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A Synopsis of
From Wasteland to Promised Land: Liberation Theology for a Post-Marxist World

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[Information about the book appears at the end of the document.]

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1. Land: The Hope of the Oppressed on Every Continent

At the start of the 1990s, while the Berlin Wall and the authoritarian regimes in Eastern Europe toppled, Latin American communities and clergy who were operating under the banner of liberation theology began throwing off the yoke of oppression.

The uprising of subjected peoples around the world lends immediacy to the search for genuine liberation. While many emphasize political matters, equally critical are the ethical and economic underpinnings of liberation. To ignore these will likely result in a tragic disillusionment for the people who have made the enormous sacrifices to chart new courses.

In *How the Other Half Dies*, Susan George wrote that "The most pressing cause of the abject poverty which millions of people in this world endure is that a mere 2.5% of landowners with more than 100 hectares control nearly three quarters of all the land in the world - with the top 0.23% controlling half." To recognize this social plague for what it is, and to avert a backlash of despair, requires a clear understanding of two great themes: the Promised Land and the Wasteland.

The Promised Land is the hope of the landless, literally, land, the gateway to opportunity. Abraham in Mesopotamia and the Israelites in bondage in Egypt so wished for their own land that they left homes and familiar surroundings and risked death to seek the distant place God had promised, a land rich in milk and honey, where a day's labor would put food on the table and allow their children to grow into adulthood. This exodus pattern has been repeated over and over, from the migrations of prehistory to the boat people of our day. For centuries, immigrants have poured into the Americas, looking for the inheritance denied to them in the Old World -- their portion of land.

But the Promised Land is not so much a geographic place as it is a hope and a vision of a just social order. Modern society has many wondrous features, but it certainly is not the Promised Land in its full glory. Indeed, we are "modern captives" who sense the Promised Land as a primitive instinct, as a deep longing, and as a cry from the depths of our captivity that the world should be different.

All of us, no less than the Hebrews in Egypt, are captives of structures imposed upon us. To enslave people, today as three thousand years ago, is to rob them of the value of their labor. Millions of working people living in severe poverty are robbed of the fruits of their labor. Through various forms of exploitation, especially the monopolization of land rights, large segments of humanity are oppressed, dehumanized, held in bondage. One factor enabling governments to legalize land theft and lend respectability to exploitative landlordism is the general silence of religious and intellectual leaders about humanity's common rights to land.

We begin to penetrate and overcome this silence when we realize that the Wasteland is wasted land, unfulfilled potential, producing no "milk and honey." Speculators in both urban and rural areas hoard land on which the hungry, the homeless, and the jobless could feed, shelter, and employ themselves. Keeping valuable lands idle causes artificial shortages that drive up rents which poor people must pay for poor land. Land hoarding deserves much of the blame for creating the Wasteland: it forces people into the "desert." There, people find the oases controlled by more land monopolists who must be paid a ransom for access to nature's life-sustaining water. And as we will see, the primary focus of Biblical economic laws was the prevention of precisely this sort of usurpation of God's gifts to all creatures.

The midbar, the biblical Wasteland, is only part desert. It has towns and pastures, but it lacks the "fullness of life." This anomaly is mirrored in the modern Wasteland, crowded with factories, skyscrapers and mansions -- along with ugly blight and squalid slums.

The point of departure of liberation theology is the recognition of the awful fact that millions lead subhuman lives. The rural landless seek refuge in cities, often becoming squatters in barrios or favelas with open sewage and no safe water supply. They may earn fifteen dollars a month if they find work at all. Children live in the streets and go to bed hungry. Illness and drought, and even complaining of their lot, may lead to premature death. And they can see the Mercedes behind the iron gates of walled mansions. (Ironically, mercedes is also a Spanish legal term denoting title to a large grant of land.) Like poor Lazarus in the parable of Jesus (Luke 16:19-31), they survive on the crumbs that fall from the rich man's table. When judgement comes to the rich man, he receives no mercy because he had shown none.

2. Latin American Colonialism and its Legacy of Bondage

Just as the Hebrews in Egypt toiled beneath the yoke of Pharaoh and his taskmasters, so did the peoples of Latin America for centuries endure bondage to colonial rulers.

And just as remnants of the slave mentality persisted among the Hebrews in the wilderness, so does the legacy of colonial attitudes and institutions persist in Latin America today.

The image of Christ dying in passive agony on the cross, and the image of the Blessed Virgin as a dolorous woman in mourning and pierced by a sword, are common in popular Latin American Catholicism. They speak of centuries of impotence under Spanish and other foreign masters. Even today many practicing Roman Catholics

approach carnival as a temporary relief from suffering -- a reality that was present yesterday and will be here tomorrow, always. In this sense, carnival is escapism -- for a few days. Then real life continues.

The origins of this suffering are clearly to be found in the aristocratic system imposed by papal bull and the armed might of Spain and Portugal, a system that relegated the indigenous Indian population to a life of slavery, at best. In Inter Caeteris, Pope Alexander VI designated King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella "lords and masters" of the New World. Thus were the treasure stores of gold and silver, and later coffee and beef, thrown open -- to a well-defined elite.

The encomienda was the basic instrument used by the Spanish empire for settling Latin America. This was a grant of Indians to an encomendero who assumed the obligation, in principle, of Christianizing and civilizing them. The Indians, "in exchange", were required to provide labor and tribute to Spain. We look back upon this epoch as a period of brutal and cynical "pacification" of the indigenous people by conquering exploiters. But it is important to recognize that the encomenderos who were charged with "Christianizing" the natives took their jobs seriously enough to allow the clergy to move in and do their evangelical works without interference. It may be tempting, now, to view those early missionaries as merely cynical agents of colonial expansionism -- but in fact, it could not have been so. The enduring pervasive influence of the Catholic Church in Latin America attests to the success of those missionaries on the front lines. Had they not been motivated by a sincere Christian faith, they could not have left such an indelible mark on an entirely different culture.

However, religious works cannot avoid their political context (an insight of the liberation theologians). Although in theory the encomienda was not a grant of land, in practice many of the encomienderos were also granted mercedes, or legal title to vast tracts that gave rise to the late estates. After the encomienda system was abolished, this control of land allowed the economic exploitation of the natives to continue.

