inequality that caused the 2008 financial crash. Naming these causes, Dorrien argued that the crisis revealed the deficiency of the neoliberal economic model and provided a moment for progressives to push for structural changes that could expand the cooperative sector and democratize the

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<sup>161</sup> Dorrien, *Economy, Difference, Empire Social Ethics for Social Justice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

process of investment.<sup>162</sup>

Analyzing the Crisis of 2008: a Catholic Economic-Ethical Lens

Christine Firer Hinze, a Catholic moral theologian engaged in liberationist thought, enters the ethical conversation around the cause of the 2008 financial collapse through her detailed examination of the subprime mortgage market and the financial and political trends that led to its collapse. Her 2009 article “Social and Economic Ethics,” drew from the principles of Catholic social teaching as it asserted that the goal of any economic system must be a holistic and sustainable commitment to human dignity and material well-being. She argued against abstract engagements of economic theory saying instead that the economy must be understood as grounded in the material world and accountable for its effect on human bodies. Firer Hinze’s response to the 2008 economic crisis highlighted the need for a Christian ethical analysis that is founded on a *principle of intelligibility*: it had to engage how the market works, explore what caused its most recent failures, ask who benefited, and examine the resulting consequences.

In “Social and Economic Ethics,” Firer Hinze methodically walked readers through the changes in economic laws and practices that precipitated the 2008 recession, beginning with the development of derivatives market in the 1990s and culminating with the collapse of the mortgage market by 2007. Firer Hinze rejected the idea that no one was to blame for the crisis that emerged and pointed toward structural violence resulted from people’s desire to take advantage of short-term payoffs made possible by limited oversight and regulations.<sup>163</sup> Situating the root of the 2008 recession in the subprime

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid,164.

<sup>163</sup> Firer Hinze quotes the research of theorist Arjun Appadurai to explain the change that took place in accounting rules in large banks as well as the suspension of government oversight over financial

mortgage crisis, she argued that “irresponsible borrowers” colluded with “irresponsible lenders” to take advantage of increasing demand within the housing market.<sup>164</sup> She called for accountability of not only predatory lenders but also borrowers who could not afford the high interest rate loans they were being offered. Firer Hinze identified both an unethical financial market structure and people’s willingness to participate in it as the root causes of the crisis.

When placed at the center of our communal moral decision-making process, financial markets became a threat to human well-being. Economic markets are based on a set of complex relationships that are produced and affected by human agency. Turning to the principle of incarnation, Firer Hinze argued that economic systems must connect to their material bases and consequences. She further suggests that global markets require regulations to ensure their connection to the common good. Firer Hinze overlooked the deeper discrepancies that undergird the free market capitalist system. In her focus on the financialization of the housing market, she failed to take the next step of questioning why such demand within the housing market needed to be created. Today’s material reality is that the economy can produce more homes than are needed to house every family and individual. Yet more and more people cannot afford the housing that is made available by the current housing market. Facing this basic crisis of over production, capitalism needed to create more demand. The expansion of subprime mortgages to those who could not afford available housing was an economically necessary solution to capitalism’s chronic crisis of overproduction.

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institutions that produced great flexibility and speculation in the market. “Social and Economic Ethics,” *Theological Studies*, 70, no. 1 (2009), 167.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

Central to critique of Firer Hinze's failure to look at the larger context of the mortgage crisis is the question of the role of the economy. Who does the current structure serve? Who benefits from this economic system? If the economy is, as Firer Hinze argued, to promote human dignity and sustainability, then a critique of the 2008 subprime mortgage crisis cannot end with a call for corporate responsibility, socially responsible investments, and conservative borrowing practices by housing consumers. If Catholic social teaching prioritizes a preferential option for the most vulnerable, deeper questions must be asked. In a 2011 article, "Economic Recession, Work, and Solidarity," Firer Hinze noted that a problem people face in contesting the "normative" practices of the free market economy is that many debates about what went wrong in the Great Recession subscribe to "economic orthodoxy." Proponents of the free market system who place economic debates outside the realm of ethics often claim that the profit-maximizing dynamics of the capitalist market must be protected at all costs. This inevitably naturalizes existing economic relationships, conceals the reality that a handful of elites benefit disproportionately at the direct expense of the majority in ways that dangerously destabilize our society and economy, and limits our ability to imagine that any other system of economic relations is possible.

Building on her early attempts to develop a Christian understanding of socio-political power, Firer Hinze's post-2008 work insisted that questions of economic life cannot be isolated from critiques of ideology, power analysis and conflict.<sup>165</sup> She challenged modern finance theory and argued that the Great Recession demanded a robust ethical analysis that can "take into account the material-moral habitats of

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<sup>165</sup> Firer Hinze, *Comprehending Power in Christian Social Ethics*, American Academy of Religion Academy Series (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1995).

economic activity and attend carefully to the economy's concrete effects on the daily lives of individuals, families, and communities.”<sup>166</sup> At the heart of this current conflict are the lives of workers and families who are experiencing falling wages, a polarized job market, high levels of unemployment, growing numbers of impoverishment, and increasing wealth disparity. Yet the dominant economic and social ethics describe such results as normal and necessary side-products of the current market structure.<sup>167</sup> Firer Hinze affirms basic market autonomy based on her belief in economic freedom, but she does so with the caveat that there will be times when the government ought to intervene in the market to stimulate the economy and to ensure a social safety net exists for those at the bottom.<sup>168</sup> While Firer Hinze’s initial critique of U.S. financial and political institutions pointed to what I have defined as the structural violence of poverty, her proposed resolution to the crisis relied on the good will of those in power to prevent or minimize the affects of structural violence.

### **Challenging the Religious and Economic Unconscious**

U.S. Catholic and mainline Christian institutions largely agreed with the popular sentiment that “the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer” in the midst of the wide spread economic devastation taking place in 2008. This made the prioritization of the preferential option for the poor an essential and possible step. Gary Dorrien and Christine Firer Hinze moved from a critique of the immoral practices that created the

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<sup>166</sup> Firer Hinze, “Economic Recession, Work, and Solidarity,” *Theological Studies*, 72, no. 1 (2011), 151.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid*, 161.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid*, 166–167.



crisis to a critical examination of larger financial shifts that led to the crash in 2008. They argued that certain economic policies were not in line with a Christian vision that promotes the human dignity and sustainability of creation. Christian theologian Joerg Rieger, a liberationist who has devoted much of his career to understanding the intersections of theology, economics, and power, joined the scholarly discussion of the root causes of the Great Recession and the devastation that followed it by demanding that Christians further investigate the fundamental relationships that exist between their economic, social, and religious lives. Like Dorrien and Firer Hinze, Rieger took up the task of analyzing what caused the crisis and took note of the longer economic trends that led to a growing disparity between wealth and poverty in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. What Rieger added to this growing critique of the economic crisis was a deeper ideological analysis of the relationship between the beliefs of a free market capitalist system and Christianity.

In “Between Accommodation and Resistance: Theology in a Globalizing World,” Rieger challenged Christian scholars and practitioners to begin their study of the economy and economic crisis by first engaging economic and technological critiques. He argued that, “Moralizing accounts that focus on intention are the least helpful here, as they usually attribute less than pristine intentions to the other side.”<sup>169</sup> He was critical of the fact that theological inquiry is often disconnected from economic and technologic debates. Rieger observed that unless we intentionally learn otherwise, the free market is perceived as a system that has always existed and people continue to believe that it always will. He also challenged Christian theologians to acknowledge the ways our

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<sup>169</sup>Joerg Rieger, “Globalization and Theology: Between Accommodation and Resistance,” *Soma* (November 2011), 2, [http://www.sjut.org/journals/ojs/index.php/soma/article/viewFile/1/pdf\\_3](http://www.sjut.org/journals/ojs/index.php/soma/article/viewFile/1/pdf_3).

current understanding and image of God are influenced by our belief in the free market system. This is a thread that has long been present in Rieger's work. In his 1998 publication *God, Mammon, and Theology*, Rieger suggested that, "Our dilemma is that at present, with capitalism celebrating one victory after another, it is becoming even harder to distinguish between God and Mammon... Wall Street seems to have a message, too; and it often receives more attention than the message preached in the pulpit on Sunday mornings."<sup>170</sup> If this indeed is the case and our "religious unconscious" is influenced by our "economic unconscious" Rieger's analysis challenges Christians to take a step back and examine the ethics of the free market system. His approach asks how a blind faith in the current economic system prevents Christians from recognizing the deficiencies of this system. How does the market, as a primary source for understanding the world around us, shape Christian responses to the crises revealed in the Great Recession?

Rieger's critical examination of Christian beliefs that perpetuate faith in the free market capitalist system in the United States is a unique position in relation to arguments engaged earlier in this chapter. While religious institutions as well as Dorrien and Firer Hinze focused on illuminating more radical and liberationist principles from within the Christian tradition to reproach capitalist zealotry, they did so without interrogating the ways Christian values have been married to the values of free market capitalism in the context of the United States. In *No Rising Tide*, Rieger suggested that because modern Christian theology has focused on disembodied ideas and otherworldly matters, Christians accept the dominant theological and economic theory that situates the market as the source of all value and all solutions to social and economic problems. Rieger stated

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<sup>170</sup> Rieger, *Liberating the Future: God, Mammon, and Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 3.

that economic theories, “like the ideas that economic deregulation always promotes growth, that tax cuts for powerful corporations and the wealthy always spur the economy, and that wealth gathered at the top inevitably trickles down,” become “big faith claims.”<sup>171</sup> He pushes Christianity to reject the dominant values of free market capitalism and turns instead to foundational Christian beliefs. Rieger argued that Jesus’ ministry was not about conforming to the rules of the Roman Empire or even the Jewish tradition but were focused on developing an alternative way of life that would center on “the stone that the builder rejected.”<sup>172</sup>

Rieger critiqued the state of Christian ethics and practice in which the “economic unconscious” and the “religious unconscious,” rely on the same source of authority and power. Christianity’s hope in and focus on an otherworldly reality conceals the failures and decline of the current economic system. Affirming my earlier interrogation of the “faultless” hand of the market, Rieger’s analysis illustrates that no one is held accountable for the failure of the market to meet people’s basic needs. He suggested that Christians have developed blind faith in two systems (religion and economics) and a resignation to the idea that the average person cannot fully understand these systems unless someone with authority to interprets them for them. Such blind faith maintains the status quo and confines people’s response to the financial crisis to a practice of individual values and principles. The wealthy are encouraged to help the poor. The poor are left to interpret the hardship they experience as the consequence of their own failures. The only recourse is to help (if you have means) or seek help (if you lack them) but otherwise,

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<sup>171</sup> Rieger, *No Rising Tide: Theology, Economics, and the Future* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), viii.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, x.

adapt to the situation rather than challenge it. Unable to break out of that dynamic churches and religious communities failed to name the pervasive class dynamics that exist in this society.

What is needed, according to Rieger, is recognition of the connection that exists between moral and economic values. People must interrogate the ethics of the market while also refusing to reduce the structural problems of the economy to issues of morality. He noted, “The main problem is not a lack of personal moral values [greed of the elite or failures of the poor] but the particular values produced by the market.”<sup>173</sup> In interrogating the ethics of the market, people must question who benefits from the current economic structure and who does not. If this society is to find a solution that can respond to the suffering of billions of people around the globe who are hurting in the aftermath of the 2008 global economic crisis, it must attempt to understand the logic of the current economic system as a whole and name the conflicts it continues to produce.

Rieger’s work challenges the religious and economic unconscious and calls Christians to recognize the inherent contradiction of the capitalist system that depends on the creation of poverty. In *No Rising Tide* he pointed to the fundamental relationship that exists between wealth and poverty, between the ruling class and the working class: “Downturn for working people—whose wages were systematically repressed and whose benefits were slashed—was one basis for economic successes at the top.”<sup>174</sup> Applying this theory to the 2008 crisis, the problem is not simply that people got greedy and the solution is not simply that things can be brought back into balance through the return to regulations and corporate accountability. Rieger’s work implores Christians to examine

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid, 25.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid, 2.

the chronic crisis of capitalism and to recognize that the crisis was not the same for all involved.<sup>175</sup>

While many suffered the devastating effects of the 2008 economic crash when the global economy lost as much as 40 percent of its value by 2009, Rieger noted that four hundred wealthiest Americans, each of whom hold assets in excess of \$1.3 billion, saw their assembled net worth rise by \$30 billion to \$1.57 trillion from the previous year.<sup>176</sup> Those in power have steadfast faith in the free market system as the system that has produced wealth and power for them, even if imperfect, is not fundamentally defective. Their argument is that the system simply needs to be modified so that it can help provide opportunities (but not rights) for those not yet reaping its benefits. Yet the wealth gained by elites in the midst of the Great Recession reflected not only a growing inequality of income, but of power and influence. Seeing the threat to social, economic, and political stability looming in too-extreme discrepancies of economic power moved wealthy investors like Warren Buffett to suggest that extreme inequality was bad for capitalism and that taxes on the wealthy ought to be increased. While many applauded Buffet for his desire to reduce inequality, Rieger's class analysis helps us to recognize that Buffet in reality was simply trying to save a failing system. Buffet's proposal to lessen inequality did not seek to fundamentally change the inequality of power present in this system, but to moderate it.

Looking at the problem of economic crisis without a class perspective hinders our ability to fully examine the fundamental conflict of capitalism. Rieger argued that the

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<sup>175</sup> For more on Rieger's discussion of class and class conflict, see Joerg Rieger's edited volume, *Religion, Theology, and Class*.

<sup>176</sup> Rieger, *No Rising Tide*, 2.

economic downturn “is not simply an accident—or a succession of mere accidents—but is tied to a system that distributes power in unequal fashion.”<sup>177</sup> The ruling class depends, in turn, on the working class’s blind faith in the capitalist market. Maintaining faith in neoliberal economics results in a belief that those at the top have gotten there because of their own ingenuity and in turn they have the best solutions to offer the rest of us. However, responding to the economic crisis is not simply a matter of economic distribution. If the poor and working class were to challenge the fundamental structure of the free market capitalist system, the 2008 crisis would not be understood as an anomaly. Instead we would recognize the growing reality for the majority of people in the United States and around the world.

Rieger’s development of an analysis of class struggle in the U.S. context focuses on convincing the “middle class,” that they ought to align with those who have traditionally be defined as “the bottom” of society. In her review of *Religion, Theology and Class*, postcolonial feminist theologian, Kwok Pui-lan noted that Rieger presented a stark dualism between the rich and the poor as a mechanism to articulate the reality of class struggle. Pui-lan argued that the nature of global capitalism is much more fluid and multifaceted in relational terms. What is missing from Rieger’s construction of class conflict, according to Pui-lan, is the ways in which the poor and middle class “collaborate with or sustain the global economic system.” Pui-lan’s postcolonial lens points out the need to interrogate the ways in which the ideologies and practices of global capitalism are absorbed by the poor and dispossessed. She writes, “Without articulating how and why the poor are absorbed, coopted, and bought into the system and become the instruments of their own oppression, we cannot see through the maze to propose alternatives and

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<sup>177</sup> Ibid, 48.

mobilize resistance.”<sup>178</sup> What Pui-lan’s observation illuminates is the need to develop not only an objective critique of the system that reinforces a reality of class struggle, but tools that can unveil the ideological mechanisms at work that compel people to subjectively justify the morality of a global capitalist system.

### **Conclusion**

The effects that the 2008 financial crisis had on the lives of everyday people in the United States was a significant religious concern expressed by both Christian institutional responses as well as Christian scholars of Christian thought and practice like Gary Dorrien, Christine Firer Hinze, and Joerg Rieger. While religious institutions clung to the need to lift up the value of human livelihood and ensure care for those most impacted by the Great Recession, Dorrien, Firer Hinze and Rieger moved deeper into an interrogation of the social, economic and political systems that created the 2008 crisis. These responses offered crucial resources for uncovering the inconsistencies of a global capitalist system and raised ethical questions about the morality of a capitalist economic system that produces massive poverty in the midst of great abundance. For a liberationist Christian ethics that is aligned with the transformative possibilities that emerge from the movement of the poor, I am compelled by Kwok Pui-lan’s response to Rieger’s edited volume on *Religion, Theology, and Class*, that more investigation is needed understand

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<sup>178</sup> Kwok Pui Lan, “Religion, Theology, and Class,” *On Postcolonialism, Theology and Everything She Cares About* (Blog), November 30, 2013, <http://kwokpuihan.blogspot.com/2013/11/religion-theology-and-class.html>.

the ways in which the poor and the middle class have absorbed the assumptions of a global capitalist system.<sup>179</sup>

The objective conditions people faced in the wake of the 2008 economic crisis were not matched by a conscious understanding of the structures that caused the crisis. Emerging movement and religious leaders lacked the conceptual categories, analytical tools, and constitution of history needed to help people understand why those falling from the ranks of the middle class failed to recognize their alignment with the poor and dispossessed? Why did those experiencing economic hardship resist identifying with the problem of poverty? And why, when economic conditions continued to worsen, did people look for others to blame rather than recognize their shared dispossession as a site of unity that could be used to confront the power structures that produce tremendous wealth for a few and massive poverty for many?

The next chapter will move into a deeper exploration of the liberationist method of conscientization as an analytical tool to address the complex history of social control that continues to obscure the immorality of our free market capitalist economic system. Conscientization, a concept developed by Paulo Freire and employed by Latin American liberation theologians, is a process of action and reflection that draws on critical social theory to illuminate the historical forces at work in structuring our economic, social, and political reality. Acknowledging Rieger's critique that Christian values have often been wedded to an unquestioned belief in the free market capitalist system, I turn to an

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<sup>179</sup> If we examine efforts that have gained popularity since the 2008 crisis like the Moral Mondays Movement in North Carolina, we begin to recognize the hunger that people in America have for a new and vibrant vision of change. The emergence of disparate efforts like Occupy Wall Street, the Tea Party, and Black Lives Matter demonstrate the discontent that many people in our society feel for traditional mechanisms of economic and political reform. However, the discord that exists between popular responses and the marginalization of collective responses that have emerged since the 2008 crisis, illustrate the need for developing shared analysis that can inform strategic practice.



interdisciplinary body of scholarship for analytical tools that can help expose the systemic construction and ideological reification of global capitalism that has prevented the majority of people in the United States from recognizing their shared dispossession.<sup>180</sup> Reflecting on the specific theoretical framework that is needed to confront cultural complexities present in the United States, I will explore core conceptual categories developed in the work of revolutionary thinkers Antonio Gramsci and W.E.B. Du Bois as a means to establish analytical tools that can interrogate the material and ideological obstacles that prevented masses of people impacted by the Great Recession in the United States from recognizing the contradictions of global capitalism and the structural violence of poverty.

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<sup>180</sup> Corey Walker, in his contribution to Joerg Rieger's edited volume *Religion, Theology, and Class*, also argues that, "The academic study of religion provides us less with robust models for formulating critical responses to this line of questioning [around religion theology and class] than posing a series of seemingly insurmountable theoretical and methodological obstacles. Given the peculiar history of this scholarly discourse and its intimate connections with the imperialistic operations of knowledge/power in the modern era, the academic discourse on religion does not provide us with a neutral and objective space to easily launch this inquiry," 175. Corey Walker, "Black Reconstruction: Thinking Blackness and Rethinking Class in Late Capitalist America," in *Religion, Theology and Class*, ed. Joerg Rieger (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

## Chapter 4

### Conscientization: Countering the Propaganda of History and the Cruel Manipulation of the Poor

*By singular coincidence and for a moment, for the few years of an eternal second in a cycle of a thousand years, the orbits of two widely and utterly dissimilar economic systems coincided and the result was a revolution so vast and portentous that few minds ever fully conceived it; for the systems were these: first, that of a democracy which should by universal suffrage establish a dictatorship of the proletariat ending in industrial democracy; and the other, a system by which a little knot of masterful men would so organize capitalism as to bring under their control the natural resources, wealth and industry of a vast and rich country and through that, of the world.<sup>181</sup>*

— W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America*

While the material conditions of the 2008 economic crisis posed an opportunity for a growing majority in U.S. society to recognize its shared dispossession, a complex history of social control in this country, reinforced in the construction of our moral thought, continues to obscure basic notions of class struggle and the relationship that exists between racial consciousness and class struggle in American social consciousness. The financial crisis that began in the United States in December 2007 offered a momentary glimpse at the fundamental weakness of our global economic order and its ability to ensure the basic needs of the masses. Emerging as it did, following a prolonged period of stagnant social mobility and increased inequality impacting the working poor and middle class alike, the crisis did not produce an experience of collective struggle among the growing population of people encountering this reality. Building on Rieger's argument that Christians must come to recognize the relationship that exists between moral and economic values, there remains a need to uncover the ideological and

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<sup>181</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880* (New York: Free Press, 1998), 346.

historical mechanisms that have been utilized by those in power to justify the infallibility of a free-market capitalist system and the structural violence of poverty. High tech global capitalism, defined as the most successful and enduring economic system in modern history, is made to sit outside the field of ethical judgment. Thus removed from the field of ethical inquiry, the values of the free-market capitalism go unquestioned and its consequences, overlooked. In the minds of many, the free-market system has always existed and always will. At the same time, as economic fundamentalism has gained strength in the American consciousness, religious fundamentalism has also been on the rise. Cornel West, in an attempt to define the crisis of contemporary American religion, suggests that while more Americans are turning to religion to respond to the economic and political crises our society faces, the prophetic vision of American religious traditions has been marginalized and silenced. He expounds that,

American religious people have little memory of or sense for collective struggle and communal combat... This social amnesia prevents systematic social analysis of power, wealth and influence in society from taking hold among most religious Americans. Instead, the tendency is to fall back on personalistic and individualistic explanations of poverty, occupational mobility or social catastrophe.<sup>182</sup>

Illuminating that those who accept religious principles on blind faith are likely to accept economic principles on blind faith as well, the insights of Rieger challenge us to question the infallibility of the free-market system as West moves us to reexamine the role that prophetic religious traditions can play in responding to social injustice.

The crisis that people in the United States are currently experiencing is not reserved to the economic conditions they are facing. America, according to West and Rieger, is also encountering a crisis of consciousness. The objective conditions, that

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<sup>182</sup> Cornel West, "Introduction: The Crisis in Contemporary American Religion," *Prophetic Fragments*, In *The Cornel West Reader* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1999), 358.

should have revealed the deficiency of a system that thrives on massive inequality, have not resulted in people from across political, social, and geographic spectrums of society coming together to develop a shared program that can confront unjust system of free-market capitalism. If we want to understand why that is, we must explore the ideological and historical mechanisms that have been used to shape the American popular consciousness. Protests that have emerged in communities throughout the United States and around the globe since 2008; protests against evictions, water shut offs, denial of Medicaid expansion and women's reproductive rights, police brutality and anti immigration; were largely isolated. They were not driven by a conscious counter-hegemonic political formation. They emerged out of the basic necessity for survival and an innate desire to live a life with dignity. Social movement leader and educator Willie Baptist explains that while the global crisis of 2008 "exposed the terminal weakness in the structure of the economic status quo and in the enemy's narrative in defense of that structure," the ruling elites' strength continues to lie "in the general ignorance of the mass of the people and in the prevailing lack of consciousness enforced by long embedded stereotypes and prejudices in their ideology and thinking."<sup>183</sup>

The continued persistence of negative stereotypes, insufficient understandings of the root causes of mass inequality, and ideological positions that sustain social divisions, must be understood in relationship to a hegemonic value system that reinforces the moral infallibility of our free-market capitalist system. What are the ideological myths and historical narratives in American culture that have masked the immorality of the free-market capitalist system and the structural violence of poverty? As a liberationist Christian social ethicist reflecting on the economic crisis of 2008 and its evolving impact,

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<sup>183</sup> Willie Baptist, *It's Not Enough to Be Angry*, (University of the Poor Press, 2015), 25.

I recognize the need for analytical tools to understand not only the causes of the crisis (which Dorrien, Firer Hinze, and Rieger have begun to theorize), but also to interpret people's response / lack of collective response to this historic moment. To interrogate the obstacles that obscured the revolutionary possibilities that existed in the midst of the 2008 economic crisis, I turn to two critical thinkers and movement leaders who placed tremendous effort on understanding revolutionary moments, the opportunities that they present, and the failure of "the proletariat" to build a united force that could successfully transform the power structure for the good of the masses in their society.<sup>184</sup> Italian theorist and political leader, Antonio Gramsci, and American sociologist, historian, and civil rights activist, W.E.B. Du Bois, are crucial figures whose works offer concrete reflections on the relationship between critical consciousness, ideological formation, and the structures that reinforce political and economic power during moments of revolutionary struggle. Their work, however, is not contained to dismantling dominant narratives. As leaders of social movements interested in bringing about social transformation, they took on the added task of developing counter-narratives necessary to overcome the existing *hegemony*.<sup>185</sup> Examining core concepts developed in Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* and Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction in America*, I will extract methods that can deconstruct historical and ideological narratives that shape popular perspectives

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<sup>184</sup> The proletariat, as used in the work of Antonio Gramsci and W.E.B. Du Bois, describes the social class in society made up of laborers who do not own the means nor the product of their labor (both industrial and agrarian).

<sup>185</sup> Hegemony was a term initially adopted by Lenin to describe the leadership employed by the proletariat over other exploited classes to unseat the bourgeoisie. Gramsci further developed this concept to theorize the structures of bourgeois power in Western European states in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Hegemony, according to Gramsci, can be understood as the fusion of philosophy and practice, coming together to form a dominant system of thought that is manifest in institutional, cultural, and private life and reinforced by intellectual and moral traditions. It is both ethicopolitical and economic. While associated with the dominant ideology, Gramsci does not dissociate ideology from the influence of economic activity. I will develop a deeper discussion of hegemony in the upcoming section on Gramsci.

on race, class and inequality in the United States and that are used to maintain and reinforce the infallibility of a free-market capitalist system and the power of the ruling elites. Furthermore, I will explore the elements of interpretation and revision in their work, laying the groundwork for an ethical framework that challenges the assumptions, pervasive in the consciousness of twenty-first century America, that perpetuate the structural violence of poverty.

### **A Battle of Ideas: Challenging the Stigma of Poverty and the Myth of Mobility in U.S. Consciousness**

*Mass ideological factors always lag behind mass economic phenomena, and that therefore, at certain moments, the automatic thrust due to the economic factor is slowed down, obstructed or even momentarily broken by traditional ideological elements—hence that there must be a conscious, planned struggle to ensure that the exigencies of the economic position of the masses, which may conflict with the traditional leadership’s policies, are understood. An appropriate political initiative is always necessary to liberate the economic thrust from the dead weight of traditional policies....*  
— Antonio Gramsci, “The Modern Prince”

While the number of Americans who agree that poverty is a major problem in our society has grown since the economic crisis of 2008 and they would like to see a country with more equality, a majority of people in the United States have not overcome the deep ideological assumptions that inequality and in turn poverty are inevitable, acceptable, and at times, deserved.<sup>186</sup> Over the last 50 years since President Johnson launched the War on Poverty, 92 federal programs have been created to “help” low-income Americans. There are job-training programs, food-aid programs, and housing programs, yet statistics tell us that unemployment, hunger, and homelessness have reached record highs since the

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<sup>186</sup> See Dave Gilson and Carolyn Perot, “It’s the Inequality, Stupid: Eleven Charts That Explain What’s Wrong with America,” *Mother Jones* (March/April 2011), <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2011/02/income-inequality-in-america-chart-graph>.

Great Recession in 2008.<sup>187</sup> In addition to support provided by government agencies, hundreds of thousands of private charities exist in the United States to, “[cope with] our society’s failure to face up to and deal with the erosion of equality.”<sup>188</sup> One might assume that such policies and programs ought to be enough to eliminate or at least reduce the conditions of poverty in this country. Why then has poverty and inequality not only persisted, but actually grown in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Reflecting on the impact that the 2008 crisis and subsequent recession has had on a growing majority of Americans, why has the population of dispossessed people living in one of the wealthiest countries in the world failed to join forces and rise up against a system of injustice that causes so much hardship, fear, and despair? Why, upon recognizing their individual suffering did people “miss the opportunity” to connect with the suffering of others?

Antonio Gramsci’s analysis of social and political consciousness would suggest that people’s understanding of the dominant structures that produced the financial collapse in 2008 have not collectively caught up to the economic contradictions that people are experiencing in the wake of the Great Recession. Any interpretation of people’s response to the 2008 crisis must take into account the ways in which people’s understandings of the economy are tied to a larger system of beliefs and opinions, which, are part of a complex historical process that has shaped their consciousness about why things are the way they are. Dominant narratives about the economy and about social relations that exist within our global capitalist system intersect with, affirm, and contradict people’s lived experience of the Great Recession. The ability to make sense of

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<sup>187</sup> “The War on Poverty: 50 Years Later,” *A House Budget Committee Report*, March 3, 2014, [http://budget.house.gov/uploadedfiles/war\\_on\\_poverty.pdf](http://budget.house.gov/uploadedfiles/war_on_poverty.pdf).

<sup>188</sup> Janet Poppendieck, *Sweet Charity?: Emergency Food and the End of Entitlement* (New York: Viking, 1998), 5.

the fragmentary and incoherent reality people experienced in the wake of the 2008 crisis requires the development of analytical tools that can help people counter the dominant narrative that is hard at work to preserve the status quo. Gramsci's interrogation of the complex historical processes that shape our collective consciousness and the conceptual tools he develops to both deconstruct and reconstruct hegemony illuminate important steps needed for a liberationist process of conscientization.<sup>189</sup> His work in the *Prison Notebooks* provides critical mechanisms for fostering the critical consciousness necessary to uncover systems of domination that are structured, legitimized, and regenerated to enforce the power of the ruling elites. At the same time, it illuminates the need to establish a counter narrative to the dominant hegemony.

#### Antonio Gramsci: A Battle of Ideas

Antonio Gramsci dedicated his life to the revolutionary struggle of the socialist movement in Europe. His life as a political journalist, communist theorist and strategist, and movement leader organizing factory workers in a time of great economic and political crisis in Italy led to his incarceration by Mussolini in 1926. It was during his time in prison that Gramsci committed himself to the study of Italian history, philosophy, politics, religion, and culture. His written reflections became the twenty-nine notebooks now known as the *Prison Notebooks*. The reflections that appear in Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* are not abstract theories, but are Gramsci's attempt to come to terms with the failure of a revolutionary class struggle in Western Europe and in particular Italy. While the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 had achieved initial success in Russia, revolution in Western Europe had failed and Italy was confronted with the rise of Fascism, the party

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<sup>189</sup> As defined at the end of Chapter 3, conscientization is a process of action and reflection that draws on critical social theory to illuminate the historical forces at work in structuring our economic, social, and political reality.



responsible for Gramsci's imprisonment. Anthropologist Kate Crehan explains that upon imprisonment, "Gramsci was determined to devote himself to a more rigorous study of the roots of fascism's triumph in Italy and the failures of the Left that had led to this triumph. Understanding this required, in Gramsci's view, an exploration of 'culture'. When and how has 'culture' changed? When and how has it persisted?"<sup>190</sup>

Gramsci was grappling with why so many among the working class were lending their support to Mussolini's Fascist Party. Reflecting on the complexities of political consciousness in democratic societies, Gramsci came to recognize the particular importance that the role of civil society played in moving the masses. The failure of the socialist revolution in Western Europe resided in the inability of the movement's parties and organizations to counter the consent / hegemony that had been formed by those in power, 'the class of modern Capitalists, owners of the means of social production and employers of wage-labour.'<sup>191</sup> Gramsci came to see that the frontal attack that succeeded in Russia was not sufficient to meet the conditions in Western Europe. The socialist movement in Italy had underestimated the power of consent, a ruling hegemony that had evolved within the formation of the Western state. Gramsci came to recognize the power of civil society to maintain hegemony in moments of crisis, "The traditional ruling class, which has numerous trained cadres, changes men and programmes and with greater speed than is achieved by the subordinate classes, reabsorbs the control that was slipping away from its grasp."<sup>192</sup> What Gramsci realized was that in countries that had dynamic civil

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<sup>190</sup> Kate Crehan, "Gramsci's Concept of Common Sense: a Useful Concept for Anthropologists?" *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 16, no. 2 (2011): 276.

<sup>191</sup> Karl Marx and Engels, Friedrich. *Rethinking the Western Tradition: Communist Manifesto* (Cumberland, RI: Yale University Press, 2012), 74.

<sup>192</sup> Antonio Gramsci, "State and Civil Society," in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans.

societies, the inconsistencies of ruling class power that ought be revealed in a moment of crisis could no longer guarantee a revolutionary response. Civil society had the ability to resist “catastrophic incursions” that a great economic crisis might once have spurred.

In attempting to uncover what enables and what prevents social change, Gramsci took great care to examine how power was gained and maintained not only through coercion (political force), but also through consent (personal convictions and prevailing social norms).<sup>193</sup> His reflections on the structures of civil society brought him to the idea that through these structures people are led to adopt concepts of the world that do not reflect their own experiences nor serve their self-interests. This insight offered a crucial analytical tool needed to uncover the ideological mechanisms that led to the defeat of the socialist movement and the rise of fascism in Italy.<sup>194</sup> Joseph Femia, in his examination of Gramsci’s political thought, suggests that to understand how the apparatuses of civil society worked to construct and maintain the hegemony of those in power, Gramsci called for a deep interrogation of the role that intellectual and moral leadership played in cultivating the consent of the masses. Femia argues that Gramsci’s analysis was an attempt to illuminate how civil institutions were used as instruments of the dominant

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and ed. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 210.

<sup>193</sup> I want to note that Gramsci’s work recognizes the role of coercion in maintaining systems of domination, and I do not seek to dismiss the significant role that physical violence, political surveillance, and social repression play in deterring social movements. My focus in this chapter, however, will veer towards Gramsci’s theory of consent. I am particularly interested in exploring how people, for reasons of submission and subordination under the ruling capitalist class, adopt a conception of society in which situations of violence, inequality, and oppression appear normal and unchangeable.

<sup>194</sup> Civil society is the realm of social institutions – schools, courts, religious and associational institutions, trade unions, and political parties – that shape the ideological superstructure that creates and diffuses modes of thought. Julio de Santa Ana further defines civil society as “the set of public non-governmental organisms, groups and movements which express and represent people’s concerns and people’s rights.” He further suggests that Gramsci emphasized the intimate connection that exists between civil society, economic structure, the state and political society. “The Concept of Civil Society,” *Ecumenical Review* 46, no. 1 (January 1994): 7. The development and evolution of moral thought takes place in the realm of civil society.

order to mold personal convictions and social vision in ways that reinforced the ideas and rules of those in power.<sup>195</sup> It was through civil society—through the beliefs and values reinforced by church, family, media, political parties, schools, unions, and other voluntary associations—Gramsci argued that the hegemony of those in power gained lasting strength. It is through the cultural reality, which Gramsci defines as how the realities of class are lived in a particular context, that the realities of power (consciously and unconsciously) bring into being cultures of subordination. Crehan explains that, “the subordinated come to see the hierarchies of the world they inhabit as inevitable and inescapable, the will of God or the law of nature. They may not like their subordination, but they cannot see how things could possibly be other than as they are.”<sup>196</sup> It is in the realm of civil society that the development and evolution of moral thought takes place. And it is in this realm that the battle of ideas, for and against revolutionary transformation, is fought.

The process of conscientization requires that we uncover how one’s consciousness is developed and how that consciousness shapes our moral thought. Addressing the disparity of wealth and power that was illuminated by the 2008 economic crisis and returning to Crehan’s engagement of Gramscian thought, she illustrates how the reality of such disparities, based on one’s cultural consciousness, can appear unchangeable to those whose everyday reality they are.<sup>197</sup> What is needed are empirical tools that enable us to recognize the cultural assumptions that project the “naturalness” or

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<sup>195</sup> Joseph Femia, *Gramsci’s Political Thought: Hegemony, Consciousness, and the Revolutionary Process* (New York: Oxford Press, 1981), 24.

<sup>196</sup> Crehan, 275.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid*, 277.

the “divine will” of the current social, economic, and political systems. Gramsci’s work in the *Prison Notebooks* provides us with mechanisms that can expose the construction of dominant ideologies and engage the contradictions of our lived experiences. These contradictions, if revealed, can produce the possibility of social transformation.

### Hegemony and the Moralization of Poverty

Hegemony is a concept that Gramsci developed to address how the ruling class in industrial capitalist societies gained and maintained power not only through coercion, but also consent. Emilie townes, in her use of Gramsci’s work to uncover the cultural production of evil in U.S. consciousness, suggests that Gramsci was interested in revealing how the dominant group controlled the populace. How, through the use of social and cultural institutions/ideas within civil society, did those in power influence the consciousness of subordinate groups?<sup>198</sup> Absorbed passively, imposed from outside one’s own immediate context, and passed down from generation to generation, Gramsci asserted that one’s conception of the world was often uncritically lived and accepted. He argued that while the masses often adopt (consciously and unconsciously) a conception of the world that has been constructed by those in power, it is a conception that is not their own. Gramsci’s focus, therefore, on the concept of hegemony was to reveal the social and historical construction of dominant ideas and practices. He insisted on the need to interrogate the mechanisms embedded in civil society—the role of cultural, moral, and ideology leadership—that reinforced ruling class hegemony in the very structures of people’s daily lives. Townes points out that, “For Gramsci, hegemony does not mean

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<sup>198</sup> Townes, 20. Townes suggests that Gramsci’s development of the concept hegemony illustrated a break he made with Marxism’s economic determinism. I would suggest that this was not so much a break as it was an emphasis Gramsci developed within a particular stream of Marxism that Engels and Marx themselves recognized as important.

there is only one universally valid position for all time. Rather, other worldviews—in any given stage of historical development—can provide the major way of interpreting and perceiving the world.”<sup>199</sup> It is people’s own experience and perception of reality, often contradictory to the dominant worldview that opens up the possibility for countering the dominant hegemony.

It is this point that Crehan argues sets Gramsci apart from other social theorists that have attempted to explain the strength of structures of domination. Comparing Gramsci’s concept of hegemony with Bourdieu’s theories of *habitus* and *doxa*, Crehan contends that what is unique to Gramsci’s theoretical analysis, and what I would claim is relevant for a liberationist ethics, is his attempt to understand not only why things stay the same, but also what compels things to change.<sup>200</sup> Gramsci’s concept of hegemony is not static. He recognizes the possibility that exists for changing the popular consciousness. The first necessary step to incite transformation is recognition and an understanding of the dominant narratives. Townes further encourages this transformational possibility in the development of her work around deconstructing the fantastic hegemonic imagination—the imagination that “uses a politicized sense of history and memory to create and shape *its* worldview.”<sup>201</sup>

The ideological position that the free-market capitalist system is inherently good is the hegemonic value that shaped people’s interpretation of the 2008 economic crisis, promoted the belief that the economy had recovered, and obscured people’s ability to identify why more people were becoming poor when the economy was, according to

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<sup>199</sup> Townes, 20.

<sup>200</sup> Crehan, 281.

<sup>201</sup> Townes, 21.

news reports and statistics, flourishing. In their article, “The Great Recession and Free Market Capitalist Hegemony: A Critical Discourse Analysis of U.S. Newspaper Coverage of the Economy, 2008-2010,” Julie Steinkopf Rice and April M. Bond explore how the institutions of global capital were able to re-establish the hegemony of free market capitalism and obscure counter-hegemonic discourses of alternative forms of economic relations in the wake of the financial collapse. Through their analysis of some 400,000 U.S. newspaper articles between 2008-2010, they highlight the way global capital was able to not only preserve, but also strengthen the dominant narrative of the infallibility of the free market capitalist economy. Rice and Bond’s research illustrates the bifurcation that took place in reporting on business / market recovery and the ongoing economic challenges local communities were facing. They explain that while reporting about improvement and recovery dominated business and market news, the narrative around local communities and ordinary citizens became one of “dependency.”<sup>202</sup> The growth of dependency narratives of local communities along side of the need to “leave the economy alone to recover” and concern for the government deficit between 2008 and 2010 further obscured the reality that institutions of finance capital had been recipients of a \$787 billion government stimulus initiative. And while free market efforts were promoted as the most effective way to rebuild the economy, Rice and Bond explain that, “we noticed the nearly complete absence of discussion about innovative ways communities were working to rebuild / reboot their economies.”<sup>203</sup> The result was a de-

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<sup>202</sup> Julie Steinkopf Rice and April M. Bond, “The Great Recession and Free Market Capitalist Hegemony: A Critical Discourse Analysis of U.S. Newspaper Coverage of the Economy, 2008-2010,” *Sociological Focus* 46 no. 3 (2013), 220–221.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid*, 222.

coupling of the global capitalist system from its impact on local communities and everyday citizens. The intentional isolation of people's experiences of economic hardship from the recovery of the free market economy perpetuated dominant myths about the efficiency global capitalism and the dependency, powerlessness, and criminality of local communities.

Returning to Gramsci's critical examination of hegemony, it becomes necessary to understand how the infallibility of the free market capitalist system has been historically linked to a narrative of poverty that "blames the victims" and obscures the agency of everyday people whose experience could reveal the deficiency of this economic system. If the economic system is good, the system cannot be blamed for the existence of poverty. Without interrogating the construction of this dominant assumption, the success or failure of an individual in this economy is not tied to the economic structure, but to the merits of the individual. In her examination of the relationship of religion and class to the myth of American exceptionalism, political scientist Sheila Collins explains that along side the success story of U.S. capitalism stands a belief that, "If everyone is responsible for their own success or lack of it, then those who succeed have earned it, while those who fail have not worked hard enough, are not smart enough, or have not taken advantage of the opportunities that were available to them; therefore, they deserve what they get."<sup>204</sup> The ideological assumption that capitalism is inherently good disables people from recognizing the structural violence of poverty. It prevents people from drawing the connection that the recovery of the global economy is dependent

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<sup>204</sup> Collins, "The Myth of American Exceptionalism,"102.

on the impoverishment of local communities. Instead, it limits people to personalistic and individualist explanations of poverty.

Gramsci's concept of hegemony provides us with the tools to examine the historical and social construction of such faith claims. The themes of individualism, economic vitality, and private property have deep roots in American consciousness. In addition, the prolonged period of economic growth that the U.S. experienced after World War II through the collapse of the Soviet Union advanced a conviction around the world in the supremacy of liberal democracy, and in the notion that liberal democracy is made possible by global capitalism. Yet, this period mirrors an economic reality where the gross domestic product climbed while the real wages of the American family fell or plateaued. This perpetuation of poverty in the midst of economic growth required a new explanation. Scholars like Mark Rank argue that by the 1960s the primary cause of poverty in the American consciousness shifted from a critique of the economic structure to an analysis of individual deficiencies.<sup>205</sup> But how did this happen? In his explanation of the rise of Neoliberalism in the United States, social theorist Jan Rehmann shows how an ideological shift in U.S. interpretations of welfare politics and poverty was essential for Neoliberalism's hegemonic success. Rehmann notes how explanations of poverty famously laid out by Oscar Lewis, Michael Harrington, and Charles Murray's *Losing Ground*, ideologically transformed people's conception of "Poverty, engendered on a mass scale by deregulation, deindustrialization, and a race to the bottom of the labor market... into a 'behavior' to be cured by labor discipline in low-wage jobs."<sup>206</sup> Poverty,

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<sup>205</sup> Rank, *One Nation Underprivileged*.

<sup>206</sup> Jan Rehmann, "Poverty and Poor People's Agency in High-Tech Capitalism," in *Religion, Theology and Class*, ed. Joerg Rieger (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 144.



in the minds of the American people, was no longer a deficiency of the economic system, but rather the product of a poverty-perpetuating value system and way of life.

Through the stigmatization of poverty, a growing capitalist economy was able to put forward the idea of its own infallibility and inherent moral worth. Emilie townes' work is helpful in explaining how the historical criminalization, feminization, and racialization of poverty through the construction of the fantastic hegemonic imagination, “conveniently diverts our attention away from structural issues such as economic, political, and social structural inequalities that affect not only Black mothers and their children, but all of us.”<sup>207</sup> Examining the cultural production of evil, townes traces multiple elements of U.S. society (religion, corporate media, marketing, popular literature, and public policy) that have been used to demonize the poor, objectify Black poverty, and stereotype Black womanhood. In particular, her examination of the myth of the Welfare Queen highlights the use of religious values to justify assumptions about wealth and poverty. Townes illuminates the ways in which the Protestant work ethic and Christian beliefs that “God permitted poverty so that those who were better off would have someone to give to and therefore earn their reward for such charity in heaven,” were institutional values upon which poverty dependency narratives were established in American consciousness.<sup>208</sup>

Sheila Collins work further explores how religious values have been used to reinforce the dominant narrative of America exceptionalism. She examines the internal battles that have taken place within the Christian tradition to counter dominant values that

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<sup>207</sup> Townes, 117.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid, 120-121.

reinforced the myth of American Dream and overlooked a structural analysis of class power. At the same time, Collins' work traces prevailing ideologies of Puritanism, classical liberalism, and the rise of religious fundamentalism to illuminate the deep relationship that has existed between economic and religious values in popular American consciousness. Following the historical and ideological battle that continued to be waged within American religious and political thought, Collins explains that,

By the 1990s, the Religious and Political Right had succeeded in muzzling the liberal mainstream churches on social and economic issues. It had built up a formidable arsenal of media outlets for its radical capitalist agenda, driven the Democratic Party from left of center to right of center on economic issues, taken the Republican Party far to the right, and repealed much of the regulation that would result in the 2007-2008 global economic crash.