Two types of large landed estates survive to this day from the colonial period:

- the hacienda (or fazenda, in Portuguese), raising cattle and a diversity of crops for local use or sale; and
- the plantation, raising a single exportable crop.

Initially, Indians were given as slaves to the landholders. Later, the "freed" natives were tied to the landowners through debts brought on by a subsistence wage system. The shortage of good land off the estate made it easy for the landlord to attract or coerce labor onto his estate.

This pattern continues today with an underclass largely descended from the Indian and African slaves, along with other dispossessed groups. The haciendas and plantations are noted for their inefficient husbandry. Landowners face few social or economic pressures to become good managers, and often live in the cities leaving the estates to be run by overseers. Consequently, the landowners often do not make large profits, but that is not their objective. Their primary concern is the maintenance of the two paramount features of the status quo, which go hand in hand.

- First, labor is very cheap, because workers have no alternative place to employ themselves, even though massive tracts of good land are held nearly idle by the land barons.
- Second, the cost of holding on to huge estates -- i.e., the taxes charged by the public for the privilege of retaining possession -- are low or effectively nonexistent.

Strong incentives for good stewardship are as absent as the landlords.

There is also little incentive to productivity; most of the population has no share in the fruits of the land or the profits of the estates. The colonial system of land tenure discourages the creation of capital, with most of the surplus from the land going to purchase luxury goods that are produced at the expense of more useful manufacture or more often are imported, thereby straining the country's balance of payments. The situation in the cities is no better for the poor, who are drawn there by word of mouth, radio, television and films that present the cities as if they are the Promised Land. Of course, the image is false. So many landless folk seeking employment in the cities have turned them into places of great degradation. Urban land monopoly and speculation create tremendous housing difficulties for the poor. For example, in 1950, 36% of Brazil's people lived in cities, in 1988, 75% do so. Thus, the city of Sao Paulo has grown from ca. 2.2 million in 1950 to ca. 17 million in less than forty years. Of these, we are told that one third are favelados, landless urban squatters, and over 2.5 million are street children.

Indeed, the primary purpose of holding vast amounts of land, as Andre Gunder Frank writes in *On Capitalist Underdevelopment*, "is not to use it but to prevent its use by others. These others, denied access to the primary resource, necessarily fall under the domination of the few who do control it. And then they are exploited in all conceivable ways, typically through low wages."

3. The Promised Land and the Promise of Land Reform

The underclasses in Latin America envision something better for themselves and their children. As a consequence, many Latin American countries have attempted to institute some type of land reform. Since the structures of oppression were not developed autonomously, many of the reforms were aimed at foreign exploitation. Examples include the nationalization of the oil fields in Chile in 1923, in Argentina in 1924, in Mexico in 1938, in Brazil in 1950, and in Peru in 1969. Sometimes, however, the nationalization has targeted advantaged groups within the country, such as that of Bolivia's tin industry in 1952, when more than half the industry was owned by the Patiño family. (This, interestingly, follows the colonial practice of reserving gold and silver for the king, and is more characteristic of Latin America than of the former English colonies, the United States.) Outside of legislating control over mineral and gas resources, however, there have been relatively few real attempts at rural agrarian land reform, and virtually none at urban land reform.

Mexico attempted land reform in the mid-1800s after expropriating the Church's estates, and in 1917 after the revolution that toppled the Diaz oligarchy. Before the revolution began in 1911, two-tenths of one per cent of the population owned estates, and 88.4% were landless laborers. The goal of the Mexican constitution of 1917 was to redistribute some of the land among the peasants, directly in small holdings, and as grants called ejidos to communities. The latter allowed individuals the right to cultivate plots of community land without buying or renting them. It seemed like a good idea, but there was not enough land to give small holdings to all the landless laborers. Over a quarter of the national territory (more than 55 million hectares) was expropriated and redivided between 1924 and 1970. But with the withdrawal of state support in the form of credit, water resources, transportation and marketing advantages, and technical assistance, the ejidos could not compete successfully with private farms. Other land redistribution attempts have occurred in other Latin American countries, such as Bolivia, Peru, and Cuba, with similar mixed results.

Latin America's most promising approach to land reform was the "Law of Emphyteusis" adopted in 1826 under the influence of Argentina's founding president, Bernardino Rivadavia. Emphyteusis, in ancient Roman law, denoted a perpetual lease of lands and tenements in consideration of annual rent and of improvements. Its enactment quickly resulted in new settlements, new employment opportunities, and the cultivation of hitherto

neglected lands. A series of decrees was promulgated to correct administrative defects, but before they became operative, Rivadavia resigned. His bitter opponent, Colonel Dorrego, proceeded to emasculate the program, a process completed by dictator Juan Manuel de Rosas, who conferred huge land grants upon himself and his minions, eliminating almost wholly the public collection of ground rent. The inland provinces became practically depopulated, and the Emphyteutic Law was finally repealed in 1857.

Effective land reform in Latin America, as elsewhere, has scarcely taken place. One of the major obstacles is that many governments are run or controlled by a powerful elite that owns the most valuable land, and often retards and corrupts the reform process.

Foreign enterprises also fight the reforms by threatening to withdraw their investments.

They are aided by fiscally conservative politicians who argue that stability is necessary for economic development, even at the expense of ignoring the exploitation of the poor, who are poorly represented in the political process.

And the few that have been enacted have been plagued by a host of problems, and often merely reposition the former landowners, thanks to compensation for expropriated lands, as the new monopolists of trade and money lending, able to renew their exploitation of the poor.

Turning to their religious heritage for answers to severe injustice and suffering due to land monopoly seems natural to liberation theologians and their followers. In the Bible, the Promised Land is characterized by the "eminent domain" of God. The abundance of the land comes with the recognition that the earth is the Lord's. Otherwise, we continue in the Wasteland.

4. Life in the Wasteland: The Just Society vs. Baal Worship

Fertile ground for the emergence of liberation theology was provided by the clash of views over the role of politics in the Latin American Church in the first half of this century. One problem encountered was how to acknowledge God's sovereignty in history when the everyday world was structured in ways that seemed to deny it. Where could one find a divine presence in a civilization that, in so many ways, seemed so uncivilized?