What Collins work reveals is the intentional use of religious values by those in power to reinforce their hegemonic position. Her analysis helps unearth the assumptions at work, which mask the cruel manipulation of the poor in the United States.

The moralization of poverty that is carried out through the institutional avenues of civil society must be understood in its historical relationship to a growing affirmation of the infallibility of the free market capitalist system. The problem of poverty, under the hegemonic narrative of global capital is not a result of the dependency of global capital on chronic impoverishment, unemployment, and underemployment to produce increased profits and further capital accumulation, but rather the pathology of the poor. The strength of this dominant narrative prevents the majority from recognizing the structural violence of poverty. Gramsci's method suggests that the poor and working class's ability to counter the hegemony of the ruling class will require them to develop their own narrative—to bring together their disparate experiences of economic crisis—and to reveal the paradox of a free market economic system that produces massive poverty while

accumulating tremendous wealth. Furthermore, following the leadership of the dispossessed, a liberationist Christian social ethics must re-invoke the prophetic Christian vision that stands with the oppressed and argues against religious values that have been abstracted in support of the status quo.

It's Common Sense, "We're" Not Poor...: The Myth of Mobility in America

The work of Antonio Gramsci is key to understanding how a ruling class ideology that devalues the masses of people in society is adopted as the dominant frame through which people come to perceive the world around them. As previously noted, Gramsci would assert that for a majority of people, our conception of the world is passively absorbed, imposed upon us from outside our own immediate context, passed down from generation to generation, and uncritically lived. In taking on the values and ideologies of those in power as our own, Gramsci suggested that people come to believe the current conditions are natural and unchangeable. Such constructed conceptions of the world, left unexamined and accepted as *common sense*, are what Gramsci argued props up people's subordination.

A belief in the infallibility of the free market capitalist system is supported by a general agreement from the masses in U.S. society that the "ups and downs" of the economy are natural. The overall success of the U.S. economy worldwide further perpetuates a belief that there is no poverty in America and that; "We" as a country are not poor. Instead, the United States is understood as a classless society that has been made great by the strength of its middle class. Collins illustrates that while great disparities exist among those who call themselves middle class, those who make as little as \$30,000 a year to as much as \$250,000 a year, "the myth of the United States as a

classless society lives on in a significant portion of the American population.”<sup>209</sup> The existence of class struggle in the United States is obscured by the moralization of poverty (as was explored in the previous section), but also through the myths of opportunity and upward mobility. While the numbers are decreasing, a majority of Americans continue to identify themselves as a part of the ‘middle class,’ who are merely experiencing temporary weaknesses in an otherwise productive economy.<sup>210</sup>

Gramsci’s theory of common sense can help us understand how the narratives of the “middle class” and “upward mobility” and the values associated with these frames in U.S. society disable the majority from recognizing the shared social relationship to capital that exists among both the declining middle class and the increasingly superfluous poor as a result of the chronic crisis of global capital. Gramsci suggested that,

Common sense is not a single unique conception; identical in time and space... it takes countless different forms. Its most fundamental characteristic is that it is a conception which, even in the brain of one individual, is fragmentary, incoherent and [inconsistent], in conformity with the social and cultural position of those masses whose philosophy it is.”<sup>211</sup>

The “fluidity” of middle class identity, as common sense reality in U.S. society, becomes a hegemonic apparatus that both reinforces the infallibility of the free market capitalist system and disguises the structural violence of poverty. In support of the capitalist hegemony, Collins explains that while a majority of Americans are waking up to the

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<sup>209</sup> Collins, 100. Collins goes on to explain that income statistics alone do not convey the reality of wealth disparities in the United States. She suggests that a majority of Americans command very little power over political and legal decisions that are made by those at the top 0.1 percent of the income/wealth ladder.

<sup>210</sup> Rakesh Kochhar and Rich Morin, “Despite Recovery, Fewer Americans Identify as Middle Class,” *Pew Research Center*, January 27, 2014, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/01/27/despite-recovery-fewer-americans-identify-as-middle-class/>. In 2014, 44% of Americans identified themselves as middle class. 40% identified as lower or lower-middle class. In 2008, 25% of Americans identified as lower or lower-middle class. In 2012, 49% of Americans identified themselves as middle class.

<sup>211</sup> Gramsci, SPN, 419. Cited in Crehan, 281-282.

disparity between the rich and the poor, most Americans remain reluctant to blame the wealthy for such imbalances in the economic system. She argues that their hope of becoming wealthy themselves and their continued belief in the possibility of upward mobility diminish the development of class consciousness among the middle and lower strata of the population.<sup>212</sup> On the other side of this disparity is the widespread rejection of poverty in U.S. consciousness. While the American majority hopes to become rich, they also fear being identified as poor.

The common sense identification of the United States as a middle class society leads to a conflict of consciousness when an individual experiences economic hardship. One's individual experience comes into conflict with the collective consciousness / common sense that endures about who are the poor and why people are impoverished. A recent study by the Center for Community Change, after holding 14 listening sessions in 7 states and Washington D.C. with African Americans, Latinos, and whites at or below the poverty line, reported that despite their economic reality and their grasp of systemic injustice, "participants didn't self-identify as poor nor gravitate to language of 'poverty.'"<sup>213</sup> The common sense middle class ideology that dominates U.S. consciousness perpetuates the dominant U.S. worldview that "We" are not poor.<sup>214</sup>

While more and more people are experiencing the disparity of wealth and poverty, people

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<sup>212</sup> Collins, 101 and 115.

<sup>213</sup> "Messaging for Economic Justice: Research Brief," *Center for Community Change*, July, 2014, <http://www.communitychange.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/CCC-Research-Brief.pdf>.

<sup>214</sup> The Heritage Foundation argues that the problem of poverty is often exaggerated in the United States. Quoting James Q. Wilson that notes that, "The poorest Americans today live a better life than all but the richest persons a hundred years ago." They argue that ownership of modern conveniences like air conditioning, television, and cars dispute national statistics that suggest 30 million Americans are living in poverty. Robert Rector and Rachel Sheffield, "Air Conditioning, Cable TV, and an Xbox: What is Poverty in the United States Today?" *The Heritage Foundation*, July 19, 2011, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2011/07/what-is-poverty>.

must come to ask how the common sense that distorts the roots of this disparity can be renovated and made critical in the existing activity of people's daily lives.<sup>215</sup> While common sense presents an obstacle to confronting the hegemony of the ruling class, Gramsci's work also shows how the dynamic nature of common sense can provide an opportunity to achieve radical transformation.

From Common Sense to Good Sense: From Charity to Caritas

*Who are better prepared than the oppressed to understand the terrible significance of an oppressive society? Who suffer the effects of oppression more than the oppressed? Who can better understand the necessity of liberation? They will not gain this liberation by chance but through the praxis of their quest for it, through their recognition of the necessity to fight for it. And this fight, because of the purpose given it by the oppressed, will actually constitute an act of love opposing the lovelessness which lies at the heart of the oppressors' violence, lovelessness even when clothed in false generosity.*

— Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

Drawing on the work of Marxist theorist Antonio Labriola, Gramsci saw the necessity of bringing together theoretical and practical activity. Through a unity of theory and practice, Gramsci believed a revolutionary consciousness could emerge and reveal the inconsistencies in the ruling class hegemony. Yet for a philosophy of praxis to be effective, Gramsci argued that one must not only critique the common sense, but also base itself within common sense. A philosophy of praxis must start from within the existing modes of thought, within the popular consciousness of the masses and develop a critical thinking from within. Gramsci writes, "It is not a question of introducing from scratch a scientific form of thought into everyone's individual life, but of renovating and making 'critical' an already existing activity."<sup>216</sup> Developing this critical consciousness,

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<sup>215</sup> Gramsci, "The Study of Philosophy," in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 331.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, 330–331.

or *good sense*, is for Gramsci a necessary step to deconstructing structures of domination and moving toward social transformation. A philosophy of praxis that moves from common sense to good sense engages both the theory of class conflict as well as people's practical awareness of the contradictions of inequality. It is through a philosophy of praxis that people can begin to connect their personal experiences of impoverishment to a social phenomenon that is impacting the whole of our society.

It is not enough, therefore, to merely suggest that inequality is engineered and not inevitable. Anti-foreclosure organizers Spencer Resnick and Jonathan Bix, in an article they wrote for *Jacobin* about the grassroots possibilities for transforming common sense, explain that simply critiquing the free-market system does not enable people to recognize its weakness. Instead, they argue that, "the contradictions of capitalism must be felt and experienced in the fabric of daily life."<sup>217</sup> It is in the coming together of theory and practice, of knowing and feeling that a revolutionary consciousness can arise. Drawing on Gramsci's notion that we must engage people's common sense to develop a more critical understanding of the situation at hand, Resnick and Bix's article, "Gramsci Comes Home," argued that the financial crisis of 2008 and the foreclosure crisis that followed created an opportunity for homeowners and tenants alike to challenge the dominant faith in market ideology and popular conceptions of class in America.

Homeownership, for many in America, has been a marker of the American Dream. However, as numbers climbed from 1 in 33, to 1 in 18, to 1 in 11 homeowners heading toward foreclosure in 2008, many began to ask if America was defaulting on this

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<sup>217</sup> Spencer Resnick and Jonathan Bix, "Gramsci Comes Home," *Jacobin*, August 18, 2013, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2013/08/gramsci-comes-home/>. Resnick and Bix are part of the anti-foreclosure organization Nobody Leaves Mid-Hudson in Poughkeepsie, NY.

dream.<sup>218</sup> The security of America's "middle class" and the underlying belief that "We" are not poor was challenged by the reality of the 2008 foreclosure crisis. While American financial institutions attempted to place the blame of the mortgage crisis on irresponsible borrowers, anti-foreclosure organizers like City Life / Vida Urbana in Boston stepped forward to organize homeowners and tenants against displacement in the aftermath of the Great Recession. Fighting for people's basic right to housing, City Life helped community members learn about their rights under the law and helped to draw public scrutiny to unfair banking and eviction practices in their community. Building on the threat of eviction, housing organizers worked to develop critical consciousness and through their efforts began to build the basis for a collective struggle that could illuminate the inefficiency of the economic system.

Resnick and Bix point out that unique to City Life's organizing model was their ability to bring together "homeowners (a group typically viewed as homogeneously white, middle-class, individual property owners) and tenants in foreclosed buildings (a group typically described as working-class and people of color)."<sup>219</sup> Building on a common threat of eviction at the hands of Big Banks, City Life worked to reveal how the foreclosure crisis that began in 2008 and the dispossession that it caused were not the fault of one individual homeowner or tenant. Their organizing, in bringing together homeowners and tenants, prompted community members to recognize how inequality is not inevitable but rather is engineered.

City Life's work challenged the American common sense about "who are the poor" in our capitalist society. The threat of eviction that emerged in the 2008 housing crisis

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<sup>218</sup> "Defaulting on the Dream: States Respond to America's Foreclosure Crisis," *Pew Charitable Trusts*, April 2008, [http://www-tc.pbs.org/now/shows/506/defaulting\\_on\\_the\\_dream.pdf](http://www-tc.pbs.org/now/shows/506/defaulting_on_the_dream.pdf).

<sup>219</sup> Resnick and Bix.



upset traditional notions of class that privileged ownership in the United States. It gave City Life the opportunity to demonstrate how people traditionally thought of as poor and people thought of as middle class had shared material conditions that could make unlikely alliances possible. But this recognition of shared struggle did not transpire spontaneously. The development of a collective struggle was made possible through the organizing efforts of City Life to bring together a structural critique of the system that was displacing working class people from their homes with people's everyday life needs, practices, and common sense.

Gramsci argued that common sense ought not be understood merely in negative terms. Instead, he suggested that within the incoherent whole that makes up our common sense, there exist elements of truth as well as elements of misrepresentation. Here, I return to the value of charity that remains a stronghold in the American belief system. The common sense concept of charity accepts the status quo that poverty and inequality are inevitable must be contested. However, the truth that underlies the value of charity in the American consciousness is a deep desire among many Americans to help their sisters and brothers in times of need. The work of City Life builds on this common sense value of charity, and through critical analysis and political activity, moves its constituency toward a good sense understanding and practice of *caritas*—a genuine love for all human kind. As individual families are brought in to fight against their own displacement through the shared practices of militant eviction blockades, bank protests, political education, and community discussions, Spencer and Bix explain that the fight for others' homes "often becomes more important than one's own home."<sup>220</sup> In developing a philosophy of praxis, City Life propels people beyond the capitalist system of exchange,

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<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

to a deeper sense of responsibility for all humanity. Their organizing practices, in highlighting shared class struggle, are able to transform the common sense value of charity (as aid to the poor) into a prophetic Christian value of *caritas*—building a culture of solidarity and collective struggle. The home is no longer seen as a commodity on the market, but a human right that everyone should have. Through this real life context of the foreclosure crisis, through experiencing this basic conflict of the capitalist system, and through critical reflection and political action, a new ideology emerges. With the solidarity built through the lived experience of struggle, the possibility of developing a philosophy of praxis that upholds the needs of the people over the needs of profit making institutions can emerge.

Gramsci's work provides us with the concrete tools to challenge the morality of the capitalist system and to reveal the injustice of a system that continues to moralize the problem of poverty. His concepts of hegemony, common sense, and good sense set up a framework where people can move from experiencing conditions of inequality and exploitation, to developing not only critical self-consciousness, but further to advancing a critical collective consciousness through shared action (counter-hegemony) that can uncover the economic, political, and social systems that produce mass inequality in our society. Developing this critical collective consciousness is a necessary step to overcome prevailing ideological influences that maintain the hegemony of the ruling class. But what are additional obstacles that continue to prevent us from building this collective consciousness? The criminalization, marginalization, racialization, and feminization of poverty have been used to perpetuate what the Rev. Dr. William Barber II of the Moral

Mondays Movement in North Carolina has named “a divide-and-conquer strategy.”<sup>221</sup>

As I turn to the work of African American journalist, scholar, and social activist, W.E.B. Du Bois, I will argue that there exists a long standing “divide-and-conquer” strategy in the United States that has deep moral and ideological roots in the myth of the *American Assumption*. I will explore how Du Bois’s work in *Black Reconstruction in America* can help uncover the ideological and historical mechanisms that worked to prevent an organized and unified response to the conditions millions of Americans faced in the wake of the 2008 crisis.

### **Confronting a Politics of Division and the Myth of the American Assumption: Re-Connecting Race and Class in U.S. Consciousness**

*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. — That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, — That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.*

— *The Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776*

*O, let my land be a land where Liberty  
Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,  
But opportunity is real, and life is free,*

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<sup>221</sup> William J. Barber II and Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *The Third Reconstruction: Moral Mondays, Fusion Politics, and the Rise of a New Justice Movement* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2016). For a deeper examination of the Criminalization of poverty: Randall Amster, *Lost in Space : The Criminalization, Globalization, and Urban Ecology of Homelessness* (New York: LFB Scholarly Publishing, 2008).; Marginalization of poverty: John Atherton, *Marginalization, Society and Church* (London: SCM Press, 2003).; Racialization of poverty: Martin Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare : Race, Media, and the Politics of Antipoverty Policy*, Studies in Communication, Media, and Public Opinion (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999)., Sanford Schram, Joe Soss, and Richard C. Fording, *Race and the Politics of Welfare Reform : Edited by Sanford F. Schram, Joe Soss, and Richard C. Fording* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003).; Feminization of poverty: Jill S. Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare : How Racism Undermined the War on Poverty* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1994)., Annelise Orleck, *Storming Caesars Palace : How Black Mothers Fought Their Own War on Poverty* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005).

*Equality is in the air we breathe.*

*(There's never been equality for me,  
Nor freedom in this "homeland of the free.")*

*Say, who are you that mumbles in the dark?  
And who are you that draws your veil across the stars?*

*I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart,  
I am the Negro bearing slavery's scars.  
I am the red man driven from the land,  
I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek—  
And finding only the same old stupid plan  
Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak.*

— Langston Hughes, "Let America Be America Again"

Equality and democratic participation are both the foundation and fundamental paradox upon which American moral consciousness is built. In the founding creed, the architects of the constitution invoked the values, instilled by their Creator, of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. These values were to be ensured by the active participation of "all members" of U.S. society. Yet, the history of American "democracy" is wrought with stories of subjugation, exclusion, and exploitation. If read through the eyes of the poor and working class masses (of those who fought slavery and racism; those who organized labor strikes and formed picket lines for workers' rights; those who protested against wars, against discrimination, and against imperial domination), this history becomes a story of suppression and resistance for the majority and a story of manipulation and coercion by an elite minority. A liberationist viewpoint cannot simply overlook these discrepancies, but rather must lift up this conflict as the place that can enable us to change our perspectives and practices. As Langston Hughes poem so eloquently reminds us, social movements led by oppressed communities within U.S.

society (for abolition, women's enfranchisement, industrial union rights and civil rights for African Americans and others) have consistently called for a broader and deeper recognition and assurance of the rights enumerated in the Constitution. The strength of these movements does not sit outside of "American society," but rather in their efforts as critical actors in U.S. history to achieve social transformation for the whole of society. An obstacle that remains, however, is that dominant narratives of U.S. history have largely obscured this reality of resistance. There is a "social amnesia" created when the successes and struggles of those who have fought to expand the vision of democratic participation and equality are misrepresented and omitted from the dominant historical narrative.

It is within the dialectical relationship between what is and what ought to be/what can be that W.E.B. Du Bois's quest in *Black Reconstruction in America*—for social Truth in American consciousness—offers a significant intervention. In answering his own question as to why he wrote his rigorous reconstitution of Reconstruction history in America, Du Bois stated, "It is simply to establish the Truth, on which Right in the future may be built."<sup>222</sup> For Du Bois, there was no way forward toward social transformation without confronting the misrepresentations of history (of power and social relationships) that dominated the social and moral consciousness of the American people. Throughout his career, Du Bois fought against the oppression and subjugation of African peoples in the United States and around the world. As Martin Luther King articulated it in his

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<sup>222</sup> Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America*, 725. In developing her conception of counteremory, emilie townes explores the need to reexamine the past through microhistories that challenge us to reconsider falsified and incomplete histories. She establishes "truth" as the socially forgotten memories that when told, enable us to reframe dominant narratives. Townes highlights the work of Du Bois as a primary example of Black counteremory as a reconstructive strategy, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, 8, 24.

Centennial Address honoring Du Bois in 1968, “One idea he insistently taught was that black people have been kept in oppression and deprivation by a poisonous fog of lies that depicted them as inferior, born deficient and deservedly doomed to servitude to the grave.”<sup>223</sup> It should be further noted that Du Bois’s work to critique the historical falsehoods and the popular myths that penetrated American racial consciousness were not only for the benefit of black America, but an attempt to illuminate the reality of class conflict in U.S. society. Du Bois believed that the enfranchisement of African Americans was an essential step for world democracy of all human beings of all races.<sup>224</sup>

Du Bois’s systematic analysis of history and his tireless critique of U.S. power structures in *Black Reconstruction in America* provide tools that a liberationist Christian social ethics can draw on in attempting to develop a counter-hegemonic narrative to the myths of white supremacy (constructed to preserve race-based divisions) and the American Assumption (established to mask class conflict.) In this chapter, I will illuminate the method Du Bois employed to deconstruct the dominant historical narratives at work to preserve the dictatorship of capital and to prevent the masses in American society from recognizing their shared dispossession. I will also illustrate how Du Bois’s theoretical approach to the relationship of race and class in U.S. society is essential for confronting the structural violence of poverty.

### W.E.B. Du Bois: Countering the Propaganda of History

*We have too often a deliberate attempt so to change the facts of history that the story will make pleasant reading for Americans... Our histories*

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<sup>223</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., “Honoring Dr. Du Bois, No.2 1968,” in *Freedomways Reader: Prophets in Their Own Country*, ed. Esther Cooper Jackson (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000), 31.

<sup>224</sup> Du Bois, *The Gift of Black Folk* (Millwood, NY: Kraus-Thomson Organization Ltd, 1975), 186, 217.

*tend to discuss American slavery so impartially, that in the end nobody seems to have done wrong and everybody is right. Slavery appears to have been thrust upon unwilling helpless America, while the South was blameless in becoming its center. The difference of development, North and South, is explained as a sort of working out of cosmic social and economic law.*<sup>225</sup>

— W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America*

W. E. B. Du Bois, as a leader in the African-American movement not only for civil, but also human rights provides a clarifying lens through which we can interpret the “problem of the color line” in U.S. society. He engages racial inequality in America as a matter of national moral concern while raising up the need to disrupt the dominant narratives that work to manipulate popular consciousness regarding race relations and class struggle. While his theories on race and white supremacy in America are frequently referenced across academic disciplines, scholars often focus their research on Du Bois’s early writing. Beginning with his 1897 address to the American Negro Academy, many conclude with his 1903 publication of *The Souls of Black Folk*.<sup>226</sup> Political scientist Adolph Reed offers a pointed critique of scholarship that fails to recognize the larger political project that characterizes Du Bois work. He is particularly critical of recent scholarship that isolates Du Bois’s construction of double-consciousness, as developed in *The Souls of Black Folk*. Reed argues that appropriations of Du Bois’s metaphor lie far away from the central premises of his work and depoliticize and dehistoricize the Afro-American experience. He contends that,

His [Du Bois] idea of politics, moreover, always centered unambiguously on the realm of government activity and public policy. His anti-imperialism, his

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<sup>225</sup> Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America*, 713–714.

<sup>226</sup> It should be noted that Du Bois continued to publish for another 60 years after writing *The Souls of Black Folk*. See Reiland Rabaka, *W.E.B. Du Bois and the Problems of the Twenty-first Century* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, 2007).

reinterpretation of Reconstruction, his vision of social transformation in the United States and elsewhere all proceed from recognition of the centrality of state power, both in the shaping of social life in general and as the crucial focal point for effective progressive theorizing and practice.<sup>227</sup>

Du Bois's long career as a scholar and activist consistently linked intellectual analysis to direct engagement with influential controversies of his day and strategic political action.

His later work, in particular, offered a strategic critique of the development of industrial capitalism and a global system of racial domination. It was in 1935 that Du Bois published *Black Reconstruction in America*. Written amidst the challenges of the Great Migration, struggles of the Great Depression, the rise of Fascism in Europe, and the ensuing threat of a second world war, *Black Reconstruction in America* can be read as a radical call for the development of a revolutionary consciousness needed to bring about an end to slavery in all of its forms (the slavery of poverty, the slavery of color, and the slavery of nation).<sup>228</sup>

Du Bois's research in *Black Reconstruction in America* must, in turn, be understood in its historical contextuality of deep political debate. His reexamination of Reconstruction history began with his 1909 essay, "Reconstruction and Its Benefits," to counter popular misconceptions constructed by elite white academicians about the "failure" of Reconstruction. Du Bois argued that Reconstruction represented a critical moment in American history when the power of the national government resided in the hands of the masses of citizens (black and white) who had the right to vote. His essay challenged accounts of this period that blamed the ineptitude of African-American

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<sup>227</sup> Adolph Reed, *W.E.B. Du Bois and American Political Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 178.

<sup>228</sup> Du Bois, *In Battle for Peace; the Story of My 83rd Birthday* (New York: Masses & Mainstream, 1952), 78–79.



leadership for the collapse of Reconstruction and illuminated the role African-American leaders had played in defeating the Southern Democratic government, establishing free public schools (for both free blacks and poor whites), and achieving progressive legislation across the South.<sup>229</sup> While he delivered this essay at the annual American Historical Association meeting in 1909 and his essay was published in the 1910 volume of *The American Historical Review*, Du Bois's account of Reconstruction history, alongside other African-American memoirs of the Reconstruction period remained on the margins of this scholarship. These counter-narratives of Reconstruction were further veiled from American popular consciousness by racist interpretations of the period that were reinforced by D. W. Griffith's 1915 film, *The Birth of a Nation*.

Du Bois was critical of the ways that popular misconceptions of African Americans and their political agency would continue to limit America's achievement of egalitarian democracy. Du Bois's decision to expand the development of his Reconstruction argument grew stronger in the wake of the Great Depression as he began to recognize the limitations of New Deal reforms and the ongoing inattention that liberal politics and union-based Marxism paid to race.<sup>230</sup> Eric Porter, in his assessment of Du Bois's midcentury scholarship, suggests that Du Bois saw that the policies proposed

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<sup>229</sup> David Levering Lewis, introduction to *Black Reconstruction in America*, vii.

<sup>230</sup> Adolph Reed notes Du Bois opposition to integrationist who were not critical of American society, but whose main desire was to be accepted by American society, 68. And Amiri Baraka emphasizes Du Bois's reproach for the Communist Party USA for its tendency to minimize the revolutionary function of the Black Liberation Movement, 549. Imamu Amiri Baraka, "Black Reconstruction: Du Bois and the U.S. Struggle for Democracy and Socialism," in *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, ed. Imamu Amiri Baraka and William J. Harris (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1991).

under the New Deal would likely be used to reinforce a disintegrating capitalist economy as well as an exclusionary approach to democracy.<sup>231</sup>

While Du Bois was a socialist that believed socialism could be achieved through gradual yet intentional reform efforts, he was skeptical of New Deal policies that did not challenge the status quo of industrial capitalism nor address eligibility requirements that prevented African Americans from gaining access to public aid. Du Bois found that in political and social efforts to shift the consciousness of American society, the ideologies of class conflict and racial consciousness largely remained at odds. To understand this contradiction, Du Bois returned to his historical analysis of the Civil War and Reconstruction. How could this critical moment in American history, a time where every major social institution in society was forced to question the way forward, reveal the social-theoretical assumptions that continued to dominate American consciousness and prevent the achievement of true democracy?

His writing of *Black Reconstruction in America* set out to illuminate how the dominant narrative of Reconstruction manipulated the reality of racial consciousness and class conflict in American thinking. Opposing white scholars' historical distortions that disparaged the role of African Americans in the Reconstruction era and deemed Reconstruction a failure, Du Bois's research highlighted the significant role African Americans played in the success of the Reconstruction experiment. Furthermore, he examined the systematic role that the legacy of slavery and the fortification of white supremacy as a mechanism of social control (over both blacks and whites) played in the dismantling of a Reconstruction democracy. Du Bois revisionist history examined the

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<sup>231</sup> Eric Porter, *The Problem of the Future World W.E.B. Du Bois and the Race Concept at Midcentury* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010), 80.

social values, economic practices, and political policies that both enabled the achievements of Reconstruction and led to its defeat. His work in *Black Reconstruction in America* illuminates a critical process that is needed to deconstruct ideological myths that provide cover for the immorality of a free-market capitalist system and perpetuate the structural violence of poverty.

From a Slavocracy to a Capitalist Plutocracy: America's Divide-and-Conquer Strategy

*How America became the laborer's Promised Land; and flocking here from all the world the white workers competed with black slaves, with new floods of foreigners, and with growing exploitation, until they fought slavery to save democracy then lost democracy in a new and vaster slavery.*<sup>232</sup>

— W.E.B. Du Bois

The 1930s was a period of staggering unemployment, wage cuts, and deteriorating living conditions for masses of people across the United States and around the world. The worldwide crisis that has become known as the Great Depression had a devastating impact on African Americans as a group that had been systematically disenfranchised and continually excluded from growing industrial employment. However, this period also gave rise to tremendous organizing activities across the labor movement and in particular among a newly emerging labor movement of the unemployed. While African Americans had often been excluded from labor unions or forced to organize separate unions, the conditions of the 1930s and the wave of strikes that took place across the country in 1934 in response to these conditions created a space for black and white workers (employed and unemployed) to come together and organize a new industrial union movement. It was also in this moment of crisis and social unrest that social theorist, Ferruccio Gambina, explains that Du Bois recognized the deepening class divisions that

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<sup>232</sup> Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America*, 17.

were simultaneously developing along racial lines.<sup>233</sup> To understand these discrepancies and to interrogate the relationship of racial consciousness and class struggle, Du Bois returned to his study of Reconstruction.

Du Bois saw the era of Reconstruction as a moment in American history where there was an *opportunity* to shift the economic and political structures away from a white propertied class to a unified leadership of black and white laborers. Through his 729-page account of the political and economic revolution of the Civil War and Reconstruction, Du Bois explained how this revolutionary moment came to enfranchise black and white labor with the potential to confront the landed oligarchy. This possibility for political and social unity among the laboring class was thwarted, however, by structural and ideological racism, which Du Bois argued was established by the landed oligarchy and absorbed in the racial prejudices of white labor. It was the misrecognition of class struggle, obscured by the fabrication of white racial unity, that became a missed opportunity for workers across racial lines to bring about industrial democracy.

In his chapters on “The Black Worker” and “The White Worker,” Du Bois traced the establishment of the economic system of slavery in the United States. He documented the transition from immigrant labor made up of Irish peasants, German and English artisans, and free Negroes, to the legal disenfranchisement and enslavement of black workers that took place throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. In his essay, “The American Blindspot,” historian Noel Ignatiev highlights Du Bois’s intentional use of the

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<sup>233</sup> Ferruccio Gambino, “W.E.B. Du Bois and the Proletariat in Black Reconstruction,” in *American Labor and Immigration History, 1877-1920s: Recent European Research*, ed. Dick Hoerder (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1983), 48–49. Ferruccio also points out that the technological innovations in the cotton industry led to the “outmigration” of black labor to northern cities. Following Gramsci’s analysis of the industrial revolution, we can recognize the potential that arises for the labor force to organize that takes place when black and white labor are brought into relationship with one another.

term “The Black Worker,” as opposed to “The Black Slave.” Ignatiev suggests that Du Bois choice of terminology was used to denote class conflict and the establishment of the Black Worker as an essential member of the proletariat.<sup>234</sup> From its inception, Du Bois was establishing the inseparable relationship of race and class in the U.S. context and offering critical tools that enable us to understand the systematic construction of power in American society.

Du Bois further explained that this transition from free labor to slave labor required a “special police force, ... made possible... by the presence of poor whites.” He argued that it was the establishment of this distinction between black slaves and white workers/overseers under the economic system of slavery that “bred in the poor white a dislike for the Negro toil of all sorts. He never regarded himself as a laborer, or as part of any labor movement. If he had any ambition at all it was to become a planter and to own ‘niggers’... The result was that the system was held stable and intact by the poor white.”<sup>235</sup> Here we see not only that the black worker was systematically segregated from the poor white Southerner, but further that the poor white Southerner displaced their class alliance in hopes of becoming part of the “owning class.” The birth of this plantation politic would penetrate the American consciousness for years to come. Du Bois argued that, fostered by economic competition at the bottom and the need of the

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<sup>234</sup> Noel Ignatiev, “‘The American Blindspot’: Reconstruction According to Eric Foner and W.E.B. Du Bois,” *Labour / Le Travail*, Vol. 31 (Spring, 1993), 243–244. It should be noted that Du Bois’s employment of Marxist analysis in *Black Reconstruction in America* has been a contested framework, both at time his manuscript was published through contemporary scholarship. Ignatiev’s article is an attempt to explore that debate and the particular political intentions that accompany it through his comparison of W.E.B. Du Bois’s and Eric Foner’s interpretations of Reconstruction history.

<sup>235</sup> *Black Reconstruction in America*, 12.

ruling elites to maintain control over the masses, the dominant relationship between black and white workers would become one of racial division.

The emancipation of black labor that was achieved through the Civil War did not change the basic race relations of white and black workers in the United States. Reflecting on the opportunity that arose in the period of Reconstruction to unite the labor class and secure true democracy, Du Bois's assessment was that the consciousness to overcome the ideological power of racism and white supremacy did not exist for a majority of the white working class. The fear of labor competition and a resentment that the efforts of Reconstruction would give to "colored people what had never been done for white people," masked the reality of class struggle and reinforced a pathological belief in the inferiority of the Negro. Du Bois explained that instead of building class unity,

The politically enfranchised slave was accused, as every laboring class has been, of ignorance and bad manners, of poverty and crime. And when he tried to go to school and tried to imitate the manners of his brothers, and demanded real economic emancipation through ownership of land and right to use capital, there arose the bitter shriek of property, and the charge of corruption and theft was added to that of ignorance and poverty.<sup>236</sup>

While the rhetoric was put forth that emancipation would result in the possibility for every "man" regardless of race, to have "a fair chance in the race of life," what emerged was a justification of the continued subjugation of the black laborer. This resulted in the prolonged exploitation of both white and black labor at the hands of a Northern industrial oligarchy.<sup>237</sup>

Du Bois's recounting of this history was clear, however, that Reconstruction was not a failure of the black proletariat. Starting with his chapter on "The General Strike," of

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<sup>236</sup> Ibid, 206.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid, 246.

500,000 black workers in the South, through his accounts of the accomplishments made by the dictatorships of the black proletariat in establishing democratic governments across southern states (Chapters 7–13), Du Bois is steadfast in highlighting the critical steps that were made by the black proletariat to shift the social order of American society.<sup>238</sup> Gambino suggests that Du Bois understood Reconstruction as a moment in U.S. history when, “the black proletariat in the South came as close as no other section of the working class in the United State had come to making use of the state for its needs.”<sup>239</sup> The economic and political reform that was achieved in the South during the period of Reconstruction was not to be overlooked. Ignatiev highlights some of the achievements noted by Du Bois,

Abolishing property qualifications for holding office, apportioning representation based on population not property, abolishing imprisonment for debt, founding the public school, extending rights for women, building asylums for the insane and the handicapped, modifying the tax structure, and other reforms.

Ignatiev goes on to suggest that, “A program of this sort, carried out against a background of mass movement, may not yet be communism, but it is no longer capitalism.”<sup>240</sup>

The challenge that remained, as Du Bois saw it, was two fold. The power of Northern industry was continuing to gain control over American government and had no intention of allowing laborers in the South to maintain control over wealth and economic production. Du Bois explained that what was preserving the power of the dictatorship of

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<sup>238</sup> Du Bois adopts this Marxian term, the dictatorship of the proletariat, to define a unified working class – of black, brown, yellow and white – that is able to gain political power and establish industrial democracy, *Black Reconstruction in America*, 346.

<sup>239</sup> Gambino, 54.

<sup>240</sup> Ignatiev, 246.

the proletariat in the South was the assistance of the military arm of the government—a government that was slowly being overtaken by organized wealth. He argued that from the perspective of Northern capital, “As soon as the Southern landholders and merchants yielded to the Northern demands of a plutocracy, at that moment the military dictatorship should be withdrawn and a dictatorship of capital allowed unhampered sway.”<sup>241</sup> On the other hand, what was needed to attain true control over the economic organization of the South was a united, organized, and educated group of workers (black and white) who could put the mass of workers in power. The coming together of black and white labor, however, was stymied by the deep ideological values of racism that penetrated white workers consciousness and the inability of poor white laborers to recognize a class differentiation from the planters. In addition, Du Bois noted the failure of the white labor movement in the North to recognize freed black slaves as part of the labor movement, and the inability of the Abolitionist movement working in the South to recognize the plight of the white laborer in connection to their moral argument against slavery.<sup>242</sup> Du Bois suggested that while the possibility for a real and new democracy existed, racial division would destroy this opportunity. He wrote,

To accomplish this end there should have been in the country and represented in Congress a union between the champions of universal suffrage and the rights of the freedmen, together with the leaders of labor, the small landholders of the West, and logically, the poor whites of the South... This union of democratic forces never took place. On the contrary, they were torn apart by artificial lines of division.<sup>243</sup>

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<sup>241</sup> *Black Reconstruction in America*, 345–346.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*, 20–22.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*



The inability of the laboring class to develop what Gramsci termed a historic bloc is what Du Bois argued rendered the class helpless against the growing forces of Northern industry that would result in the death of democracy and the rise of a capitalist plutocracy. Upon gaining power through what Du Bois called a “counter-revolution of property,” a new capitalism and a new enslavement of labor would ensure the end of Reconstruction. The greed of Northern capitalists, alongside the resentment of white planters and the fear of poor whites would lead the post-Reconstruction period down a path toward a “new and vaster slavery” and a violent philosophy of race. Du Bois argument in *Black Reconstruction in America* suggests that it was the triumph of the dictatorship of capital that led to the defeat of Reconstruction. And the defeat of Reconstruction would result in an intentional silencing of the historical accomplishments that were achieved when “black folk attempted to reconstruct democracy in America.”

#### Challenging the Great American Assumption

For the purposes of a liberationist Christian social ethics, challenging an American consciousness that is steeped in the construction of racism and white supremacy is an essential step towards establishing true equality and the moral rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. To confront the direct subjugation and the structural establishment of laws that reinforce racial stratification as a mechanism of social control in the United States, a liberationist ethics must uncover how the ideological formation of racism and white supremacy is connected to the development and justification of what Du Bois called, “the most conscienceless, unmoral system of industry which the world has experienced.”<sup>244</sup>

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<sup>244</sup> Ibid, 182.

In his critique of the autocracy of Northern capital in *Black Reconstruction in America*, Du Bois argued that a system, based on private profit and the accumulation of wealth and power, was propagated by the myth that, “wealth is mainly the result of its owner’s effort and that any average worker can by thrift become a capitalist.”<sup>245</sup> This ideological construction upon which the post-Civil War economy would be established, and which shaped many Americans’ responses to the 2008 economic crisis, was what Du Bois named the great *American Assumption*. It was upon this philosophy that the theory of “compensated democracy” (freedom of economic opportunity not a guarantee of equal rights) was built. The incident that some from the ranks of the white laboring class were able to obtain land and capital through “intelligence, hard work, and good fortune” was used to affirm the American Assumption and created allies for the capitalist class. Du Bois further suggested that the American labor movement was founded on this assumption and saw, “America as a refuge from oppression and free for individual development according to conscience and ability.”<sup>246</sup>

The reality, as Du Bois depicted it, was that the developing industry would use the American Assumption to protect its own interests and to maintain control over the masses. The universal truth of the American Assumption, according to Du Bois, would become a direct contradiction to the possibility of economic emancipation and the achievement of true democracy. Du Bois queried,

What were to be the limits of democratic control in the United States? If all labor, black as well as white, became free, were given schools and the right to vote, what control could or should be set to the power and action of these laborers? Was the rule of the mass of Americans to be unlimited, and the right to rule

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<sup>245</sup> Ibid,183.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid.

extended to all men, regardless of race and color, or if not, what power of dictatorship would rule, and how would property and privilege be protected?<sup>247</sup>

Returning to Gramsci's theory of hegemony, Du Bois analysis illustrates the relationship of coercion and consent that was used to defeat Reconstruction. Examining this history, Du Bois demonstrated how the pervasive physical violence used to reestablish white authority in the South and to repeal the democratic achievements made during Reconstruction (coercion), was matched with an ideological strategy to reinforce the unsubstantiated superiority of the white race and the supreme value of rugged individualism preserved in the great American Assumption (consent). Historian Allison Powers, in her examination of *Black Reconstruction in America*, highlights the critical relationship that Du Bois identified between the construction of racial consciousness and the mystification of class struggle in American popular consciousness. She notes that,

He [Du Bois] argues that this fiction [the failure of Reconstruction] is sustained through a paradoxical pairing of two separate and contradictory fictions: on the one hand, 'that bizarre doctrine of race that makes most men inferior to the few' (725) and, on the other, the 'Great American Assumption' that 'wealth is mainly the result of its owner's efforts and that any average worker can by thrift become a capitalist (183).<sup>248</sup>

Powers argues that Du Bois's desire to understand this great assumption was related to his growing recognition by the 1930s that the legal mechanisms of constitutional emancipation had not prevented the resubjugation of African Americans post-Reconstruction nor the co-option of the American juridico-political system by a new U.S. imperialism.<sup>249</sup>

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<sup>247</sup> Ibid, 184.

<sup>248</sup> Allison Powers, "Tragedy Made Flesh: Constitutional Lawlessness in Du Bois's Black Reconstruction," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 34:1 (2014), 110.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid, 111.

Believing that the crises of World War I and the Great Depression had revealed the deep weaknesses in the global capitalist economic system that had seized power post-Reconstruction, Du Bois's task in *Black Reconstruction in America* was to dismantle the myths of white supremacy and of the American Assumption. Powers notes, "Assessing the state of American and global politics in the 1930s, Du Bois suggests that ascertaining the true nature of the history of Reconstruction might hold the potential to revive a democracy that the constellation of processes he terms the 'Counter-Revolution of Property' foreclosed."<sup>250</sup> If the masses could come to recognize and understand the falsity of the American Assumption revealed amidst "grotesque Profits and Poverty, Plenty and Starvation, Empire and Democracy," the possibility existed for building a true democracy on the principles of Reconstruction— "Land, Light, and Leading for slaves black, brown, yellow, and white, under the dictatorship of the proletariat."<sup>251</sup>

#### Reconnecting Race and Class in U.S. Consciousness

The criminalization, marginalization, racialization, and feminization of poverty continue to limit the American imagination from recognizing both the structural creation of inequality and an alternative possibility of true democracy in the twenty-first century. These pathological conceptions of poverty, foundational to our interpretation of race and class in the United States, continue to perpetuate racial and social animosity and help mask the underlying political and economic power of the ruling elites. As the global crises of World War I and the Great Depression revealed the paradox of "Profits and Poverty, Plenty and Starvation, Empire and Democracy," for Du Bois, the 2008 global economic crisis has the potential to again reveal the consequential discrepancies between

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<sup>250</sup> Ibid.

<sup>251</sup> *Black Reconstruction in America*, 635.

the global capitalist system and the myth of the American Assumption. Du Bois's deconstruction of social myths and reconstitution of a distorted history in *Black Reconstruction in America* were his attempt to "look back" in order to "look forward." Powers explains that, "Although Du Bois recognizes that theories of race emerged out of the political economy of Atlantic slavery, he insists that the persistence of such doctrines was not inevitable or irrevocable."<sup>252</sup> She goes on to suggest that Du Bois's research and analysis in *Black Reconstruction in America* are an attempt to historically explain and denaturalize the race doctrine that dominates American ideology.

Du Bois believed that in order to change the status quo, one must first understand why things were the way they were. By illuminating the agency of "black workers" and those who aligned with them to fight for an end of slavery and the establishment of Reconstruction, Du Bois was attempting to counter the social amnesia that prevents a systematic social analysis of power, wealth, and social control in U.S. society. The ability to articulate the relationship between class struggle and race relations and to argue that United States could not achieve full democracy without addressing the manipulation of race and class against the masses in U.S. society, was at the center of Du Bois's mission in *Black Reconstruction in America*.

Du Bois's work provides us with definitive tools for refuting the assumptions and stereotypes that continue to mask the realities behind white supremacy and the American Assumption in the United States. By retelling the story of Reconstruction, he reveals the construction of economic, political, and social power in the United States. Full equality and true democracy are not impossibilities. However, the account offered in *Black Reconstruction in America* illustrates how these rights will not simply be given to the

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<sup>252</sup> Powers, 111.

people and in fact, they are rights intentionally withheld from large segments of the population to reinforce social division. While moments of crisis provide an opportunity for a deeper social unity among the dispossessed class than was previously possible, Du Bois's analysis of the Reconstruction period pushes us to be mindful of the ideological challenges that remain in bringing the poor together. His historical method traces the construction of white supremacy and its use by industrial capitalism to maintain social control through political, social, economic, and cultural institutions. Du Bois demonstrates how a reconstitution of history, in the telling of stories that have often been left out of the dominant narrative, is essential to forming a new ethical consciousness that can counter the paradoxical myths of white supremacy and the American Assumption.

**Conclusion: Organic Intellectuals, the Dictatorship of the Proletariat, and the Epistemological Privilege of the Poor**

*The poor are not morally or spiritually superior to others, but [what is meant by a preferential option for the poor is that] they do see reality from a different angle or location – and therefore differently.<sup>253</sup>*

— José Míguez Bonino - *Toward a Christian Political Ethics*

*Everyone is a philosopher, though in his own way and unconsciously, since even in the slightest manifestation of any intellectual activity whatever, in 'language', there is contained a specific conception of the world, one then moves on to the second level, which is that of awareness and criticism.<sup>254</sup>*

— Antonio Gramsci, "The Study of Philosophy"

The history of revolutionary struggle, the successes and failures of movements to achieve lasting structural change, are stories often far removed from American popular consciousness. The triumphant narratives of U.S. free market capitalism mask the

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<sup>253</sup> Bonino, *Toward a Christian Political Ethics*, 43.