And was it up to individuals or governments to establish a reign of righteousness?

Leonardo Boff points to three models of the Church that have impacted on the liberation dialogue in Latin America.

- First, "the Church as City of God" holds that politics and government are essentially outside the realm of religion, which is for individual salvation.
- Second, "The Church as Mater et Magistra" sees the Church as educating and persuading political leaders to work for social betterment.
- Third, "The Church as Sacrament of Salvation" has the religious community opening itself to the world and actively collaborating with the state in uplifting the members of society.

Finding all three historical models of the Church wanting, Boff suggests a fourth, drawn from his experiences in the Brazilian basic ecclesial communities. This model, which can be called "The Church of People-hood and Justice for All", would be much more participatory, avoiding centralization and domination. Being democratic, it

would emphasize the community more than the individual. Behind Boff's model is liberation theology's concern for the loss of "people-hood" in Latin America and in much of the world.

The new wave of Latin American theologians couple their critique of "individual Christianity" with an affirmation of the broader concept of being a "people of God." In the Bible, we are reminded, God has a chosen people. He loves the poor, oppressed, and landless -- as a group. He hates the oppressors -- as a group. It is the people who leave the Wasteland and enter the Promised Land. And although the generations had passed away, their children and grandchildren repeated the history of Egyptian oppression and God's salvation in the first person: "And the Egyptians treated us harshly, and afflicted us, and laid upon us hard bondage. Then we cried to the Lord... and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand." (Deut. 26:5-10)

The Judeo-Christian meaning of liberation is clarified by some attention to Baal, the most active "foreign god" of the Canaanite pantheon. To the Canaanites, fertility depended upon sexual union between Baal and his sister and consort, Anath. Baal worship consisted in reenacting the mating of the gods in orgiastic rites with temple prostitutes. Beyond maintaining natural fertility and harmony, Baal religion was used by the aristocracy to uphold the social order. Canaanite tenants worked as dispossessed farmers on estates owned by magnates, the temple, and the king. They worshiped the landowners, the baals, who held dominion over both the land and the peasants themselves. Old Testament exhortations against Baalism emphasize the proper way to worship Yahweh: by acting with mercy and justice towards one's fellow humans.

Because justice does not prevail when some, like the baals, claim the land and its bounty while others are excluded from these privileges, Hosea denounces Israel for betraying its covenant to recognize God as the true owner of the earth. And Amos, referring to the greed for possessing the land and its fruits, said God is angered by those "who trample upon the needy, and bring the poor of the land to an end" (Amos 8:4). Amos' indictment of Israel mentions oppression of the poor and cultic prostitution as if they were one (Amos 2:6-8). This seems strange until one recognizes that the link between these two sins is a wrongful concept of land ownership. Recall that Baal-worship and its sexual rites glorified inequitable land possession and control. In the Prophets, the role of land is crucial in the divine providential scheme, and the flouting of just principles of land possession has grave consequences. Human beings are caretakers, not the owners, of God's creation.

Amos and Hosea underscored that being a caretaker of the earth, while defining people's relationship to the land, also defined people's relationship to one another. Being a caretaker meant loving justice and doing mercy, letting go of selfish possession and the desire for power over others by usurping their means of livelihood, and instead becoming, like God, compassionate. Consider what a revolutionary break this represents from Baal worship, which idolized control of the soil and deified the landowners!

5. Poverty in the Wasteland: The Preferential Option for the Poor

Jesus expressed the contrast between ownership and stewardship in the pithy saying: "You cannot serve God and mammon" (Matt. 6:24; Luke 16:13). Again we see the real sting of Baal worship. Possessions, understood apart from their Creator and their usefulness to man, become "master." They become idols that dehumanize and kill. Stewardship never entails the passive acceptance of social mores that allow possessions to become masters (Luke 16:1-13). Thus, being a caretaker of God's land means having a different view of reality than is prevalent in a world ruled by possessions.

Jesus opens his ministry by claiming as real what Isaiah had hoped for: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release of captives and... to set at liberty those who are oppressed" (Luke 4:18).

Society turned upside down is the topic of Jesus's keynote address in Luke: the poor and hungry can be happy because they will no longer be poor and hungry. But Jesus does not stop at this announcement, he goes on to call people to stewardship. He asks men and women to love their enemies and to be merciful as God is merciful (Luke 6:27-49). He urges them to do no less than act as a community where God, not mammon, rules. These are radical demands.

Latin American liberation theologians point out that, according to the Exodus story and to Luke's gospel in particular, God's chosen people are the refuse of society. The reversal -- the reordering of those who are on top -- is good news to the poor! The recipients of God's grace, however, are not always poor, oppressed, or helpless. The patriarchs, the judges, the Roman centurions, and many others blessed by God certainly were not. Why did God act on their behalf as well? God is faithful, and acts favorably for those who respond to him with faith, as Paul points out (Rom. 1:16).

The church's "preferential option for the poor" must be seen as an application of the injunction to do justice and love mercy. As Gustavo Gutierrez has always insisted, we must maintain "both the universality of God's love and God's predilection for those on the lowest rung of the ladder of history. To focus exclusively on the one or the other is to mutilate the Christian message."

Liberation theologians and other social reformers often fall into the trap of romanticizing the poor, as did Nicolas Berdyaev in his early demi-Marxist days: I then thought that the proletariat, as a working and class-conscious group, exploited but at the same time free from the sin of exploitation, possessed the psychological structure that is favorable to the revelation of the truth...

The temptation here is to think of God's bias for the poor in terms of a higher spirituality brought about by poverty. Yet involuntary poverty is scarcely any guarantee of faith. If it were, its promotion ought to be a primary mission of evangelism, and the exploitation of the disadvantaged a cause to make the Church rejoice. The biblical bias is rather to be traced back to the nature of God himself.