<sup>254</sup> Gramsci, "The Study of Philosophy," in *Selection from the Prison Notebooks*, 323.

fundamental weakness of a system that continues to dehumanize, exploit, and impoverish a growing majority of people in the United States and around the globe. These dominant myths serve to conceal class struggle and racial consciousness and when absorbed within Christian institutions, mask the prophetic Christian tradition that has always fought on the side of the oppressed. These incomplete and misrepresented histories create false moral understandings of the agency and worth of poor people whose lived experiences, if revealed, would illuminate the failure of the capitalist system. The work of Antonio Gramsci and W.E.B. Du Bois provide a liberationist Christian social ethics with concrete tools for developing a new ethical narrative that is capable of critiquing the supposed infallibility of a free-market capitalist system and illuminating the immorality of the structural violence of poverty.

Gramsci's and Du Bois's work in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* and *Black Reconstruction in America* reveal ways in which the ideas and assumptions of those in power have shaped our moral consciousness about race and class in the United States. However, their methods of deconstruction and reconstruction illustrate how, through a process of conscientization those who have experienced dispossession and exploitation can begin to recognize and reveal the deficiency of a system that produces massive wealth and prosperity for a few, while creating great suffering and misery for many. A Christian social ethics rooted in a liberationist method sees conscientization as an essential step toward organizing among the poor as a social force that can lead the whole of society in transforming these unjust structures.<sup>255</sup> It takes on the problem of poverty

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<sup>255</sup> It is important to emphasize that both Gramsci and Du Bois recognized that social transformation could not be won nor maintained by the poor and working class alone, but that the poor and working class must become a leading social force in a broad based multi-class movement – what Gramsci called a historic bloc.

and inequality not as an ontological concern for theological inquiry, but as a conflictual reality of the economic, social, and political process.<sup>256</sup> Recognizing that our understanding of the problem and our place in society will shape our response, the epistemological privilege of the poor challenges dominant models of representative leadership that intentionally and unintentionally work to preserve the power structures as they currently exist. It is the process of conscientization that initiates one's ability to move from a reality of resistance among the poor to a strategy of social movement building.

A liberationist Christian social ethics can apply the tools of historical and social analysis offered by Gramsci and Du Bois to the examination of the material conditions that have continued, for many, to deteriorate since the Great Recession. In recognizing the relationship that exists between economic and moral values, a new ethical narrative can build on the ability of people's lived experiences, through the development of critical consciousness, to disrupt the dominant assumptions about why things are the way they are. Grounding this narrative in the struggles and leadership of the poor, the next chapter will explore the potential spaces that can be created through Poverty Truth Commissions to disrupt dominant social narratives that mask the structural violence of poverty and to construct a new collective consciousness that is needed to challenge negative stereotypes, uproot the causes of mass inequality, and confront the historical assumptions that sustain social division.

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<sup>256</sup> Gutiérrez, 24.



## Chapter 5

### **A Commitment to Change: Moving from a Preferential Option for the Poor toward the Right to Not Be Poor and the Use of Poverty Truth Commissions**

*A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. On the one hand we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life's roadside, but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring. A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth.<sup>257</sup>*

— Martin Luther King Jr., “A Time to Break the Silence”

A Christian liberationist commitment to restructuring the edifice that maintains “the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth” as Martin Luther King Jr. advocated cannot be confined to an idealistic appeal to the moral consciousness of the public. To achieve a “true revolution of values” that can confront both material and ideological strongholds that preserve dominant social, economic, and political structures and perpetuate inequality and exploitation, Christian moral consciousness must be manifested through Christian praxis. As a systematic combination of reflection and action, a liberationist Christian praxis roots itself in the material conditions and engages in historical and social analysis.

This dissertation has employed a liberationist method for a twenty-first century context, working to develop a critical understanding of the 2008 economic crisis and the contradictions and suffering that the crisis continues to reveal. Recognizing that these conditions, as experienced in people's daily lives, did not spark coordinated forms of mass resistance, I have emphasized the importance of the liberationist principle of

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<sup>257</sup> King, “A Time to Break Silence,” *Testament of Hope*, 241–242

conscientization as a process for excavating the deep ideological barriers that promote complacency and social division and prevent us from confronting the structural violence of poverty and white supremacy that exist in American society. The need to create spaces where social and historical analysis can incite concrete practices of social action is the final step in the liberationist method. It demands that American Christians choose a side and work as and with the poor and dispossessed to change the structures that perpetuate injustice.

Gutiérrez, reflecting on the revolutionary moment out of which liberation theology emerged, suggests that such moments must be understood as transitional situations during which, “this thrust toward the future occurs *above all* when one participates in the building up of a just society, qualitatively different from the one which exists today.”<sup>258</sup> Acknowledging that consensus around what it means to build a just society does not yet exist and will not spontaneously emerge, a liberationist Christian social ethics recognizes the need to create spaces where people can challenge the hypocrisy of poverty in the midst of plenty and can begin to re-imagine the guiding principles that shape our vision for a new society. The criminalization, marginalization, racialization, and feminization of poverty, as understood within American popular consciousness, are built on misconceptions that marginalize people’s experience of poverty and paralyze them from responding to unjust social conditions. As was addressed in chapter four, the ideological processes that have masked the reality of class struggle and the manipulative use of white supremacy have created false moral understandings of poor people’s worth as a means to legitimize economic practices and policies of inequality. Popular consciousness around wealth and poverty further stigmatizes and

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<sup>258</sup> Gutiérrez, 122.

silences the poor, failing to recognize the role that the poor and dispossessed must play in the process to restore and realize justice in U.S. society.<sup>259</sup>

The dominant narrative about economic progress defines poverty as an unfortunate exception in an otherwise productive system and often characterizes the poor and dispossessed as undeserving recipients of government handouts and charity. This is reaffirmed by traditional interpretations of biblical texts and Christian doctrine. Indeed, it should not come as a surprise that the Bible Belt in the U.S. South is also the area with the most contiguous concentration of poverty, impacting people of all races/ethnicities. A commitment to change within the liberationist method illuminates how asserting the agency of the poor and dispossessed as a social force is a necessary step towards dismantling the myths that perpetuate inequality and promote social division. As I suggested earlier, this collective agency is not inherent, but rather must be developed and claimed. If, theologically, liberation theology maintains a preferential option for the poor in the midst of a twenty-first century economic crisis, a liberationist Christian social ethics that has analyzed the causes and outcomes of the 2008 economic crisis must insist on building a new economic narrative that calls for the right of all people to not be poor in a society that has the means to end poverty. This ethics insists that Christianity must be concerned with social analysis, critical consciousness, and moral action for justice and equality to be pursued in the here and now. Salvation, from this theological perspective, is about liberation. It is about building a qualitatively different society from the one that

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<sup>259</sup> Miguel De La Torre offers an important caveat to discussions on restoration and reconciliation. He recognizes that society must question how it can restore harmony that has never existed or been experienced. If this is indeed the case, restoration and reconciliation must be understood “as a process of arriving at a new state of being, one perhaps that neither party has ever experienced ... And this new state of being through reconciliation can be called salvation.” *Liberating Johan: Forming an Ethics of Reconciliation*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007), 3.

currently exists. It is not limited to creating better means to respond to the needs of the poor as they exist within the current structures, but as King stated, changing the structures that produce poverty so that all may have life and have life abundantly (John 10:10).

American Christians can no longer support a dominant narrative that claims the inherent goodness of free market capitalism and deems the persistence of poverty as an aberration in the grand narrative of American progress.<sup>260</sup> They can no longer profess a Christian narrative that suggests poverty is the result of individual sin and validate such claims by taking Bible quotes about individual behaviors out of context and ignoring the larger biblical arc of justice. Illuminating the institutional violence and structural sin of poverty reveals that the United States has the resources to end poverty in the twenty-first century. A Christian ethics engaged in a broader movement for human rights, therefore, insists on the right to not be poor and rejects a complacency that refuses to challenge the current economic order.<sup>261</sup> Attempting to disband the fusion of Christianity and capitalism in American society, the ethical right to not be poor builds on the prophetic witness that the poor—who represent a plurality of religious belief and non-belief—are waging. Reclaiming liberationist conceptions of poverty offers American Christians new ways to think about, talk about, and mobilize against poverty:

For the prophets... poverty was never a neutral thing. When they spoke about it, it was in order to protest against the oppression and injustice of the rich and powerful. Poverty is not a hazard of fortune or a fact of nature but the result of certain people's greed and injustice. It is intolerable because it contradicts the very purpose of God's mighty act of deliverance—to rescue [God's] people from the slavery of Egypt. It robs man of his humanity as a steward and transformer of

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<sup>260</sup> Townes, 125.

<sup>261</sup> Liberationist Christian social ethics must strategically support a human rights ethics that acknowledges the plurality of religious belief and non-belief in local communities while nurturing its distinctive Christian motivation for mobilizing that support.

the world and therefore it contradicts the mandate of creation. Finally, it breaks human solidarity, and consequently it destroys fellowship among [human beings] with God. Poverty, in this sense, is a scandalous fact which must be eliminated. God himself is engaged in the struggle against it; [God] is clearly and unequivocally on the side of the poor.<sup>262</sup>

In choosing to stand on the side of the oppressed, a liberationist Christian social ethics can begin to lay bare the long held theological and socio-cultural assumptions about who are the poor and confront the disparity of wealth and poverty in the United States. But such work cannot be done in abstraction from the lived experiences of the ever-expanding population of the poor. Christian liberationist praxis illuminates the scandal of poverty in a time of great abundance by engaging the concrete realities of the poor and dispossessed. It seeks to develop a collective commitment to live out the Christian values of liberation—through the creation of a new social order (building up the Kingdom of God) based on solidarity and creativity over and against the individualism and greed of the present system.<sup>263</sup>

The Christian social ethics I formulate has deep roots in Latin American liberation theology, but also builds on the U.S. liberationist traditions that have challenged the complex intersections of race and class and applies these lessons to the U.S. context today. It claims that the history of Christianity is a history of poor people uniting and organizing across all lines of division to right the wrongs of society. It follows in the tradition of liberation theologians and practitioners by insisting that all life is sacred and that movements of the poor and oppressed for justice are holy and consecrated by God.

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<sup>262</sup> Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation*, 112.

<sup>263</sup> I want to emphasize that a new social order needed to respond to the disparity of wealth and poverty in the United States is not and cannot be understood as an exclusively Christian social order. The poor and dispossessed come from diverse religious/non-religious and cultural backgrounds. A new social order must build on the diversity that exists across U.S. society and recognize the vision and gifts offered through this multicultural reality. Christians, in turn, must play a role in building a new society by coming together and working as part of a broad social movement committed to ending poverty and inequality.

This liberationist Christian social ethics finds lessons from the Bible and Christian tradition that puts a premium on leadership development and conscientization and insists that disciples of Jesus and evangelists of the gospel need opportunities and spaces where they can come together with a broader social movement to critique the status quo, develop shared analysis, and plan strategic action steps for change.

This final chapter concludes, therefore, by examining the model of the Poverty Truth Commission (PTC) in relationship to a Christian praxis of liberation. I should note that the PTC is not a Christian model. It is a transformative justice model that seeks to bring together communities that have long been divided and connect those communities through the broad work of social movement building. I engage the PTC model to explore one concrete tool that can be used—in dialogue with a liberationist Christian social ethics—to disrupt the dominant social narratives that divide the poor and dispossessed and work to justify a system that continues to produce poverty amongst mass abundance. In an attempt to think about the liberationist goal of restoring right relationship with God and with one another, I offer a brief overview and assessment of the truth and reconciliation model to highlight core principles and practices of a restorative justice paradigm that has been used to address the history of human rights abuses and the inadequacies of existing power structures in transitional societies.<sup>264</sup> I then focus on the particular development of poverty truth commissions in the U.S context and how they can move American Christians out of complacency by naming the structural sin of poverty and reclaiming values of solidarity with and as the poor. My examination of the PTC will

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<sup>264</sup> Michael Hadley defines restorative justice as, “a process whereby all the parties with a stake in a particular offense come together to resolve collectively how to deal with the aftermath of the offense and its implications for the future.” *The Spiritual Roots of Restorative Justice* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001), 9.

illuminate the catalytic role and moral witness that those most affected by the structural violence of poverty have played in establishing truth commissions in the United States. Turning to the community-based model of U.S. poverty truth commissions, I will explore how the reality of *who* establishes the commission shapes the goals, outcomes, and possibilities for social transformation through the PTC process. In conclusion, I will illuminate how the moral right to not be poor, as established through the PTC, enables Christian leaders to create an alternative vision to the dominant Christian narratives that support the morality of the modern capitalist economic system and overlook the structural sin of growing inequality. Embracing the need to illuminate the structural violence of poverty and to build strategic unity across broad segments of society that are currently divided, a Christian counter-narrative calls American Christians to join together with a broad social movement to construct a new moral consciousness that names the scandal of poverty that has been masked by the American Assumption and stands with the poor and dispossessed to eliminate it.

### **Restoring Right Relationship: Theorizing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Model**

A Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) is a justice model designed to analyze the systemic context of historical offenses, to investigate human rights violations, and to identify patterns and causes of violence. Emerging as a tool for transitional justice in the 1980s, truth commissions have continued to capture the political imagination of countries around the world as a mechanism that can address the realities of mass atrocities, political violence, and systematic injustice.<sup>265</sup> Onur Bakiner, in his study of

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<sup>265</sup> Truth commissions have been implemented as a tool of transitional justice in countries

memory, power and legitimacy in the truth commission process, suggests that, “Most, if not all, commissions attribute to themselves the duty to rebuild the nation and the nation state in light of a new ethics of political conduct.”<sup>266</sup> While this model has taken varying forms based on the particular context in which it is established, broadly speaking, the TRC represents a need and desire for social and political transformation following a period of national crisis.<sup>267</sup> The contemporary need to develop a social process that can respond to the inadequacies of current economic and political systems and to reconstruct society based on a collective vision for transformation, moves me toward an examination of the TRC model.

As addressed in chapter four, my exploration of the TRC model acknowledges that neither a shared analysis around the causes of poverty nor a shared vision of how

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emerging from years of deep social conflict like Chili, Uganda, the Philippines, and Rwanda. Transitional justice, “refers to those transitional processes through which radical transformations of a given social and political order are carried out. In these processes, the need of equilibrating the contradictory demands of peace and justice is present.” Rodrigo Uprimmy and Maria Paula Saffon. “Transitional Justice, Restorative Justice and Reconciliation: Some Insights from the Colombian Case,” *‘Coming to Terms’ with Reconciliation: Critical Perspectives on the Practice, Politics, and Ethics of Reconciliation*, 2005, [http://global.wisc.edu/reconciliation/library/papers\\_open/saffon.html](http://global.wisc.edu/reconciliation/library/papers_open/saffon.html). Transitional justice can further be understood as an approach to justice that is employed by societies (that have experienced massive human rights abuses and civil war) transitioning from conflict/state repression to a democratic system of rule. See Priscilla B. Hayner, *Unspeakable Truths: Transitional Justice and the Challenge of Truth Commissions* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>266</sup> Onur Bakiner, “Coming to Terms with the Past Power, Memory and Legitimacy in Truth Commissions,” (dissertation, Yale University, 2011), 18.

<sup>267</sup> Numerous definitions exist for truth commissions and the elements that constitute a truth commission continue to be debated. Priscilla B. Hayner, “Truth Commissions: a Schematic Overview,” *International Review of the Red Cross* 88, no. 862 (2006): 295–310, defines truth commissions as “officially sanctioned temporary bodies that produce a report focusing exclusively on past atrocities and investigating patterns of abuse.” Mark Freeman suggests that “A truth commission is an ad hoc, autonomous and victim-centered commission of inquiry set up in and authorized by a state for the primary purposes of (1) investigating and reporting on the principal causes and consequences of broad and relatively recent patterns of severe violence or repression that occurred in the state during determinate periods of abusive rule or conflict, and (2) making recommendations for their redress and future prevention.” *Truth Commissions and Procedural Fairness* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 18. Bakiner defines Truth Commissions as, “a temporary body established by an official mandate to investigate past human rights violations, identify the patterns and causes of violence, and publish a final report through a politically autonomous procedure,” 26.



people in the United States can address the problems that have been exacerbated since the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis exist. Furthermore, the growing inequality of wealth and poverty and its intersection with the injustices of racism, sexism, militarism, and ecological degradation, result in a highly divisive environment that produces complex obstacles to those working for social change. Here is where truth commissions offer an example of how to move out of this divisive context towards productive and collective understanding and action. José Zalaquett, a professor of ethics and human rights at the University of Chile, explains that, “Truth commissions help to create a consensus concerning events about which the community is deeply divided... The purpose of truth is to lay the groundwork for a shared understanding of the recent crisis and how to overcome it.”<sup>268</sup> The commitment of the TRC model to developing a shared understanding of the physical and structural violence that has taken place in a given society becomes, therefore, a relevant tool to explore as I attempt to construct a new ethical narrative that can respond to structural violence of poverty and illuminate the mechanisms of social control that have been employed to preserve the status quo in the twenty-first century U.S. context. The TRC process provides a space to apply Du Bois’s method of reconstituting and establishing Truth by uncovering the ways history and ideology have been intentionally shaped by those in power. Through the TRC process, a space is created to reassess Christian ideals (God given rights), to interrogate the way current structures have failed to ensure those ideals and to establish means through which those ideals can be put into force as human rights.

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<sup>268</sup> Greg Grandin and Thomas Miller Klubock, eds. “Truth Commissions: State Terror, History, and Memory,” *Radical History Review* 97 (Winter 2007), 3.

Significant research is being done to critically assess the social and political implications of Truth Commissions within the realm of transitional justice and particularly in the world of international conflict resolution. This dissertation does not seek to provide a critical investigation of this broad body of scholarship.<sup>269</sup> Instead, I am interested in practical lessons that the TRC model can offer for developing a broad analytical view of historical injustice, an assessment of its impact on contemporary society, and recommendations for how society can initiate a process of social transformation. I seek to explore what role truth commissions can play in reshaping social memory and developing a new moral consciousness that can lead to strategic action and national reconstruction. By exploring the use of truth commissions to challenge dominant narratives that distort injustice that has taken place in a given society, I will place an analysis of the truth commission process in conversation with a Christian liberationist principle of the epistemological privilege of the poor. It is through people's lived reality and their concrete experience of structural sin that the possibility of and obstacles to liberation are revealed. Through a public process of truth telling and connecting the untold stories that the prevailing ideologies and legal structures have long silenced, a new social accountability is demanded. In the telling of untold stories, the TRC demonstrates how the moral norms used to justify the status quo are incompatible with God's vision of

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<sup>269</sup> For additional sources that critically explore social and political implications of Truth Commissions as a model for transitional justice see: Eric Brahm, "Uncovering the Truth: Examining Truth Commission Success and Impact," *International Studies Perspectives* 8, no.1 (2007): 16–35; Erin Daly, "Truth Skepticism: An Inquiry into the Value of Truth in Times of Transition," *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 2, no. 1 (2008): 23–41; Priscilla B. Hayner, "Fifteen Truth Commissions—1974 to 1994: A Comparative Study," *Human Rights Quarterly*, 16, no. 4 (1994): 597–655; Hayner, *Unspeakable Truths: Confronting State Terror and Atrocity*, (New York: Routledge, 2001); Marcia Esparaza, "Impossible Memory and Post-Colonial Silences: A Critical View of the Historical Clarification Commission (CEH in Spanish) in Guatemala," in *Indigenous People's Access to Justice, Including Truth and Reconciliation Processes*, eds. Chief Wilton Littlechild and Elsa Stamatopoulos, 170–81, (New York: Columbia University Press / Institute for the Study of Human Rights, 2014).

love and justice. Promoting a new evangelization, the TRC establishes a newfound commitment to change by first exposing the fundamental contradictions of the existing system.<sup>270</sup>

### Repairing the Breach: Exploring Core Elements from the TRC Model

*Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.*

— *Isaiah 58:12*, New International Version

*Unlike a court, the Commission does not aim at a conclusion so much as a process. This process was designed not for the purposes of recrimination but instead aimed at confronting the injuries and injustices of the past and coming to terms with them. It is in this light that a picture emerges of a new kind of institution which has achieved what a court could never achieve.*<sup>271</sup>

— Richard Penwill, an advocate of the South African TRC

While the TRC model is always shaped by the particular context in which it is set, there are several basic elements that repeatedly appear in TRC processes and that I highlight in attempting to develop one concrete organizing tool that can be used within a Christian liberationist praxis: 1) they are committed to the task of truth telling in a process of reconciliation, 2) they are charged with an ethical accountability to go beyond mere “fact finding” to uncover a broader account of past abuses, 3) they are organized in relation to national or international human rights laws, and 4) they are used to put forth particular recommendations that help guide a divided society toward engaging in a

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<sup>270</sup> New evangelization was a term first used by John Paul II and further developed by Leonardo Boff in his book, *New Evangelization: Good News to the Poor*. For Boff, new evangelization requires a distinct break with traditional models and methods of evangelization of Latin American colonialism. New evangelization is about transforming the social reality of suffering and turning unjust social relations into relationships that produce justice and participation. It is about the transformation of the old life into the new. *New Evangelization* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), xiii.

<sup>271</sup> Alex Boraine, *A Country Unmasked* (Capetown, South Africa: Oxford University Press South Africa, 2000), 344.

process of social transformation. Through my assessment of the TRC model, I lay out the traditional use of these core elements within the international TRC model while also theorizing the moral implications this model can have if adopted within a Christian praxis of liberation.

### 1) The Responsibility of Truth Telling and the Possibility of Reconciliation

A defining element that grounds the use of the TRC model in conflict-laden societies is the charge to: “[promote] reconciliation and [reveal] the truth of the past.”<sup>272</sup> Emerging from the ruins of communities that have been torn apart by violence and conflict, the TRC model highlights the use of truth telling as a means for documenting mass violence and human rights abuses. As Du Bois’s work suggested, dominant histories that obscure the realities of exclusion, exploitation, and subjugation prevent a society from moving towards social transformation. The TRC model, therefore, uses public truth telling as a process for those whose voices have been silenced to expose the violations that have been enacted and to illuminate why and how such abuses occurred.

A liberationist intervention within this model broadens traditional definitions of violence to expose poverty and racism as extreme forms of structural violence that result in human rights violations. Through a collection of stories that moves testimonies from individual experiences to the development of shared analysis, the TRC works to build a common understanding of violence (physical and structural) that has taken place and to establish a personal and social accountability for the abuses committed. It is only upon publicly revealing these violations and demanding the culpability of individuals and

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<sup>272</sup> Alejandro Castillejo-Cuéllar, “Knowledge, Experience, and South Africa’s Scenarios of Forgiveness,” in *Radical History Review: Truth Commissions: State Terror, History, and Memory*, eds. Greg Gradin and Thomas Miller Klubock (Winter 2007): 12.

existing power structures (establishing the relationship that exists between personal and structural sin) that the possibility for reconciliation and transitional justice can be established. A liberationist interpretation further emphasizes that reconciliation cannot exist without the restoration of right relationships. Reconciliation, within a liberationist framework, is not about restoring harmony that has never existed in a society. Rather, as De La Torre reminds us, reconciliation is about bringing about a new state of being—bringing forth God’s salvation here and now.<sup>273</sup> The fundamental structures that produce human rights violations must be changed if God’s vision of justice is to be achieved.