God, finally, is the one who rejects power and takes upon himself, in the person of his son, the ultimate sacrifice in solidarity with all who are crucified by the power structures of this world. God not only has compassion for the poor, he becomes, like them, weak. God not only reverses society, he appears on the cross as a manifestation of this reversal. He appears, Paul wrote so vividly, as foolishness, a stumbling block, weakness, and uses "what is low and despised in the world... to bring to nothing things that are" (Cor. 1:18-31). God becomes weak in order to become one with his people. He wishes to be worshipped genuinely for the sake of his loving essence, not falsely for the sake of attributes which compel, out of fear, a counterfeit of worship. Thus Christ, in Dostoyevsky's powerful symbolism, spurns the Devil's temptation to make use of miracle, mystery, and authority, inviting instead a faith that finds in Truth and Goodness their own intrinsic validation. It is in this sense that Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36), for in this world predatory power assails the innocent and must be contained and curbed by power harnessed to their defense.

"I have overcome the world" (John 16:33) may be interpreted to mean that Truth and Goodness are triumphant simply because of what they are and that nothing external can affect them. But human life and freedom cannot be

made to depend entirely upon the spiritual condition of other men, society and its rulers. The rights of the individual must be safeguarded in case that spiritual condition proves to be a low one or not sufficiently enlightened by grace. As Nicholas Berdyaev put it, "A society that chose to be based solely upon grace and declined to have any law would be a despotic society.... It is impossible to wait for a gracious regeneration of society to make human life bearable."

As a citizen of the spiritual order, the Christian lives under grace -- and is not restrained by power or authority. But in this life he or she is also, inescapably, a citizen of the secular order, where power must be checked by power and political means employed to serve the ends of grace, moving the world closer to a likeness of the Promised Land.

6. Suffering in the Wasteland: Independence -- or In Dependency?

The Wasteland is a disturbing transition zone between Egypt and the Promised Land, between bondage and liberation. So Latin America today, in its second century after independence, finds itself in a wilderness between colonial subjugation and genuine self-determination.

Liberation theologians point to institutional evil, rather than individual evil, as the major factor keeping the poor trapped in the Wasteland. They shift the critical focus from problems caused by evil leaders to the oppression caused by large impersonal forces. And they further point out that these forces are not to be found solely in developing nations. (For example, in most societies, even developed ones, male-dominated social structures dehumanize women.) They remind us how a military-industrial complex, multinational corporations, government bureaucracies, giant banking centers, or other powerful institutions or organizations may depersonalize citizens, depriving them of effective control over their own lives.

The 1950s was an optimistic decade of developmentalism. But by 1967, Pope Paul VI questioned this optimism in his encyclical, *Populorum Progressio*. He saw rich nations developing quickly while poor nations developed slowly. He saw discord between people and nations arising from glaring worldwide inequalities of power and possessions. These conflicts arose in part, the Pope said, from too narrowly conceiving development as limited to economic growth. He called for broadening the goal to promote the good of every person, with emphasis on the whole person.

While in parts vague and offering no radical solutions, the Pope's encyclical nevertheless dramatized how poor nations may be held captive by economic dependence on rich ones, and served to correct a popular belief that economic growth alone is sufficient for progress.

Four years later, Gustavo Gutierrez raised a more substantive critique of developmentalism in his epochal work, *A Theology of Liberation*. As he saw it, underdevelopment, instead of being a step on the way to progress, is really the historical end-product of the economic expansion of the great capitalist countries. The amount of fat of wealthy nations is directly related to the amount of hunger of poor nations. Thus the first step toward liberation must be to sever the bondage of dependence. Gutierrez did not purport to be stating anything original, but simply advanced, in a theological context, ideas drawn from Andre Gunder Frank, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, and other secular Latin American social scientists who had produced various systems of dependency theory, based, in some cases, on Lenin's doctrine of imperialism.

It would be fatuous to deny that some of Latin America's poverty is traceable historically to the operations of First World companies and to the intervention of First World governments, as dependency theory holds. Due to the influence of Gutierrez and later Boff and others, dependency theory became a cardinal tenet of liberation theology. However, the theory is now recognized by Boff and Gutierrez as being of questionable value as a key to the solution or even diagnosis. Gutierrez now writes that the theory "does not take sufficient account of the internal dynamics of each country or of the vast dimensions of the world of the poor."

The existence of dependence does not automatically justify the charge that it stems from exploitation. This charge assumes a zero-sum situation where one region can increase its wealth only at the expense of other regions, which is to overlook the evidence that the world's wealth is not static but constantly being magnified by human enterprise. Economically, Canada is heavily dependent upon U.S. trade and investment, yet its standard of living is among the highest on earth -- due, in no small measure, to precisely that trade and investment. Albania, by contrast, was until recently the least dependent of all nations; under Enver Hoxha it followed a policy of almost total isolation, and neither traded nor maintained diplomatic relations even with other Marxist states. Yet its standard of living was the lowest in Europe -- due, in no small measure, to precisely that policy.

Insofar as dependency theory is (in a limited sense) analytically correct, the social ills to which it calls attention could be substantially dispelled by the proper allocation to the public of land and land value, or rent. Instead, most of the land rent is misappropriated by foreign corporations or domestic land-owning oligarchies. We will return to this very important point in Chapter 8.

7. Detours in the Wasteland: Marxism and Liberation

Liberation theologians have been influenced, in varying degrees, by aspects of Marxism such as some versions of dependency theory and the concepts of alienation, surplus value, class struggle, and socialism. But they have not been slavish devotees of Marx, nor have they ignored other significant secular movements such as Freudianism, existentialism, and phenomenology. Still, although it is now being used with increasing reservation, Marxism still retains a measure of vitality in liberationist thinking, and the influence of Marxism has distorted the socioeconomic outlook of liberation theology.

Alienation is a concept co-opted by the youthful Marx from Hegelian idealism. In Marx's view, alienation refers to how we are separated and misled by the projections of human experience in both abstract thought and social institutions. This is a harmful separation that divides a person within as well as from others, undermining a sense of being truly whole and "at home."

Marx found the source of alienation in the exchange relationship in general, and the wage relationship in particular. Under this system, a person sees work and its products as external to him or herself, a means to satisfying other ends, and work relationships (bosses, employees, co-workers, etc) also as means to other ends. No longer protected by patriarchal associations, feudal bonds, religious sanctions, etc., the worker is thrown into the "cash-nexus" of capitalism and confronts directly the impersonal market, which faces him as a tyrant and an anarchic force that neither employees nor employers are able to predict, control, or understand.

According to Marx, capitalist alienation is not a matter of the division of labor per se (since this is a universal feature of all economies) but "the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labour" which reduces the person to a functional cog in the machine.

Liberation theologians have linked the conquest of alienation with the abolition of the profit system, leading to the emergence of what Gutierrez calls the "new man" -- free, unselfish, creative, socially responsible -- the shaper of his own destiny. "Our revolution," proclaims Jose Porfirio Miranda, "is directed toward the creation of the new human being." The liberationists' most massive systematic effort, a five-volume work by Juan Luis Segundo, is entitled *Theology for Artisans of a New Humanity*. All this accords with the Marxist view that human nature is plastic and can be transformed by structurally altering material relationships. But it does not accord with the traditional Christian acknowledgment that human nature is sinful and can be transformed only through the operation of divine grace in human hearts.

For Marx, since commodity production is most developed under capitalism, so too is alienation and exploitation. This exploitation is hidden by "the fetishism of commodities" -- the social relations between labor products mediated by money. The measure of exploitation, for Marx, is found in the difference between the value of labor (wages paid) and the value of the commodities sold. This difference, realized as profit by the capitalist, Marx called "surplus value". Capital itself is nothing but stored-up labor, Marx wrote, deserving no further return (i.e., interest), and sterile without the application of current labor. It creates no value but simply absorbs it. New value is produced by current labor, but the worker is nominally paid no more than the value of the necessities of life habitually required by the average laborer. Surplus value, the difference between this and the market value of his product, thus constitutes "stolen wages."

Marx's fallacy is his failure to recognize that capital tremendously enhances the value-producing power of current labor, without which current labor would be very nearly sterile. If people had not stored up labor by refraining from immediate gratification, and instead using and often risking their wages to increase wealth, capital would not exist.

Initially, stored-up labor is the only source of capital; later, the rent of land can be converted into capital. But Marx viewed capital even in its initial formation as the expropriated product of the labor of others. To the extent that he was partially correct in this, the expropriation, as he himself indicates, must be laid mainly at the door of the landowner.

Marx's dialectical materialism holds that social classes are determined by historical development of various modes of production, and that class struggle must inevitably lead to a dictatorship of the proletariat, a transition on the way to the abolition of all classes and the emergence of the classless society. Yet in Latin America, the proletariat -- Marx's industrial wage-workers -- constitute the top quarter of income earners. The truly marginalized are the tenant farmers and other agricultural workers along with the jobless or underemployed urban slum-dwellers. But Marx considered the agricultural workers of his day to be hopelessly reactionary, and the urban lumpenproletariat to be hopelessly degraded into beggars, criminals, and "scabs."

Liberation theology, however, borrows from Marx to suit its own vision. Substituting the poor for the proletariat, liberationists hold that theology must grow out of the revolutionary practices of the marginalized and exploited masses. But, the poor exhibit the same range of tendencies as other classes, from the virtuous to the vicious, a fact which complicates liberationist claims that the poor are special repositories of the truth.

In spite of the recent collapse of socialist states, socialism, or a perception of it, still has a strong hold on many who are trying to overcome economic oppression. Marx was vague as to the structure of a post-revolutionary society. Describing the aims of the Paris Commune of 1871, Marx wrote, "It wanted to make individual property a truth by transforming the means of production, land and capital, now chiefly the means of enslaving and

exploiting labor, into mere instruments of free and associated labor," and, he declared, "this is Communism." This sounds surprisingly consistent with a free market and with the goals of genuine land reform, but it is far from consistent with what he really meant by communism: the total abolition of the market.

What is supposed to happen after the inevitable overthrow of capitalism? Production will be for use and not for profit, but at first the products will be distributed (by means of noncirculating labor certificates) in terms of the amount of socially useful labor each individual performs. In the "higher phase" of communist society, distribution will be according to the formula "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs."

Marx gave little more detail beyond these hints of labor certificates and central planning. What are the criteria planners would use in allocating both material resources and labor (human beings)? And how would this process not contradict Marx's vision of freedom to shift from one occupation to another at will, even several times a day? And what is to prevent the initial dictatorship from becoming a self-perpetuating oligarchy?

Liberationists ignore the history of state socialism, which has time and again introduced capitalist "impurities" to correct its dismal performance -- beginning as far back as Lenin's "New Economic Policy." These measures have been necessary because socialism's view of human nature as either naturally noble or almost totally malleable is fallacious. While many do respond unselfishly and heroically in crises such as war and natural disaster, such behavior cannot be sustained in a large-scale way as a regular day-to-day routine. Insofar as populations can be conditioned to behave selflessly, they are also reduced to regiments of biped ants.

An economic system is best founded on the assumption that people are basically self-centered. And the art of government, Archbishop Temple observed, "is the art of so ordering life that self-interest prompts what justice demands."

The critique made here owes a lot to the work of Michael Novak, particularly his book *Will It Liberate?* But while Novak takes liberation theology seriously and seeks genuine dialogue, he is disappointing, not so much in what he says as in what he fails to say. (This may be why he is perceived by many liberationists as an apologist for North American capitalism.) While he speaks of the need to use the taxing power in Latin America to promote and maximize economic creativity rather than repress it, nowhere does Novak offer a model of such enlightened tax policy -- and nowhere does he advance any concrete suggestions as to how to address the land question. Yet the two, tax reform and land reform, are indeed intimately connected; true liberation demands both.

8. Power in the Wasteland: Understanding Essential Relationships

Many liberation theologians ignore the role of land ownership and do not even include land in the indexes of their books. Yet none would deny that land hoarding and land access are fundamental issues of justice and economic development.