## 2) An Ethical Charge to Re-construct Collective Memory

The TRC process should not be understood as a forensic “fact finding” mission, but rather a deep recognition that human rights abuses have been intentionally hidden and justified by ideological and historical mechanisms at work to preserve the status quo. Priscilla Hayner explains that commissions are established with an intention that, “[In] leaving an honest account of the violence prevents history from being lost or re-written, and allows a society to learn from its past in order to prevent a repetition of such violence in the future.”<sup>274</sup> When a truth commission process is established, there ought to exist a shared desire to transform a given society. However, there must also be an agreement that in order to move toward a process of reconciliation and social transformation, the human rights abuses that have been perpetrated must first be acknowledged and interrogated. This requires more than the production of a list of past abuses. Taking on the ethical challenge of truth telling, the TRC establishes a commitment to uncovering stories that have long been silenced, manipulated, and overlooked. It enables a society to confront the

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<sup>273</sup> De La Torre, *Liberating Jonah*, 4.

<sup>274</sup> Priscilla B. Hayner, “Fifteen Truth Commissions – 1974 to 1994: A Comparative Study,” 607.

way dominant moral norms are, as Gramsci suggested, codified by laws, social and cultural institutions, and traditions.

In bringing to light the untold stories, the TRC provides a platform to deconstruct historical and ideological narratives that have shaped popular perspectives on race, class, and inequality to maintain oppressive structures of power. It recognizes the need to develop a new collective consciousness that privileges people's lived experiences and reveals the intersections of racism, sexism and poverty in the lives of the poor and dispossessed. In turn, a liberationist Christian praxis of truth telling further highlights the agency of those offering testimony through the TRC process. It challenges the community to see testifiers not as passive victims, but as active participants in building up a new just social order.

### 3) Using a Human Rights Framework

In a society where human rights abuses have taken place and people have been systematically oppressed and exploited, the existing judicial institutions and legal systems cannot provide an adequate place to fully address such violations. The TRC instead turns to national and international human rights laws to establish a foundation upon which research and investigations of human rights abuses that have taken place within a particular context can occur.<sup>275</sup> Appealing to a human rights framework established by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and subsequent human rights covenants, human rights offer a particular legitimacy and moral authority to the investigation process that is being undertaken by the commission. At the center of a human rights framework is the legal, moral, and political imperative to affirm and ensure

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<sup>275</sup> Gradin and Klubock explain that, "While rarely invested with legal authority to indict or to prosecute perpetrators, commissions nonetheless usually conducted their investigations within a framework supplied by national or international human rights law," 2.

the inherent dignity of the human person. This moral legitimacy is one of the most powerful forces for accountability and enforcement of human rights principles and standards. Indeed, for populations who have been isolated and de-legitimized, especially the poor and oppressed of different races/ethnicities, appealing to human rights law is a powerful first step in claiming human rights and building the basis for unity among people across many differences. A liberationist Christian praxis takes this process one step further and applies a moral and theological lens to human rights standards. Emphasizing the inherent worth of the human person, a liberationist praxis draws on a Christian principle of *caritas*. Affirming a genuine care for all God's creation, a Christian praxis takes up the moral imperative put forth by a human rights framework to develop a culture of solidarity and community of collective struggle.

#### 4) Developing Concrete Recommendations

Finally, as a result of the commission, it is often expected that commissioners will put forth recommendations that will help guide the community to move forward in a process of reconciliation and social transition. Building on the truths revealed and the collective analysis formulated during the TRC process, the commission offers recommendations around legislative, structural, or other changes that should be taken to ensure that human rights violations and mass violence do not take place again. The recommendations put forth by the commission are meant to establish accountability for past abuses and develop communal responsibility for future social relations. In developing a process of conscientization, the TRC process seeks to provide a space where community can be formed, not based on abstract ideas, but through shared praxis. This final step suggests that it is not enough to hear the untold stories, but to truly provide

moral witness, the TRC process must establish strategies and concrete plans towards building a just society that as Gutiérrez suggests is qualitatively different from the one that exists today.

A Critical Look at the TRC Model: Prioritizing the Agency of the Dispossessed

Truth commissions have utilized the core elements of the TRC model across the world to establish a process for transitional justice. What this brief overview of the TRC model does not reveal, however, is how truth commissions are established and who is responsible for shaping the goals, structure, and in turn outcomes of the TRC process. It is here that scholars who have assessed the success of the TRC model have been particularly critical. National legislators, governmental bodies, and international arbiters have traditionally established international TRCs with the goal of building social unity and ushering in neoliberal democracy.<sup>276</sup> The goal of national unification has often been given precedence over the abuses suffered by the victims of violence and repression.

For this reason, the role of those most impacted by the violence and oppression under investigation through the TRC process is an essential element of the model that must be addressed by a liberationist Christian social ethics. Peter Storey, a South African Methodist minister involved in South African Truth Commission process, has suggested that the significance of the TRC in South Africa did not lie in the official documentation of human rights violations that were produced by the commission's final report, but resided in what happened to people through the process of truth telling.<sup>277</sup> In attempting

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<sup>276</sup> Grandin and Klubock note the weakness of the post-Cold War liberal order that prioritized catharsis and forgiveness over punishment in the TRC process. They highlight the Argentine military's attempted coup and the Chilean Right's veto against the authority of the TRC to prosecute perpetrators as examples of internal tensions that remained in responding to state power in transitional societies, 4-5.

<sup>277</sup> Peter Storey, "Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa," (class lecture, Truth Commission on Conscience and War, March 1, 2010).



to establish a collective process where the complex realities of apartheid could be discerned, Storey emphasized the important role that ongoing engagement in a community process of reconciliation must play. Mary Nolan's critique of the TRC process further illustrates why a longer-term movement based process for social transformation must exist beyond the confines of the TRC process. In her exploration of TRCs that have taken place in El Salvador, Chile, Argentina, as well as South Africa, she turns to the outcomes of such commissions from the perspective of the testifiers and asks, "Did victims gain from telling their stories? Did they want punitive justice or reconciliation? Or were they simply silenced?"<sup>278</sup> Nolan is critical of assessments of the TRC model that highlight the potential for storytelling to transform victims into survivors and promote communication among groups that have been traditionally divided. While Nolan does not reject the potential of storytelling, she argues that insufficient research has been done to explore whether such potentiality was actualized. In reviewing the work of Fiona Ross, Nolan further illuminates the ways the creation of national historical narratives silenced larger histories. In particular, Ross's work demonstrates how national narratives erased the agency, resistance, and activism present in people stories and turned people's accounts into narratives of individual victimization.

Alejandro Castillejo-Cuéllar's analysis of the South African TRC further illuminates the constraints legal categories and conventions can place on the truth commission model. In his article, "Knowledge, Experience, and South Africa's Scenarios of Forgiveness," Castillejo-Cuéllar explores the ways in which the time limitations and

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<sup>278</sup> Mary Nolan, "The Elusive Pursuit of Truth and Justice: A Review Essay," in *Radical History Review: Truth Commissions: State Terror, History, and Memory*, eds. Greg Gradin and Thomas Miller Klubock (Winter 2007): 148.

documentation objectives of the commission placed unintended limitations on the truth telling process. Castillejo-Cuéllar explains that while the first stage of the TRC hearings was dedicated to a victim-centered cathartic truth telling process, a process that acknowledged the long history of abuses that were experienced during apartheid, as the commission continued and the pressures of time and of producing a final report were felt, the methodology of the commission shifted from “truth telling” to “fact finding.” During the second stage of the commission's investigation, the process was driven by a need to systematize the finds of gross human rights violations and to legitimate sources of knowledge through forensic data. A data processor for the TRC in Johannesburg explained that, “When we started it was narrative. We let people tell their story. By the end of 1997, it was a short questionnaire to direct the interview instead of letting people talk about themselves. The questionnaire distorted the whole story altogether, it destroyed the meaning.”<sup>279</sup> The decision to focus on gross human rights violations limited “authoritative” truth to “the violation of human rights through the killing, abduction, torture, or severe ill treatment of any person... which emanated from conflicts of the past... and the commission of which was advised, planned, directed, commanded, or ordered by any person acting with a political motive.”<sup>280</sup> The larger context, history, complexities of betrayed relations and consequences of such violations—including the systematic violence connected to issues of race and economics—were eliminated from the truth telling process as the fact finding mission shifted from public testimony to systematized questionnaires.

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<sup>279</sup> Castillejo-Cuéllar, 20.

<sup>280</sup> Lyn S. Graybill, “South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission: Ethical and Theological Perspectives,” *Ethics and International Affairs* 12 (1998), 45.

The complex mechanisms of social control have been a challenge to capture in the context of the TRC model. Within a transitional justice paradigm, the mandates of TRCs that have taken place across Latin America have often been to compile an “official record” of war atrocities in an attempt to prevent future violence. Marcia Esparza argues that the problem that remains within the collective truth telling processes across Latin America, and in Guatemala in particular, is that stories were told primarily by the victims. She argues that this “leav[es] behind a legacy of collective silences.”<sup>281</sup> While the United National Historical Clarification Commission (CEH in Spanish) was essential for illuminating the mass violence that had been enacted against Indigenous communities across Guatemala—particularly in an attempt to eradicate Maya-led popular movements—Esparza suggests that the CEH did little to reveal the longer history of militarization and colonization of Indigenous communities and the mass-based support the Guatemalan army had built in the countryside. Esparza argues that the exclusion of testimony from rural Indigenous pro-army groups—the Civil Self-Defense Patrols (PAC in Spanish)—prevented Indigenous communities from fully coming to terms with the past and establishing a process of decolonization. In attempting to create a master narrative, the CEH failed to include the voices among the Indigenous community who had collaborated with genocidal policy. Esparza is critical of this oversight and contends that such testimonies are needed to unveil enduring post-colonial relations. Her critique reminds us of Gramsci’s work regarding the relationship of coercion and consent and the need to understand the multilayered reality that maintains hegemonic power.

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<sup>281</sup> Esparza, 121.

A liberationist Christian social ethics engagement of the TRC process must be an approach that moves beyond legalistic practices of justice and acknowledges that existing legal guidelines fail to capture longer and broader systemic experiences of injustice. For this reason, questions that address—on whose terms the truth commission process is established, how the TRC process is organized, and for what purpose the truth commission is called—are essential to establishing a model that can develop social consciousness and lead toward social transformation.<sup>282</sup> Bennett Collins and Alison Watson, in an article exploring the potential use of truth commissions to address racialized violence in the U.S. caution readers against a top-down implementation of the TRC model. They argue that,

It [a truth and reconciliation commission] is a largely subjective and sensitive undertaking that many times has been taken hold of by the government instead of communities themselves. Doing this allows the government to stake its claim in defining ‘truth’ and ‘reconciliation’ for the process, thus simplifying and reducing an intricate task, raising issues such as whether marginalized narratives (especially ones that go contra to dominant narratives) are given the opportunity to become part of the newly understood meaning of ‘truth’ and if the government’s version of ‘reconciliation’ between groups has been applied as a one-size fits all.<sup>283</sup>

Affirming the epistemological privilege of the poor in the TRC process prioritizes the narratives that are pushed to the margins of the dominant historical memory. It affirms the humanity of those who testify and expresses moral values not as abstract problems, but as lived experiences. The leadership of those impacted by oppressive structures and

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<sup>282</sup> While Banikar argues that non-governmental truth commissions are not official TCs because they lack an official government mandate and in turn their findings do not carry the promise of official endorsement, the next section of this chapter will examine the emerging use of truth commissions among non-governmental organizing bodies and the potential they have for developing a transformative justice model.

<sup>283</sup> Bennett Collins and Alison M.S. Watson, “Examining the Potential for an American Truth and Reconciliation Commission,” *Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs*, February, 5, 2015, [http://www.carnegiecouncil.org/publications/ethics\\_online/0102](http://www.carnegiecouncil.org/publications/ethics_online/0102).

policies of local and national governments must be at that forefront of a liberation based TRC process.

The establishment of a community based truth commission as a social movement building tool for developing leaders, breaking isolation, raising political consciousness, and strategizing for collective action is an emerging mechanism being explored by grassroots organizations in the United States. A grassroots, community based model attempts to respond to the limitations that have resulted in top-down applications of the TRC model. Since 1997–1998, a variety of Poverty Truth Commissions (PTC) have taken place in the United States.<sup>284</sup> These commissions have been constituted as an attempt among communities impacted by the growing disparity of wealth and poverty to address the economic human rights abuses that often go unrecognized in this country and to claim their agency in proposing solutions. In a report issued by the Poor People’s Economic Human Rights Campaign (PPEHRC) following a 2006 National Truth Commission on poverty, they stated that,

By holding Truth Commissions we strengthen our movement and we put forward our ideas and our values. We put forward our belief in a cooperative society, a belief in the values of love and concern for each other. When we come together like this we are able to exchange experiences and learn from one another. This venue also allows others an opportunity not only to hear from us on the front line, but also to begin to ask questions about why we need to be here—and to take sides.<sup>285</sup>

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<sup>284</sup> Kensington Welfare Rights Union (March for Our Lives 1997), Poor People’s Economic Human Rights Campaign (New Freedom Bus Tour 1998, National Truth Commission 2006) Poverty Initiative (April 2005, April 2007, October 2007) Graduate Theological Union (2008) Truth Commission for Water Rights, Detroit, MI (2008) Truth Commission: Putting Poverty on Trial, Rochester, NY (2008) Truth Commission on Health, Minneapolis, MN (2008).

<sup>285</sup> The Poor People’s Economic Human Rights Campaign is made up of farmers, immigrants, the deaf and blind, the homeless, welfare recipients, social workers, health care workers, students, low-wage workers and others how have come together to fight to abolish poverty in the United States and around the world. Poor People’s Economic Human Rights Campaign, “National Truth Commission: Shining a Light on Poverty in the U.S.A.,” Preliminary Report, July 15-16, 2006, Cleveland, OH.

In bringing political, religious, and community leaders together to tell, hear, and document stories of economic human rights violations, this mechanism attempts to counter the dominant narrative and ideology about who is poor and why poverty exists in the twenty-first century U.S. context. U.S. community based poverty truth commissions draw on lessons from commissions in Africa and Latin America to create a space where the systemic and preventable violations of economic human rights can be confronted. As a movement building tool, the PTC seeks to highlight the agency, activism, and resistance of those who have experienced and participated in the complex realities of human rights violations, systemic violence, and structural racism. It is through the illumination of the relationship that exists between personal and structural sin that the possibility of liberation is revealed.

### **Shining a Light on Poverty in America: A Community Based Poverty Truth Commission Case Study**

In 2006, a National Truth Commission on Poverty (PTC) was called for by the Poor People’s Economic Human Rights Campaign (PPEHRC)—a national network of poor, homeless, and low-income leaders from across the country—to address the mounting economic human rights violations being perpetrated against every day people.<sup>286</sup> The PTC built on years of experience organizing marches, protests, national bus tours, and regional tribunals where poor rural and urban communities worked together to shine a light on the growing problem of poverty and to think about what could

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<sup>286</sup> In 1998, the Poor People’s Economic Human Rights Campaign (PPEHRC) was launched as a project of the National Welfare Rights Union and was led by poor and homeless families of the Philadelphia-based Kensington Welfare Rights Union (KWRU). PPEHRC became a national network of over one hundred poor people’s organizations working to unite the poor across color lines to build a social movement to end poverty. For additional information on the background of PPEHRC see Kensington Welfare Rights Union, “Poor People’s Human Rights Report on the United States”, October 1999, Philadelphia, PA.

be done to end it.<sup>287</sup> Documenting economic human rights violations, the PTC gave voice to the struggles of America's poor and connected them to a broad, multi-racial movement. Through the combination of education, analysis, and activism, the PTC highlighted the absurdity of growing poverty in a time of unprecedented wealth and worked to empower the expanding population of the poor to demand their economic human rights. In an attempt to confront the isolation of poor communities, there was a particular effort to bring together poor white communities with poor communities of color under Dr. King's vision of building the unity of the poor across racial lines through a Poor People's Campaign. This case study will examine the development of the 2006 National Truth Commission on Poverty to illuminate concrete strategies for reclaiming liberationist Christian values of solidarity, dignity, and an option for the poor. I will explore how a community based truth commission develops a process needed to shift the dominant narrative on poverty and develop a collective ethical commitment needed to confront the structural violence of poverty.

The method of the research for this case study included five interviews with key leaders who helped organize the 2006 Truth Commission. Three interviews were conducted with leaders from the National Steering Committee of the Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign and the University of the Poor and two interviews focused on local Cleveland based leaders from the organizations Organize! Ohio and the Deaf and Deaf Blind Committee on Human Rights. Attention was also given to local news media, press releases, campaign materials, organizational web-based resources, and a preliminary report that was written to present the findings of the 2006 National Truth

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<sup>287</sup> Initial connections for the 2006 PTC in Cleveland, OH were made during KWRU's 1998 "New Free Bus Tour." KWRU leaders traveled to over 35 poor areas across the country collecting and documenting economic human rights violations in the United States.

Commission on Poverty. My own leadership within this network and my work to organize three Poverty Truth Commissions through the Poverty Initiative from 2005–2007 further shaped my research interests, questions, and reflections.

Living Broke in Boom Times: Understanding the Context

The organizing efforts of poor people’s organizations like the Kensington Welfare Rights Union and the PPEHRC preceded the economic crash of 2008. While the U.S. GDP saw a pattern of general growth between the years of 1996 and 2006, communities like Cleveland, OH, once the site of a booming manufacturing industry, had become the poorest big city in the country.<sup>288</sup> In addition to stagnant incomes and increased poverty, the Census Bureau reported that across the United States, over 47 million people were living without health insurance in 2006.<sup>289</sup> While corporations continued to make unprecedented profits from mergers and relocation overseas, the people of Cleveland and other devastated communities were left with low-wage jobs, welfare, and drug-related activities as primary sources of income. A technological revolution and expansion of globalization had reorganized the economy and changed the face of work in the United States. In communities across the country, workers were downsized from factories and corporations where they had worked for 40 years while fewer and fewer jobs that paid a living wage were available and the cost of living continued to rise. At the same time, the 1996 welfare reform act—the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity

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<sup>288</sup> “Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2004,” *Census Bureau*, August 2005, <https://www.census.gov/prod/2005pubs/p60-229.pdf>.

<sup>289</sup> “Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2006,” *Census Bureau*, August 2007, <https://www.census.gov/prod/2007pubs/p60-233.pdf>.



Reconciliation Act of 1996—pushed forward the narrative that the poor were to blame for their poverty even as it further lowered the wages of all American workers.<sup>290</sup>

A call to action that was written during the 2006 National Truth Commission on Poverty noted the pressing conditions facing the American people:

We are in our fourth year of a trying war, the disaster of the Katrina non-recovery keeps rolling along, we watch as more Americans go to bed hungry, seniors are crippled in body and soul for lack of adequate health care, homelessness continues to grow, and poverty increases as good jobs disappear from our communities and bad jobs replace them. The war economy gallops ahead, benefiting the corporate captains of globalization while stealing the future of working people in this nation. The soul of America, a nation that claims to value life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, is at stake. In the twenty-first Century, our nation is an affront to human rights in the same way that it was an affront to civil rights in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. There is an urgent need to build a social movement to challenge that.<sup>291</sup>

It was under these conditions and in this context that the PPEHRC turned to the truth commission model as a mechanism to build a broad base of poor people, employed and unemployed, that could move the masses of American society to take up a collective struggle for the economic human rights of all human beings. PPEHRC took on the slogan, “Disappeared in America: Hiding the Poor” in an attempt to describe the purpose and organization of this grassroots network of poor people’s organizations.

#### A National Truth Commission on Poverty in the United States

*Government abuse is easiest to identify where conduct is arbitrary. What is ‘arbitrary,’ ‘inappropriate’ or ‘unreasonable’ tends to be very fact specific, and often varies according to context and the special needs or circumstances of the persons involved. It is for this reason that those affected most immediately by economic human rights violations must be involved directly in both identifying abuses where they occur and proposing solutions that will prevent similar abuses from occurring in the future.*

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<sup>290</sup> See Martin Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare: Race, Media, and the Politics of Antipoverty Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

<sup>291</sup> PPEHRC, “National Truth Commission,” 109.

— PPEHRC National Truth Commission Preliminary Report

On July 15 to 17, 2006, the Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign, representing more than 100 grassroots and social organizations, convened a Poverty Truth Commission in Cleveland, Ohio, to assess and make visible the situation of economic, social and cultural rights in the United States. Attended by over 500 people, participants included people living in poverty, human rights leaders, union representatives, religious leaders, and artists and musicians. Those organized to testify represented poor people's organizations across the country from Arise for Social Justice in Springfield, MA, to the California Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign in San Jose, CA, to Iraq Veterans Against the War, and Katrina Survivors in New Orleans, LA. Reports were given by poor women and men—black, white, Latino/a, Asian, and indigenous. Testifiers were young and old, employed and unemployed. They were veterans of the Iraq War and mothers who had lost their sons in a war of occupation. They were people who had become homeless and survivors of Hurricane Katrina. They were immigrants whose rights were denied while their labor was exploited. They were people with disabilities, mothers whose children had been taken away by the state for being poor, citizens without access to health care, and representatives from many other sectors of American society. Their testimonies were crafted to challenge long-held stereotypes of poverty and raise the contradiction that existed when 31 million American citizens were living below the poverty line in the richest and most prosperous country in the world. In bringing their stories together, the PTC began to illuminate the complex mechanisms that both produce and mask the problem of poverty in U.S. society.

Some of the testifiers and others gathered for the PTC knew each other and had done bus tours, protests, and coordinated actions together. Others had never participated in a political action before in their life. Many people came to Cleveland with other members of the community organization or ministry they were a part of. A few people came as the sole representative of their community and struggle. Most came with a hope to get the word out about their local struggles. Even more were looking for concrete solutions and remedies on a very local level to the problems they were facing. Many of the testifiers and other participants could articulate the need to connect with other struggling communities; few could suggest concrete strategies that moved beyond a collective aspiration of solidarity. Many expressed feelings of isolation, exhaustion, and could note racial tensions that were building in their hard-pressed hometowns, but less were able to clearly interrogate the myriad ways their communities were being pitted against one another. Some were starting to recognize the impact that divisions along issues, race, geography and age were having on their ability fight back against local power structures; most were skeptical that ending poverty was possible, that they could truly unite across their differences, or that the poor had any real power.