The following two passages by Henry George, the economist who made the most definitive statements on land's role in political economy, illustrate the fundamental characteristics of land that are missed or ignored by modern economic analysts of the left and the right:

Does the passenger who enters a railroad car obtain the right to scatter his baggage over all the seats and compel the passengers who come in after him to stand up? ... We arrive and we depart... passengers from station to

station, on an orb that whirls through space -- our rights to take and possess cannot be exclusive; they must be bounded everywhere by the equal rights of others. Just as the passenger in a railroad car may spread himself and his baggage over as many seats as he pleases, until other passengers come in, so may a settler take as much land as he chooses, until it is needed by others -- a fact which is shown by the land acquiring a value....

On the land we are born, from it we live, to it we return again -- children of the soil as truly as is the blade of grass or the flower of the field. Take away from man all that belongs to the land, and he is but a disembodied spirit. Material progress cannot rid us of our dependence upon land.

Beneath all ideologies, there are basic factors and relationships that underlie economic behavior. To understand the (otherwise inexplicable) omission of attention to land's economic importance, it is useful to go back to these basics. The term "Land" refers to the whole material universe, exclusive of people and their products. Not the creation of human labor, yet essential to labor, it is the raw material from which all wealth is fashioned. It includes not only soil and minerals, but water, air, natural vegetation and wildlife, and all natural opportunities -- even those yet to be discovered. It is a passive factor of production, yielding wealth only when labor is applied to it.

Labor includes all human powers, mental and physical, used directly or indirectly to produce goods or to render service in exchange. Labor is often thought of as work that is done for hire, at fixed wages, mainly excluded from the risk-taking and decision-making that is normally classed under the heading of "entrepreneurship". Yet labor, properly understood, includes all human exertion in production -- including mental exertion. The payment to labor is called Wages. And it is important to remember that the payment, or return, to labor does not include any returns that are the result of monopoly.

Capital is the economic term that is most profoundly misunderstood and confused. For the term to make sense in any systematic analysis of wealth distribution, we must define capital in its classical sense as "wealth which is used to aid in further production, instead of being directly consumed." Since production is not completed until the product is in the hands of the consumer, products on their way to market, or "wealth in the course of exchange," are also considered capital.

Now, the objective of all economic behavior is the satisfaction of human desires. Human beings always seek to satisfy their desires with the least exertion: this self-evident proposition lies at the heart of our concepts of economic value and exchange. The primary thing needed for satisfaction is, of course, the tangible things, made from natural resources, that satisfy human desires and have exchange value. Things that meet these four fundamental criteria are termed "wealth". But money, bonds, and mortgages are but claims upon and measures of this value; they are not the wealth they symbolize.

A clear understanding of these basic definitions points immediately to the primacy of land as an economic factor. Human beings have inescapable material needs of food, clothing and shelter. Regardless of how long a chain of exchanges they may pass through in a modern economy, these things ultimately have their source in the land; they can come from nowhere else. Human beings need land in order to live. But if we must pay rent to a private land "owner" for access to the gifts of nature, it amounts to being charged a fee for our very right to live.

Land's value goes up when population increases and technological and economic development make labor more productive. Those who "own" land often withhold it from use, expecting to capture its increased value in the future -- thus, the possession of land enables people to take an income that they did nothing to produce.

Speculative withholding of land has disastrous consequences. Peasants who seek land on which to survive are pushed out to poorer and poorer lands. These "sub-marginal" lands become their alternative place for self-employment. With such a poor alternative, they have no choice but to accept very low wages. Rent -- the payment to landowners -- absorbs more of the wealth produced on all sites.

Land speculation also prevents development near the center of cities, pushing it to the outskirts while the center decays from neglect and slums increase. The "sprawl" engulfs farms and forests, even as it raises the price of land, making use and development more costly.

Rapid destruction of the Amazon rain forest in Brazil dramatizes how the unnatural phenomenon of sprawl has an ominous worldwide impact on the environment. In Brazil, ten per cent of the landowners own 80 percent of the land, while one million peasants are forced off the land each year. And a mere one per cent controls 48 percent of the cultivable land. The only place in Brazil where there is land for the taking is in the Amazon rain forest. The destruction of the rain forest is caused by a system that perpetuates artificial land shortages. Nearly four-fifths of Brazil's arable land is covered by sprawling latifundios, most of which are held by speculators who produce nothing.

Here is the root cause of poverty. When laborers are faced with the choice of either bare subsistence wages or land that can barely maintain life, labor itself is marginalized and cannot effectively bargain on its own behalf. Wages, generally, on all land, are driven down toward the point of bare subsistence. Returns to capital are also depressed for the same reason, deterring investment. When this is carried to an extreme -- when people can no longer afford the goods being produced and when there is little profit in applying capital -- the economy collapses. The inflated land market, on which the speculative frenzy has fed, collapses too.

Since the Great Depression, such total ruin has been minimized in more developed nations through Keynesian measures: monetary expansion, massive public works and welfare programs. In Third World countries, such Keynesian expedients, which support high speculative rent levels, work only if demand for exports is strong. When that demand weakens, the weight of external debt becomes so crushing as to defy redemption.

The Third World debt crisis is taken by many as the clearest sign of the correctness of dependency theory. It is asserted that Western moneylenders have extended loans to corrupt regimes, knowing that the nations' peoples would have to sacrifice to bear ever-increasing burdens. But when we recognize the land problem as the basic cause of the kind of economic collapse that has led to the "foreign debt crisis", it becomes clear that Western financial interests did not create those maladies but rather exploited the hapless economic policies of developing nations for their own gain.

Some defenders of the status quo admit that all land titles may be traced either to acts of force or fraud (or to the more respectable-sounding "priority of occupation"). But, they add, we cannot start over; society has for centuries given legal sanction to private landed property. Innumerable contracts have been executed on the basis of this sanction, and these include the good faith purchase of land. For society to withdraw this sanction, they claim, would be a breach of trust.

The passage of time, however, cannot turn a wrong into a right. Kings and popes and governments never had the moral right to vest in perpetual ownership what God intended for the benefit of all. If the acquisition of a benefit under the law were to establish such a vested right, no law could ever be amended, since it would invariably work to someone's disadvantage.

Obviously, change that further rends the fabric of society is usually self-defeating. And the vast majority of beneficiaries of unjust structures -- the beleaguered middle classes -- are not intentional wrongdoers but passive recipients of unearned wealth from a flawed system they did not create. The dismantling of these structures, therefore, should, whenever possible, be done in ways that avoid excessive hardship for them. But it must be done.