What happened over the few days of the commission was the building of a new community. It was a moment of restoration and a time where the relationships needed to live out a vision of Christian solidarity were forged. It was a community that while still burdened by the obstacles of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and ableism expressed a genuine care for one another's struggle. While deep feelings of anger and internalized ideologies that shame and blame the poor for their poverty remained, participants came to the commission with an honest desire to engage one another and do something together.

Though the stereotypes and prejudices engrained in the American consciousness did not simply melt away, the commission's commitment to meet people where they were at—physically and ideologically—enabled participants to engage the complexity and nuances of poverty through the particular stories of struggle and resistance from all those who testified.

In listening to story after story of people being devastated by the impact of welfare reform and increasing poverty, of people unable to pay exorbitant medical bills or afford their medications, of the hardships of long-term unemployment, and the fear of thousands of families in jeopardy of losing their homes, the participants began to recognize their own struggle in someone else's story. In choosing the testifiers who would be featured during the PTC event, organizers were intentional to select stories that would complicate dominant narratives about poverty in the United States and create a more comprehensive understanding of who were the poor and why they were poor.<sup>292</sup> The organizers of the PTC brought together testimonies of those impacted by long-term poverty with stories from people whose experience of poverty was relatively new, or what some sociologists might define as situational. Union representatives from UNITE-HERE testified alongside undocumented workers from the Coalition of Immokalee Workers about the right to a living wage. Lori Smith from Nashville, Tennessee spoke about being dropped from her health insurance plan after being diagnosed with Lupus and Multiple Sclerosis, while Ron Casanova of Artists for a Better America depicted the life threatening implications a \$3 billion cut in Medicaid would have on over 3 million

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<sup>292</sup> Forty-two testifiers were chosen to share their stories at the Cleveland PTC. Over a hundred more testimonies of economic human rights violations were documented throughout the course of the weekend. Prior to the convening, organizers made strategic considerations of submitted testimonies to ensure that the testimonies represented a broad reality of who constitutes the poor in the United States and the multitude of issues and conditions that cause people's impoverishment.

New Yorkers. Dawn Marie Fucile from Cleveland, Ohio, talked about how her child was taken away from her because she was deaf and poor and Gwendolyn Gaines testified about the impact massive water shut offs were having on families in Detroit. Family farmers from Kansas started to see what they had in common with low-wage workers and public housing recipients in Chicago. Hurricane Katrina survivors broke their isolation and started to make connections to the privatization of the public schools in New Orleans and Philadelphia and to the ecological devastation brought on by the coal industry in West Virginia. Pairing the testimonies of the rural, urban, and suburban poor, unveiling the distinct experiences of impoverishment and the multiple issues that intersect in one's experience of poverty—the PTC attempted to create a broader and more nuanced understanding of poverty than often exists in popular American consciousness.

While the task to illuminate the complex reality of poverty and the interweaving structures and policies that produce poverty in the United States could not fully be achieved through a single PTC event, steps were taken to collectively confront the systemic causes of poverty through the telling of untold stories and bringing together communities that are often isolated from one another. The revolution did not start that July. It was not a single day of reckoning or resolution. But the seeds that could become what the Rev. Dr. King called “a new and unsettling force” were sown. The commission validated the lived experiences of everyday people as sites of revolutionary knowledge. In refusing to remain silent amidst the pain and suffering people across different communities were experiencing, the PTC became a space where God's preferential option for the poor was taken seriously and in demanding their right to not be poor, it was brought into action. Believing that all people have the right to live healthy and fulfilling

lives, the PTC called forth participants' rights to quality education, affordable housing, health care, jobs at living wages, and access to nutritious food and a healthy environment. The *opportunity* to fulfill one's fundamental rights, as suggested by the American Assumption, was not enough. The right to not be poor must be ensured by society's obligation to fulfill people's fundamental needs.

#### Witnessing Liberation: Reflections on the PTC

The testimonies presented at the PTC served to highlight and document the country's failure to advance the elimination of poverty in the United States. It provided a platform for poor and working people from across the country to offer first hand accounts of structural sin, illuminated in the form of economic human rights violations, that they were experiencing every day. The testimony was organized into six broad categories that connected with Articles 23, 25 and 26 of the United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and were presented on panels: 1) the Right to Health Care, 2) the Right to a Living Wage, 3) the Right to Housing, 4) The Right to Water, Utilities, Food, and Other Basic Necessities, 5) The Right to Education, and 6) Unjust Child Removal.<sup>293</sup> The individuals who testified at the National Truth Commission spoke the truth about what was really happening to people in communities across the United States, truths that trends of the national economy did not reveal. The institutional violence and structural sin that was hidden behind the myths and stereotypes that criminalized, feminized, racialized, and demonized the poor were laid bare. In bringing these stories together, the truth commission illuminated how the problems at hand could not be isolated to the personal

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<sup>293</sup> Articles 23, 25, and 26 of the UDHR through the truth commission model to demand that all people be guaranteed the right to a job at a living wage, the right to organize, the right to housing, the right to medical care, and the right to education.

failures or hardships of any one individual. They broke down pathological and situational justifications of poverty and explored the structural causes that connected issues of health and education to challenges of unemployment and homelessness. Each testimony represented hundreds and thousands more people around the country whose livelihood and human dignity were threatened by the inability of people in the United States to confront a system that continued to produce poverty for many while also generating tremendous wealth for a few.

Joining the testifiers was a panel of local, state, national and international leaders who served as commissioners to bear witness to the testimonies of structural violence.<sup>294</sup> Through their process of social witness, commissioners rejected the moral complacency of U.S. society and practiced concrete solidarity as and with the poor. They brought their own experiences and expertise to the table with those who were calling out the injustice of poverty in all its forms in order to develop practical strategies for social change. It was the task of the commission to listen to the testimony, to acknowledge what they heard, to name who is responsible for the human rights violations, and in the months following the hearing, to work with PPEHRC staff and each other to produce reports, press statements, and recommendations in response to the commission.<sup>295</sup>

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<sup>294</sup> Among the commissioners were well know representatives: Dr. Arjun Sengupta, Independent Expert on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights for the High Commission on Human Rights of the United Nations and a member of Indian Parliament; Nora Morales de Cortinas, one of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo from Argentina; Peter Weiss from the Center for Constitutional Rights in New York; Marian Kramer, President of the National Welfare Rights Union; Yves Cabannes, Coordinator of the United Nations Advisory Group on Forced Evictions; Most Reverend Roger W. Gries, Auxiliary Bishop of the Diocese of Cleveland, and Noel Beasley, International Vice President of UNITE HERE. For a full list of testifiers and commissioners, see PPEHRC, “National Truth Commission.”

<sup>295</sup> To organize its work, the Truth Commission focused on answering four questions as they assessed the testimonies: 1) Can the testimonies received be considered violations of economic, social, and cultural human rights perpetrated in the United States? 2) If so, is it possible to identify who is responsible for the violations of human rights, considering both the government—administrative, legislative, and judicial branches—and the private sector—especially the mega corporations and the big transnational

Following the testimonies and the deliberation of the commission, the community present reached a general conclusion that indeed, economic, social, and cultural rights had been violated in the United States and that the federal government (both legislative and judicial authorities) and private corporations needed to be held responsible for the violations of people's basic human rights. Acknowledging the structural violence of poverty, the commission illuminated that in a vast majority of the cases presented, the violations were preventable and that clear steps could be taken to ensure such violations would not happen in the future.<sup>296</sup> The commission declared that,

A massive restructuring of U.S. government priorities must occur to effect a major redistribution of the social wealth created by the U.S. economy. Such redistribution requires the political will of the people of the U.S. to make it happen. Only a mass social movement organized around political demands—one with the downsized, the laid-off, the discarded and the dispossessed at its center—can maintain the political will necessary for such a restructuring of priorities and wealth to be realized.<sup>297</sup>

In coming together with others experiencing the reality of poverty in the United States and with leaders committed to changing these conditions, the community based poverty truth commission created a process where the work of securing human rights was taken up not *for the poor*, but hand-in-hand with the individual women, men, and children that experienced the indignity and insecurity created by unjust economic, political, and social

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American companies? 3) Is it possible that the violations could have been prevented? 4) Could the Commission make proposals and solutions to the organizers and witnesses? While a preliminary report of the findings was put together, an official report was never produced. An organizer of the 2006 PTC noted the challenge that existed in getting U.S. based commissioners to submit a final report. International commissioners all submitted final reports. The organizer attributed this discrepancy to familiarity with the model of such commissions and suggested that international commissioners had more experience participating in similar forums. Mary Bricker-Jenkins (organizer) in discussion with the author, March 26, 2016.

<sup>296</sup> For a full list of proposals but forth the National Truth Commission on Poverty, see the final report, "National Truth Commission," 104–105.

<sup>297</sup> PPEHRC, "National Truth Commission," 105.



systems. The importance of the leadership of the poor within the PTC process was further emphasized by the fact that the Truth Commission did not conclude with the telling of untold stories. The stories were only a starting point. Additional activities connected to the truth commission process included an interfaith prayer service, a day of art & culture, a day of direct action, and a three-day leadership school.

### Organizing Beyond the Commission

The inclusion of art & culture in the truth commission process was essential to bringing to life the truth about people's lived conditions. It was also a space where the richness of cultural traditions could be shared and people through their particularities could build a deeper understanding of one another. Acknowledging the various faith traditions present among the participants, an interfaith prayer service was organized to highlight the strong call for justice that existed across people's faith backgrounds. While the service included progressive religious leadership from Hindu, Christian (Evangelical, Protestant, and Catholic), Jewish, Muslim, and Indigenous communities, there was a conscious effort among PPEHRC organizers to highlight the faith/spirituality of poor people themselves and the strength it gave them to do the work of movement building in the face of injustice.<sup>298</sup>

The use of skits, songs, poems, murals, and other multicultural forms of expression were used to set the tone of the commission and to provide resources of hope and resistance. Reflecting on his experience at the 2006 PTC, Willie Baptist emphasized the powerful messages that were expressed through movement songs like "Rich Man's

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<sup>298</sup> It should also be noted that not all PTC attendees participated in the interfaith prayer service. Reservations about the role that religion could play in movement building remained. The complacency and outright rejection that people had experienced at the hands of religious institutions remained a tension for people organizing as and among the poor and dispossessed.

House,” “All of Our Rights Now,” “Up and Out of Poverty Now.”<sup>299</sup> These songs drew on people’s religious and cultural heritage and became sources of inspiration that rejected the shame and isolation of poverty by proclaiming the values of human dignity, community, and social accountability.<sup>300</sup> The use of art and culture throughout the weekend gave people from very different communities the opportunity to encounter one another in a new way. It illuminated the importance of creativity in a movement to end poverty for countering the dominant narratives of those in power. Baptist noted that many participants, after participating in singing one of “the movement hymns,” would say, “it took me to church.” He went on to suggest that what church at its best is for people is a sense of community and place to find mutual support. For a community that has felt cast aside by society, and at times by the church, rebuilding a sense of community, collective identity, and social accountability are essential to combating the shame, individualism, and division promoted by a capitalist culture.<sup>301</sup>

The use of collective action was another key element of the truth telling process. The isolation, criminalization, demonization, and disunity of the poor continue to create major obstacles for efforts to build a movement led by the poor. Dr. King, in calling for a

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<sup>299</sup> “Rich Man’s House” draws inspiration from Mary’s Magnificat in Luke 1 and evolved from a song heard in a Black Baptist Church service in North Carolina during the KWRU’s 1998 bus tour. “All of Our Rights Now,” was written by a Christian public housing resident who came into grassroots organizing work only to discover the power of community and the church. “Up and Out of Poverty Now,” was written by two homeless mothers who raised their voices in prayer—to God and governmental officials—that poverty could and should be ended. See Appendix B for full lyrics.

<sup>300</sup> Willie Baptist (organizer) in discussion with the author, January 18, 2016.

<sup>301</sup> The intentional use of arts and culture is an area that continues to be developed in the work to build a Poor People’s Campaign. There have been plays written to help explore the complex systems of gentrification, to address the need for a human right to health care, and to create participatory investigations into the legacy of and struggle to abolish slavery in America. The role that art and culture plays in shaping the hearts and minds of U.S. society is also being explored. There is a clear recognition of the cooptation of poor communities cultural expressions by the capitalist system and there exists a deep desire to reclaim cultural forms as means to build participation, solidarity, and collective commitment.

Poor People's Campaign in 1967, recognized the potential that existed in the collective action of the poor. He said, "There are millions of poor people in this country who have very little, or even nothing, to lose. If they can be helped to take action together, they will do so with a freedom and a power that will be a new and unsettling force in our complacent national life."<sup>302</sup> Dr. King and the Poor People's Campaign were essential resources for the development of the PPEHRC and their organizing activities. What King's words invoke reflect the intention behind the collective action that took place as part of the PTC. The united action of the poor and dispossessed (emphasized by the diversity of the leaders gathered for the PTC and legitimized by the participation of influential religious, social and political leaders who served on the commission and who participated in the mass action) was a direct attack on popular misconceptions of who are the poor and why they are poor. It was a rejection of dominant narratives that claim that the poor are lazy and that they have no drive to solve the problems they face. The collective action was also a reminder to participants that they were not alone and that united, the poor and dispossessed could become a catalytic force for change in our society.

The PTC concluded with a core group of leaders, commissioners and testifiers, taking part in a three-day leadership school, held at John Carroll University. It built on the analysis that had been developed over seven years of organizing among the PPEHRC network. There was a general acknowledgement that simply raising the visibility of the problems of the poor and bringing people together was not enough to end the structural

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<sup>302</sup> King, "The Trumpet of Conscience," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1986), 651.

violence of poverty nor confront the divisions perpetuated by white supremacy and racism. A deeper understanding of the structure of the U.S. economy and its production of poverty was required. A space was needed to evaluate the contradictions that were revealed by the testimonies offered at the PTC. The leadership school provided a forum for seasoned movement leaders to come together with newly emerging leaders of the poor and dispossessed to begin to build a collective analysis of the structural violence of poverty that existed in U.S. society. While the goal of the PTC was to reveal how the problem of poverty was not an individual problem, the stereotypes and dominant theories that circulate in the American consciousness remained deeply imbedded in people's common sense.

Through sessions that engaged "Lies about Poverty" and roundtable discussions on issues of unjust child removal, health care, housing, and living wage jobs, the curriculum of the leadership school argued that the problems participants faced were not due to a lack of material resources or individual failures, but to the political and economic systems that continued to prioritize private profit over basic human needs. People were not poor because they were lazy or because they did not want to work. Gathering in the "rust belt," in a city that once thrived on the production of steel and automobiles, the reality of deindustrialization and the impact it had on everyday Americans became apparent. The lessons shared at the school worked to illustrate how losing one's job could quickly lead to falling behind on one's rent or mortgage, and being evicted from one's home. The value of the leadership school as part of the truth telling process was that it allowed participants to go deeper in their assessment of these conditions. It helped them to understand Dr. King's language of dispossession and illuminated how the problem of

poverty was a problem of the poor not having ownership or control over their means of survival. It affirmed that if poor people are going to make social change a reality in the United States, they needed space to reflect on their current struggles, share analysis, and create opportunities to study and learn from each other and from history.

The analysis developed through the process of the PTC and leadership school revealed that the problem of poverty in the United States was an issue that must be confronted by class struggle. Rev. Liz Theoharis, one of the leaders of the University of the Poor and PPEHRC who helped organize the 2006 leadership school, explained that the school provided a space for truth commission participants to immediately reflect on and evaluate the experience and findings of the commission in a collective setting. Theoharis noted that, “One important point participants recognized was that many of the testimonies offered at the truth commission were stories that revealed how many more people across the country were just one step away from becoming homeless or impoverished and that we all needed to come together as one.”<sup>303</sup>

Coming together as one, however, did not happen without tensions. A challenge that existed in the work of movement building and the desire to build unity was the need to recognize and confront the ways in which the structures of U.S. society have been used very effectively to keep the working class divided and to provide groups of people with various incentives to maintain such division.<sup>304</sup> In building a movement to end poverty,

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<sup>303</sup> Liz Theoharis (organizer) in discussion with the author, January 16, 2016.

<sup>304</sup> The incentives used to maintain racial division in U.S. society was a topic I explored in Du Bois’s work in chapter 4. Such incentives have included the exclusion of people of color from labor unions; the social mobility of a select portion of white workers (with the promise of advancement for all white workers); home ownership programs, unemployment insurance, aid to dependent children and social security (programs that during the New Deal implemented racial restrictions and excluded agricultural and domestic workers). More recently, citizenship status has been an incentive used to divide poor communities. While the United States is made up of immigrants from all over the world, the *term illegal immigrant* has

led by the poor, the questions—who are the poor and who has the right to lead—remain important questions to address. With a desire to take up Dr. King’s vision of a poor people’s campaign, the PPEHRC took strategic steps to bring together poor white communities with poor communities of color. Yet serious concerns were raised about what role poor whites could play in building a movement to end poverty. There was concern that poor white leaders were engaging conversations about class without acknowledging the reality and history of race and imperialism.<sup>305</sup> There were tensions over the “hierarchy of poverty”—where leaders and organizers who were currently homeless and living on the streets felt that they were worse off than low-wage workers living in group housing and they were the “real poor.” While an overarching commitment to work together existed, the challenge of how the United States was going to solve the problem of poverty remained. Could the rights of all poor people be fought for simultaneously, or did reparations need to first be waged to respond to the inequality that resulted from the legacy of racism and white supremacy in the United States? Could the growing disparity of wealth and poverty be addressed without first confronting the discriminatory policies that disproportionately impacted communities of color? If people believed in the leadership of the poor, were those who had a certain amount of stability although still living at or near the poverty line, poor enough to lead? What was the role of those more “privileged?”

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been used to isolate and politicize the issue of immigration. The U.S. *war on terrorism* and the rise of Islamophobia have also introduced new fear tactics and policies that isolate Muslims living in the United States. Such tactics have been particularly successful in further polarizing the white poor and working class against communities of color.

<sup>305</sup> An advocate from a Dominican Republic NGO, Justicia Global, initially raised this challenge.

These challenges were not resolved at the 2006 leadership school, however, they are conflicts that have led movement leaders to recognize the need for a deeper critical analysis of the intersections of race and class in U.S. society. The questions have resulted in more focused studies on how our economic and political systems have produced unprecedented wealth while fostering a narrative of scarcity that divides the dispossessed. And research has developed around the historic development of race relations in the United States, paying particular attention to the Civil War and Abolitionist Movement as well as explorations of the historic successes and limitations of cross-racial organizing in efforts like the Bonus Army, the Southern Tenant Farmers Union, the original Rainbow Coalition, and the Poor People's Campaign. These tensions have led to my own examination of Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction in America* and the need to understand the systemic privileges (some which are actualized and many which are not) granted to and claimed by white people in U.S. society that as a result nullify the possibility of class struggle.

This extensive examination of the program that made up the 2006 PTC illustrates that the PTC model should not be reduced to the confines of a public hearing alone. The additional movement building elements (art & culture, direct actions, and leadership schools) should be understood as components of the truth telling process and highlight the importance of community building, collective action, and political education in the work of social movement building more broadly. In relationship to a Christian praxis of liberation, understanding the full scope of the PTC model gives tangible form to the Christian virtue of solidarity. In professing a shared commitment to the common good, the PTC model moves a Christian praxis of liberation from abstract theories of justice

toward concrete practices and patterns of action through the work of social movement building. Seeing the truth commission as a part of a longer process of building a movement for social change enables us to recognize the strengths that this model offers for confronting the ideological narratives that mask the reality of poverty in the United States and for providing space to begin to articulate a new ethical narrative that places the insurance of people's basic needs at the forefront of our moral consciousness. It is through this process, a process that lifts up the leadership of and with the poor, that a material basis for unity emerges and a collective demand for every person's God given rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness can be forged.

**Conclusion: A Christian Counter-Narrative—Advocating the Right to not be Poor**

In 1989 Francis Fukuyama announced the “end of history,” and the triumph of liberal capitalist democracy. With the rise and fall of fascism and communism, free market capitalism and democracy were to usher in an era of peace and prosperity for all. Yet, almost thirty years later, in the wake of the 2008 global economic crisis, the widening gap between the rich and the rest is becoming a reality for the developed and developing worlds alike. In the United States, the battles for a living wage, Medicaid expansion, access to quality education, immigration reform, struggles against the environmental degradation of vulnerable communities, an increasing militarization of the police force, and unprecedented incarceration rates continue to provoke polarizing responses among the masses of the American public. These issues are compounding challenges for “the poor” today that I have argued encompass an ever-expanding portion of the population. While more and more people are discontent with the current economic



and political situation facing the country, people in the United States remain divided and unclear about what can and should be done to confront the crises they face.

Similarly, Christian responses to these crises have been varied. While some progressive churches and scholars have joined with organized efforts of the poor and dispossessed to challenge the injustice of increasing impoverishment, others have implicitly or explicitly blamed social immorality and the breakdown of the American family for the problems communities are facing. The continued affirmation of dominant narratives that suggest that free market capitalism has no viable alternative clouds the ability of people in U.S. society to ask if the current economic system, at its core, is organized to meet the needs of those who participate in it. A liberationist Christian social ethics that seeks to respond to the conflict presented by the 2008 financial crisis must develop conceptual and practical tools that can help Christians reassess and reframe the dominant moral assumptions they hold about the U.S. economic structure and its production of both wealth and poverty.

In the final section of this dissertation, I will illustrate how a liberationist Christian social ethics that brings together critical analysis and social practice (highlighted through the PTC model) can help to deconstruct the causes and dominant “solutions” to poverty that maintain structural inequality. Emphasizing the epistemological privilege of the poor, this liberationist ethics challenges the stigmatization of poverty and the isolation of the poor, reveals the structural violence of poverty in the midst of plenty, and develops a moral imperative for the right to not be poor.

## Illuminating the Structural Violence of Poverty

*In this society violence against poor people and minority groups is routine. I remind you that starving a child is violence; suppressing a culture is violence; neglecting schoolchildren is violence; discrimination against a working man is violence; ghetto house is violence; ignoring medical needs is violence; contempt for equality is violence; even a lack of will power to help humanity is a sick and sinister form of violence.*<sup>306</sup>

— Coretta Scott King

A Christian counter-narrative that lifts up the right to not be poor takes up liberationist principles that challenge the popular belief that poverty is inevitable. Arguing that the United States has the ability to create a world free from the economic disasters that have been structured into the U.S. and world economies, the individual stories told through the PTC process come together to reveal the paradox of an economic system that produces both tremendous wealth and massive poverty. Reflecting on the questions that the 2006 PTC used to guide the commission: 1) are the experiences and conditions put forward through the stories of the testifiers economic human rights violations, 2) could these violations have been prevented, 3) who is responsible, and 4) what are the potential solutions that can address these economic human rights violations from recurring in the future, we recognize the intention of this model to illuminate the structural violence of poverty. These questions place the individual testimonies presented at a commission within a structural framework and point to the systematic nature of the problem that Collins and Watson argued more top-down approaches fail to address.

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<sup>306</sup> Coretta Scott King, quoted in William J. Barber II and Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, “A Politics Beyond Fear: The Value of Fusion Friendships,” *Sojourners*, December 11, 2015, <https://sojo.net/articles/politics-beyond-fear#sthash.YbggBzaB.dpuf>.

A community based PTC process is not limited to the traditional legal paradigm of victims vs. perpetrators. Instead it attempts to build a process for establishing social responsibility where all participants are challenged to expand their consciousness around who are the poor, why massive inequality exists in our society today, and what we can collectively do to end exploitation and inequality for all. In documenting and connecting the stories of structural violence that are perpetrated when the rights to health care, living wages, education, housing, water, food, and other basic necessities are not ensured, the truth commission process creates a space where the inadequacies of the economic system can be revealed on a mass scale.

A liberationist Christian ethics that was present in the PTC process interrupts popular Christian discourse that limits conversations about poverty to an issue of charity and demands that our moral frameworks interrogate the power relationships and social structures that create suffering among the poor and dispossessed in our society. A liberationist ethics emphasizes the need for a collective process where people's individual experience is linked to a structural analysis that asks who benefits from the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth in twenty-first century society. It asks who controls the resources—human and material—and determines their value as commodities of a capitalist economy. It demands a “true revolution of values” by naming the structural violence of poverty and calls for social action that seeks concrete change of the current economic order.

#### Confronting the Edifice that Produces Beggars and Billionaire

*Certain actions and economic policies are inevitable under the restrictions of the current global capitalist economy. If we want to have other guidelines and results, we must leave the confines of this economic model. For this, political action must also include intervention in the*

*economy and changes in the economic rules in order for what is now considered inevitable to become avoidable, and what is deemed unacceptable to be acceptable.*<sup>307</sup>

— Jung Mo Sung

In a country where poverty is accepted and perpetuated as an unfortunate but natural state of our economic and social reality, an extra governmental mechanism is needed to investigate the institutional structures that produce poverty in an economy that has created unparalleled abundance. Christian ethicist Miguel De La Torre, in exploring the normalization and legitimation of the current U.S. power structure, explains that, “Our political systems, our policing authorities, our judicial institutions, and our military forces conspire to maintain a status quo designed to secure and protect the power and wealth of the privileged few.”<sup>308</sup> The current legal system, in turn, cannot provide the means to interrogate human rights violations that are inflicted on a growing majority by the pathologies of power that exist in the United States. As the present economic and political systems continue to deny human beings the basic rights to housing, health care, and living wages, our legal system serves to reinforce dominant political and social structures through the criminalization of the homeless, the deterioration of the rights of workers to organize, and the deprivation of our most vulnerable communities from attaining the means to live a life with dignity.

By bringing together a broad section of the poor and dispossessed to publically testify about the growing impoverishment of millions of citizens and the ways in which laws have been used to criminalize human beings from pursuing basic life sustaining activities, the PTC process is able to develop a counter-consciousness against the

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<sup>307</sup> Sung, 56.

<sup>308</sup> De La Torre, *Doing Christian Ethics from the Margins* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004), 5.

isolating stereotypes and misinformation propagated around who are the poor and why they are poor. This process moves a Christian ethical narrative away from the moral failure of the poor towards recognizing the structural sin present in a system that produces both beggars and billionaires. As Pope Francis suggests, “As long as the problems of the poor are not radically resolved by rejecting the absolute autonomy of the markets and financial speculation and by attacking the structural causes of inequality, no solution will be found for the worlds problems.”<sup>309</sup> A Christian ethics that confronts the structural sin present in the growing inequality that was revealed during the 2008 crisis moves beyond an ethics of subjective intent and engages in a process committed to illuminating the structural causes of poverty. It seeks to develop an alternative narrative that draws on a radical Christian tradition of social liberation and communal accountability. It asserts that an important step in confronting poverty effectively is recognizing its structural nature.

#### Challenging the Stigma of Poverty: Moving from the Margins to the Masses

The Poverty Truth Commission model provides a process that can help challenge the American Assumption that, “wealth is mainly the result of its owner’s effort and that any average worker can by thrift become a capitalist,” or otherwise put, that all responsible people who work hard in the United States can ‘make it.’<sup>310</sup> Through the collection and documentation of economic human rights violations, the PTC process can be used to systematically demonstrate how the growing inequality that exists in the United States is not an exception, but the norm of advanced global capitalism. Because, as Gramsci suggested, ideological beliefs often lag behind economic phenomenon, the

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<sup>309</sup> Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel*, 143.

<sup>310</sup> Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America*, 183.

PTC can become an incubator for developing new political thought needed to disrupt moral values that uphold the status quo. By providing a space where diverse leaders—people who have experienced the violations of health, living wage, housing, education, unjust child removal, and more—can come together to share their lived experience of these violations, the PTC provides every day people with tools to break their isolation, to critically reflect on why such violations continue to occur in one of wealthiest countries in the world, and to raise moral concerns over inequality and the trampling of dignity and humanity of all.

A national spokesperson for the PPEHRC explained that,

Every day in our wealthy country children are removed from the arms of their mothers because they are poor, the elderly go without proper medicine, entire families live in cars or homeless encampments, jobs are leaving our country and never coming back, quality education is a reality only for those who can pay for it, and basic utilities—water, gas and electricity—are becoming unaffordable as we make the move to privatize them. The American dream no longer exists for most of us.<sup>311</sup>

The PTC process, by pairing human faces and actual stories with often-overlooked statistics of poverty in the United States, rejects the false division between a permanent underclass and the deteriorating middle class; instead it draws the connections between all poverty and dispossession. Highlighting the economic nature of the problem, the PTC empowers those experiencing human rights violations with the ability to recognize how chronic impoverishment, unemployment, and under employment are necessities of an ever-expanding global capitalist economic system. The truth commission process enables people to move their social analysis of poverty from a theory of personal failure to a critical examination of the disparity of wealth and poverty by revealing the lived

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<sup>311</sup> PPEHRC, “National Truth Commission,” 14.

experiences of a growing majority. This is an essential step for shifting our collective consciousness around the structural violence of poverty that persists in the twenty-first century U.S. context. And it is critical for linking the relationship between the creation of wealth to the production of poverty. Through the process of sharing, listening, and documenting people’s individual stories, the PTC works to develop a shared understanding of these experiences and moves to articulate recommendations that those present—by reclaiming the value of solidarity—can work together to pursue. As noted in the PPEHRC report, a major goal of the PTC process is to “take away the shame and replace it with the seeds of unity.”<sup>312</sup> A Christian social ethics that participated in this praxis of solidarity lifts up the liberationist principle that the problem of poverty is a social problem and demands that as Christians it is our duty to work to abolish poverty.

Forward Together: Confronting the Divide-and-Conquer Strategy

*There is no question that a combination of personal prejudice and institutional discrimination has rendered some groups more vulnerable to poverty than others, and that decades of government programs and policies have not effectively remedied the vulnerable situation of those groups most at risk. One must wonder whether they were ever really intended to do so. There is an advantage, after all, to government and corporate interests projecting a commitment to alleviating poverty among specific groups: the strategy conceals the structural nature of poverty, hides poor whites, who constitute the majority of poor, under a blanket of shame, coats all groups with blame for the “intractability” of their condition, and—most of all—keeps the poor down, desperate, and divided.<sup>313</sup>*

— 2006 National Truth Commission on Poverty Report

Without space to develop a shared analysis of why the United States is facing the current economic, political, and social crises it is in, the root causes of both blatant

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<sup>312</sup> Ibid, 58.

<sup>313</sup> Ibid, 85.

physical violence and more hidden structural violence is often masked by constructed narratives and ideologies that circulate within what emilie townes names “the fantastic hegemonic imagination.” It is through the construction of stereotypes and misperceptions about race and poverty, which are reinforced within voluntary associations of church, family, media, political parties, schools, and unions, that “false consciousness” is developed.<sup>314</sup> Within the realm of the fantastic hegemonic imagination, people’s lived experiences are delegitimized and the shared struggle that ought, as Du Bois argued, to connect the poor and dispossessed, fails to be recognized.

The truth telling process established through a community based truth commission model provides a mechanism for developing critical consciousness needed to disrupt people’s ignorance regarding the intersections of shared struggle. The PTC takes advantage of moments of crisis to bring segregated communities (because of race and economic stratification) together, communities who because of the history of social division in this country are often isolated from one another:

When asked to participate in the National Truth Commission, I found it hard to comprehend what a forum on human rights in urban Ohio had to do with a red neck farmer from Kansas! What in the world can I contribute to this gathering to make it better? But I am very honored to have been asked here. Farming in Kansas is alive and well; FARMERS in Kansas are an endangered species!!

Donn Teske, President, Kansas Farmers Union

Teske’s testimony points to the deep isolation of poor white communities from poor communities of color in the United States. According to the American common sense, a poor white farmer in Kansas has nothing in common with a poor black welfare mother in Cleveland. The challenges of rural agriculture are disconnected from the repercussions of deindustrialization in urban centers. On one side, poor whites are conditioned to believe

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<sup>314</sup> townes, 6.



that poor people of color living in urban environments are violent, unskilled, and dependent on government subsidies. On the other, people of color are taught (including through historical experience) that poor whites are racist, hostile, and dangerous. Both groups are taught to blame the other for the conditions and challenges they face. Du Bois's work illustrated that such conceptions and relationships are not natural, but that the United States has a long history of utilizing racial stereotypes, fallacious history, and structures of white supremacy to create racial conflicts, to divide the poor, and to mask the class relationships that foster inequality.

In bringing communities together across different racial, geographic, religious, and issue lines, a community-based truth commission model attempts to create a space where people, in sharing their lived experiences, can participate in a process that can begin to break down the stereotypes that prevent people from recognizing the deep structural roots of the problems they face. The truth commission process gives a platform to experiences that are often isolated from one another and that are manipulated by major news outlets in an age where information technology dominates the way communities relate to one another. The PTC, in piecing together individual stories of the multiple manifestations of poverty and the complexities of how a capitalist system produces and maintains poverty through different means in different communities, challenges false consciousness that is fostered by the isolation of poor communities.

With the goal of developing a counter-memory to the dominant narratives around wealth and poverty, a community-based truth commission utilizes people's every day lived experience, paired with a process of political education that draws on socio-economic and historical analysis, to illuminate the untruths and structurally reinforced

conflicts that have shaped American popular consciousness. Through the telling of untold stories, both contemporary and historic, communities are brought together to recognize the structural violence of poverty that is present when basic human needs are denied for the sake of corporate profit, the protection of private property, and preservation of the current power structure. Unraveling the myth of capitalism's infallibility, the PTC testimonies move structural critiques beyond an analysis of government programs used to manage the reality of poverty toward questioning why poverty exists in the wealthiest country of twenty-first century society.

Important work has been done to trace the use of racism and white supremacy in the development of the white middle class and the use of government subsidies (which Du Bois critiqued in relation to the New Deal) to aid the white working class at the exclusion of people of color.<sup>315</sup> Du Bois critique reminds us of the need to understand how the capitalist economic system used such subsidies to create social stability among white workers in the wake of the Great Depression. More recent scholarship has continued to focus on the issue of access and who is granted access to government subsidies. However, often, it does not question the overall legitimacy of a system that depends on government intervention for its own preservation. It rightly criticizes the distinctions drawn between the “deserving” and “undeserving” poor and notes how other direct assistance programs (farm subsidies, mortgage deductions, and business expense write-offs) are used within our capitalist system to aid middle and upper class Americans. But it does not challenge why such balances are necessary in a capitalist system. The testimonies offered through the PTC process bring questions around why inner-city

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<sup>315</sup> See Premilla Nadasen, Jennifer Middelstadt and Marissa Chappel, *Welfare in the United States: A History with Documents, 1935-1996* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

African American communities in Detroit are being denied water while living next to one of the largest sources of freshwater in the world together with questions about why small family farms in Kansas require subsidies to maintain their farms. While the problems of impoverishment are expressed in different forms, a systemic relationship exists between these two communities—a relationship based on the ownership and control of basic resources and the ability that the average American has to make decisions about resources connected to their basic human livelihood.

A liberationist Christian social ethics that engages the challenge of the PTC model to confront the divide-and-conquer strategy of a global capitalist economy recognizes the material needs and daily abuses people encounter in their everyday lives as a reality that has the potential to unite people, as a class, to work together to change society. This does not overlook the particularities of poor communities based on race, ethnicity, and location but rather engages these distinctions to better understand the complex mechanisms (material and ideological) at work to maintain the capitalist system. Recognizing the significance of building relationships across color lines as a counter strategy to capitalism's polarization and isolation of poor communities broadly, and poor white communities from poor communities of color in particular, a liberationist Christian social ethics acknowledges that such a coming together does not happen spontaneously. As demonstrated in the PPEHRC case study and the eight plus years of organizing that preceded the first National Truth Commission, a liberationist ethics recognizes that a PTC cannot exist as a singular organizing event. It must be understood as part of a longer process of social movement building that is committed to confronting the stronghold of

white supremacy and engages in connections and networks that can only be developed through time, intentional relationship building, and collective learning.

### The Limits of the PTC Model

Gramsci suggests that the system works best when people believe in the system and choose to support it. The deep faith that remains in the free market capitalist system and the endurance of white supremacy persist as challenges to developing a counter-narrative and alternative practices to the systems that continue to produce a disparity of wealth and poverty in the United States. The PTC is an organizing model that attempts to bring communities together—communities that are often isolated from one another—to build a collective analysis and develop a unified struggle that has the power to confront the structural violence of poverty. The strategic goal of uniting the poor and dispossessed raises questions about how this model can address the conflicts that exist among differences that have been conditioned by political inequality and economic exploitation.

Regarding a structural analysis of poverty, one question that arises for the strategic goal to illuminate the shared struggles of the poor—a class unity that would bring together sociological categories of generational poverty and situational poverty—is: Does it hinder a quantitative and systematic analysis of poverty interested in interrogating how the social, economic, and political structures produce poverty? Space must be created to account for these differences. The goal of unity within the PTC model is not meant to ignore these distinctions, but in bringing people together with unique experiences of poverty, to develop a broad analysis for how the capitalist system (through social and political institutions and policies) produces and reinforces social and economic disparities. In attempting to critique the economic stratification and social inequality that

exist in U.S. society, the PTC can draw on sociological theories that help to explore who benefits from the existence of a social hierarchy and how. Furthermore, as the global capitalist economy continues to evolve, additional research will need to be done to assess the accuracy and endurance of categories that include generational and situational poverty.<sup>316</sup>

When moving from the TRC to the PTC, one may ask why the PTC model does not take up the language of reconciliation.<sup>317</sup> In particular, responding to questions regarding the need for and possibility of racial reconciliation in the United States, the decision to eliminate the use of the term reconciliation ought to be addressed. On a political level, reconciliation is a highly contested term. The ability of a society to develop adequate responses to deal with the abuses and atrocities experienced by subjugated, exploited, and terrorized communities—to determine who can decide what rights the wrongs of past abuses—are difficult questions to resolve. Yet the task to the establish the Truth on which Right in the future can be built is exactly the charge that Du Bois put forth in his reconstitution of Reconstruction history in America. Du Bois explained that there was no way forward without confronting the conflicts of history. The need to address the deep conflicts of racial and ethnic injustice that have and continue to plague U.S. society cannot be achieved in the space of the PTC. This is one of the reasons

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<sup>316</sup> The technological revolution and the repercussions it will have on the U.S. workforce have yet to be fully revealed. While hope that technological innovations will benefit the world's poor endure, paired with capitalism's prioritization of profit, the labor eliminating trends that have followed innovation will need to be accessed.

<sup>317</sup> There are multiple reasons the term reconciliation has been excluded from the PTC model. While I will focus on the need to address questions regarding the racial reconciliation here, additional challenges have been raised about the grassroots model of the PTC and its ability to hold political leaders and corporations accountable for economic human rights violations. The PTC as an organizing tool has focused on the truth telling process as a means to empower and develop the leadership of the poor as a necessary step that must precede conversations about national reconciliation.

the term reconciliation has not been used. The PTC is a starting point. It is a place to initiate relationships and name contradictions, but it is not the end goal. For this reason, the PTC must be used in relationship to a longer process of social movement building and in relationship to the development of a liberationist Christian social ethics that seeks reconciliation while acknowledging that reconciliation can only be achieved through liberation from sin (both personal and communal). James Cone suggests that, “Reconciliation means death and only those who are prepared to die in the struggle for freedom will experience new life with God.”<sup>318</sup> For Cone, racial reconciliation in the United States would require the death of white supremacy and the creation of a new society qualitatively different from the one in which we currently live. Reconciliation requires that the structures that create oppression and exploitation be dismantled. The PTC alone cannot bring about racial reconciliation. Yet the conflicts revealed in the truth commission process, through the stories of people’s lived reality, can be linked to larger critiques of the historic mechanisms that have been used to divide, subjugate, and exploit people of all races and to prevent us from achieving Du Bois’s vision of a true democratic society through the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat. It is through a process of conscientization that a liberationist Christian social ethics recognizes the possibility of liberating American Christians, and white Americans in particular, from their complicity with the structures of racism and white supremacy.

### The Right to not be Poor as a Christian Moral Imperative

*There is nothing new about poverty. What is new is that we now have the techniques and the resources to get rid of poverty. The real question is whether we have the will.*<sup>319</sup>

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<sup>318</sup> James Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1975), 239.

<sup>319</sup> King, “Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution,” in *A Testament of Hope*, 274.

— Martin Luther King, Jr., “Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution”

*Went down to the rich man's house and I  
Took back what he stole from me  
Took back my dignity, took back my humanity  
And now it's under my feet, under my feet, under my feet, under my feet  
Ain't no system gonna walk all over me*

—“Rich Man’s House,” PPEHRC Human Rights Choir

We are living in a moment of economic and social contradiction, in a world that as Dr. King explained has the ability to end poverty, but has failed to do so. While a growing majority of Americans are beginning to express discontent and concern regarding the economic, political, and social realities the United States is currently facing, a shared interpretation of the root causes of these problems and a collective vision for how people ought to respond is lacking. In times like these, history has shown that people’s consciousness is challenged not only by the conditions they are confronting, but further by the ideological conflicts that are waged in moments of crisis. The 2008 global financial crisis and its repercussions have resulted in a battle of ideas, a battle in which Christianity has been used to both support and oppose the status quo.

It is in this context that the need to develop conceptual and practical tools within a liberationist Christian social ethics is essential for reframing the dominant moral assumptions that mask the complex reality of class struggle that exists in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis. The lived experiences of the poor and dispossessed are an essential element of both a liberationist ethics as well as the PTC process. In lifting up God’s preferential option for the poor and coming to recognize the structural violence of poverty that exists in the twenty-first century context of the United States, a liberationist ethics seeks out places where individuals can come together—in sharing the particularity

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of their struggles—to analyze the root causes of wealth and poverty and recognize the connections that exist between their struggles. It acknowledges that class unity does not happen automatically or spontaneously. Instead, it must be developed through critical consciousness and by building strategic relationships. In promoting a collective consciousness, American Christians can join with leaders from across varying sectors of U.S. society to begin to challenge the dominant assumptions that isolate the poor from encountering one another and prevent people from demanding a collective right to not be poor in a society that has the capacity to end all poverty.

Building on the theological principle of God's preferential option for the poor and a belief that the continued existence of poverty is against God's will, a liberationist Christian social ethics engages the PTC process as a mechanism where people can begin to re-imagine what justice looks like in the concrete lived reality of those experiencing poverty and dispossession. Demanding the right to not be poor becomes a moral imperative for Christians—a conscious commitment that compels them to act. It holds up the epistemological privilege of the poor and reminds us that justice and human dignity cannot be abstract ideals debated within Christian discourse. Instead, a liberationist ethics insists that moral action for justice and equality be pursued in the here and now. Salvation is not reserved to an otherworldly reality, but is about liberation from the ills of earthly oppression. Rooted in the concrete lives of those facing the structural violence of poverty, a liberationist ethics engages the challenges put forth by welfare rights organizers like Maureen Taylor and Sylvia Orduño who claim “there is no justice in these systems”—systems that protect the status quo and produce suffering and exploitation for the many. A liberationist ethics responds to the moral outrage, taken up by religious and community



leaders working to confront the structural sin present in the current economic, political and social systems, and reframes a new evangelization that brings good news to the poor. Poverty in the midst of plenty is intolerable and contradicts God's vision of a just society. A Christian counter-narrative that advocates the right to not be poor, therefore, rejects complacency and demands transformation that can turn unjust social relations into relationships that emphasize human dignity and social participation.

## Appendix A

## Abbreviations

CELAM	General Conference of Latin American Bishops
ELCA	Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
KWRU	Kensington Welfare Rights Union
NCC	National Council of Churches U.S.A.
PCUSA	Presbyterian Church U.S.A
PPEHRC	Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign
PTC	Poverty Truth Commission
PTH	Picture the Homeless
TRC	Truth and Reconciliation Commission
UMGBCS	United Methodists Global Board of Church and Society's

## Appendix B

Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign  
Movement Songs

## "Rich Man's House"

Went down to the rich man's house and I  
Took back what he stole from me  
Took back my dignity  
Took back my humanity  
And now it's under my feet, under my feet, under my feet, under my feet  
Ain't no system gonna walk all over me

## "All of Our Rights Now"

What do we all need, all of our rights now  
Keeping us all (where), off of the street  
What do we all need, all of our rights now  
We stand united; we'll not be moved  
Right now, we won't back down no  
Right now, we'll not be moved  
Right now, we've staked our claim now  
Right now, we've mapped out our root

“Up and Out of Poverty Now”

So long, they've kept their feet in our necks

So long, they've been walkin' on our backs

But now we are strong, moving right along

CHORUS:

We're moving up, and out, of poverty now

That's what we're fighting for

We're moving up, and out, of poverty now

That's what we're living for

--

So long, they've kept us far apart

For too long, they told us its all our fault

We must overcome, and stand tall as one

--

So strong, we have begun to unite

So strong, we've built our army to fight

Will help from above, God's given us love

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