9. Claiming the Promised Land: A New Jubilee for a New World

In the book of Joshua, we find that although the Promised Land is a gift from God, it is a gift that has to be claimed. Even before the actual conquest of the Promised Land, the Mosaic Law prescribed a method whereby possession of land was to be rendered pleasing in God's sight. The Canaanites' claim was forfeited by their idolatry, with human sacrifice and temple prostitution, and by their exploitive, monopolistic social order. By contrast, Israel, to make good its claim, had to institute a social order that would guard against the desecration, pollution, and injustices of which its predecessors were guilty, and would secure to each family and to every generation within the Hebrew commonwealth the equal right to the use of the land, of which the Lord was recognized as the sole absolute owner.

They began with a census of the tribes and families before the conquest (Num. 26:1-51). Every tribe, excepting Levi, and within each tribe every family, was to receive its proportionate share, according to size (Num. 26:55-56), and ultimately, to ensure fairness, by lot (Num. 34:16-29). The actual distribution, according to these provisions, was concluded at Shiloh (Josh. 19:51). According to ancient historian Josephus, the territory was not divided into shares of equal size but of equal agricultural value. The landmarks that protected these allotments were protected by the public and solemn denunciation of a curse against anyone who should dishonestly tamper with them (Deut. 27:11-16; 19:14).

As discovered again in our own century, it is easier to devise a one-time fair apportionment of land than it is to keep the system from falling apart. This is why the ancient law established the Jubilee year. At the end of every fifty years, any alienated lands -- given away, sold, or lost from unpaid debts -- would be restored to the original families. Temporary possessors were to be compensated for any unexhausted improvements they may have made on the land. Concentrated landownership, and the division of society into landed and landless classes, was thereby prevented from creeping into the system. The Jubilee effectively took the profit out of landholding as such, leaving no incentive for speculation. When it was observed -- and historical records indicate that it was observed for long periods -- the Jubilee system successfully removed the root cause of poverty from the Jewish society.

The influence of the Jubilee idea upon early Pennsylvania colonists is evidenced by the inscription on the Liberty Bell of the biblical words enjoining the Jubilee year: "Proclaim Liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof." (Lev. 25:10) The founder of Pennsylvania, William Penn, advocated that all men be "tenants to the public", and to defray public expenses instituted a tax on land.

Environmental concern also goes back to biblical land laws. To prevent the exhaustion of the soil, a periodic fallow was ordered. "During one year in every seven, the soil, left to the influences of sun and frost, wind and rain, was to be allowed to 're-create' itself after six years' cropping, exactly as the tiller of the soil renewed his strength, after six days' work, by his Sabbath day's rest."

As noted, the tribe of Levi did not share in the equal division of the land, since it was charged with carrying out religious and public duties. Its members were entitled to an indemnity from the eleven tribes who received the land that otherwise would have gone to them. This indemnity was the tithe -- one-tenth of the product from the land occupied by the eleven other tribes.

Here, in principle, is the formula for a just land system in almost any time or place. The compensation to the Levites maintained the substance of equal rights to land, alongside of and compatible with unequal physical division of the land itself. As Frederick Verinder pointed out in his book *My Neighbour's Landmark*, joint heirs of a house may share it equally by occupying it equally or unequally but "paying the rental into a common fund, from which each draws an equal share; or they may let the whole house to someone else and divide the rent equally." So it is with land. Sharing equally in the economic rent or value of land through the application of that value to common uses from which all benefit, renders private ownership and unequal partition of land morally and pragmatically benign.

The modern equivalent of removing one's neighbor's landmark is thus not the private ownership of land per se, but rather the private appropriation of land value. "The profit of the earth is for all" (Eccles. 5:9). The Old Testament ethic, to assure everyone the same natural opportunity, asserts that all people have an equal right to economic rent, and the Levite tithe demonstrates that the socialization of rent offsets the ethical and practical harm resulting from private land ownership. But there is another basis for its advocacy: Rent should be taken by society because it is a social product. Rent arises in large measure from two societal phenomena: the mere presence of population, and community activity in a particular area. More people means more demand for space on which to live and work. Community activities such as roads, schools, protection, parks, sewage, utilities and other public services, as well as the totality of private commercial and cultural operations, all make land more productive or desirable. It follows that a community which funds such improvements out of its rent fund will be provided with a stable and growing fund with which to maintain and improve them. And unlike conventional taxes, the collection of this fund will enhance, not penalize, the production of wealth.

Individuals, in their bare capacity as landowners, do nothing to produce land value. By withholding sites from use, whether for speculation or for other reasons, they may generate scarcity, artificially inflating rent, but this does not reflect any positive contribution to production on the part of landowners.

While land value is not the only type of unearned increment, unearned income resulting from such advantages as talent, genes or luck is not at the expense of others. Even Karl Marx admitted: "The monopoly of property in land is even the basis of the monopoly of capital." Marx could have -- but did not -- champion the abolition of land monopoly; instead he advocated its transfer from private into state hands. It was left to Henry George to expound how the universal principles of justice found in the Mosaic model could be applied to the modern age in all its economic aspects -- rural and urban, agricultural and industrial, technologically undeveloped or advanced.

What George advocated was to leave land titles in private hands but to appropriate land rent via the existing machinery of property taxation. "I do not propose either to purchase or to confiscate private property in land. The first would be unjust; the second, needless....It is not necessary to confiscate land; it is only necessary to

confiscate rent." No owner or tenant would be expropriated or evicted. No limit would be placed on the quantity of land one could hold, as long as the annual rent were paid.

Coordinately with the capture of rent as public revenue, taxes on products of human labor -- improvements, personal property, services, commodities, wages, etc. -- would be reduced and ultimately eliminated.

George considered his remedy no mere human contrivance. He saw the growth of land value and the easy means of equitably distributing it as an expression of benevolent supernatural design: "As civilization goes on... so do the common wants increase and so does the necessity for public revenue arise. And so in that value which attaches to land, not by reason of anything the individual does, but by reason of the growth of the community, is a provision intended -- we may safely say intended -- to meet that social want."

George's remedy goes a long way to stop current inequity and prevent future inequity. While past inequity, in the form of accumulations of capital based on previous land speculation and monopoly cannot be accurately redressed, these fortunes can be impelled to serve the needs of the public via investment in production, not by further investment in land speculation and monopoly.

Dependency theory, to the degree that it hits upon one of the causes of Third World poverty in exploitation by foreign investors, can find in George's land value tax the constructive practical approach it lacks. Neither erection of trade barriers nor legal restriction of foreign ownership is called for. As one Australian writer puts it:

(W)hen investors from one country buy property in other countries they are seeking site rent, which they hope to obtain directly from tenants, or indirectly by selling land in the future when the price or capital value has increased.... The site rent that is so attractive to overseas investors can be kept in the country quite easily - - by shifting taxation from labor onto land."

Because George asserted, "We must make land common property," he is sometimes erroneously regarded as an advocate of land nationalization. But, as we have seen, he was nothing of the sort. The expropriation of land makes it practically impossible to fairly compensate people for the improvements to land, which are their legitimate property. George's system renders to the community what is due to the community, without doing any violence to the wealth that has been fairly earned by productive workers.

Common property in land is sometimes discredited by equation with what Garrett Hardin calls "The Tragedy of the Commons." Referring to the common lands that were a major English institution until the mid-nineteenth century, Hardin describes the tendency of individuals, each rationally pursuing self-interest, to overgraze, denude, and use the commons as a cesspool. That which belongs to everybody in this sense is, indeed, in danger of being valued and maintained by nobody.

The enclosure movement ultimately brought an end to this ecologically destructive process, but not without literally pushing people off the land, exacting a baneful price in human misery that might well be termed "The Tragedy of the Enclosures." George hit upon a way of securing the benefits of both commons and enclosures, while at the same time avoiding their evils. Land value taxation rectifies distribution so that all receive wealth in proportion to their contribution to its production. This liberates the economic system from exploiters who contribute little or nothing. Apportioning the wealth pie fairly increases the incentive to increase the size of the pie. The market becomes in practice what capitalist theory alleges it to be -- a profoundly cooperative process of voluntary exchange of goods and services. Paradoxical though it may seem, the only way the individual may be

assured what properly belongs to him or her is for society to take what properly belongs to it: The ideal of Jeffersonian individualism requires for its actualization the socialization of rent.

Just as Marxists err in insisting that everything be socialized, extreme capitalists err in insisting that everything (even public parks and forests!) be privatized. The middle way is to recognize society's claim to what nature and society create -- the value of land and its rent -- so that working people, including entrepreneurs, may claim their full share of what they create. In this balanced approach can be found the authentic verities respectively inherent in socialism and individualism.

10. The Promised Land and the Kingdom of God

The Promised Land, like Eden, is a place of unhindered scope in which to glorify God and manifest his will. But it is not the Kingdom of God. It represents liberation from external bondage -- from oppression and restricted access to material opportunity. It is the temporal matrix within which the Kingdom may find full expression. But it is not itself the Kingdom. Although it is a heresy that locates this Kingdom exclusively in the afterlife or an ethereal paradise, Jesus declared it to be "not of this world" (John 18:36) but "within" (Luke 17:21). It is no reproach to Henry George that he lost sight of this distinction between the Promised Land and the Kingdom of God, enraptured by his vision of a just society:

With want destroyed; with greed changed to noble passions; with the fraternity that is born of equality taking the place of jealousy and fear that now array men against each other; with mental power loosed by conditions that give to the humblest comfort and leisure; and who shall measure the heights to which our civilization may soar? Words fail the thought! It is the Golden Age.... It is the culmination of Christianity -- the City of God on earth, with walls of jasper and gates of pearl! It is the reign of the Prince of Peace!

By equalizing opportunity, political and economic liberation tend to draw both poor and rich into the middle class. As an expression of social justice, this constitutes a genuine advance, ethical as well as material. But it is no easy guarantee of spiritual gain. Middle-class traits include virtues such as industry, thrift, restraint, commercial and professional rectitude, but, on the other hand, low prudentialism, self-satisfaction, and an inclination to regard material well-being as a sign of righteousness. Hence, even in the Promised Land, what Paulo Freire calls "conscientization" (roughly, consciousness-raising through social commitment), emphasized and refined by liberation theology, must continue although in a different vein. The Kingdom of God will flourish only when outward liberation gives rise to inward liberation, a victory over the limitations of the bourgeois ethos.

"The Earth Is the Lord's" (Psalm 24:1). This statement tells us something about God. He is attached to the land and loves it. He is not a spiritual abstraction oblivious to the Wasteland in which we live. God is the maker of the world of eating and sleeping, working and begetting. It also tells us something of our place in this world. With God as the true owner of the earth, every person has a right to the produce which equitable usufruct yields to his or her efforts.

To recognize that "the earth is the Lord's" is to see that the same God who established communities has also in his providence ordained for them, through the land itself, a just source of revenue. Yet, in the Wasteland in which we live, this revenue goes mainly into the pockets of monopolists, while communities meet their needs by extorting individuals the fruits of their honest toil. If ever there were any doubt that structural sin exists, our present system of taxation is the proof. Everywhere we see governments penalizing individuals for their industry and creativity, while the socially produced value of land is reaped by speculators in exact proportion to the land

which they withhold. The greater the Wasteland, the greater the reward. Does this comport with any divine plan, or notion of justice and human rights? Or does it not, rather, perpetuate the Wasteland and prevent the realization of the Promised Land?

This not meant to suggest that land monopolists and speculators have a corner on acquisitiveness or the "profit motive," which is a well-nigh universal fact of human nature. As a group, they are no more sinful than are people at large, except to the degree that they knowingly obstruct reforms aimed at removing the basis of exploitation. Many abide by the dictum: "If one has to live under a corrupt system, it is better to be a beneficiary than a victim of it."

But they do not have to live under a corrupt system; no one does. The profit motive can be channeled in ways that are socially desirable as well as in ways that are socially destructive. Let us give testimony to our faith that the earth is the Lord's by building a social order in which there are no victims.

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