

SLAVERY AND HUMAN DIGNITY

Prof. Héctor Laporta, PhD.

Throughout history there have been different ideas and forms in which some human beings marginalize and discriminate against their peers. Reviewing history, we see that there were groups who subdued and enslaved the defeated people.

However, it would be in sixteenth century with the *Conquista* of the Americas that slavery would become a systematic and large-scale signature promoted and organized by Europeans in the Western hemisphere, heavily influenced by Christianity.

In order to justify slavery in a large-scale “racism” was created to organize the world order. And I affirm this because before the colonization of the Americas there was no ethnic differences between white, black, and indian. The creation of racial categories known as *racism* was a colonial invention to justify, organize and shape the new world order.

La idea de raza es, con toda seguridad, el más eficaz instrumento de dominación social inventado en los últimos 500 años. Producida en el mero comienzo de la formación de América y del capitalismo, en el transito del siglo XV al XVI, en las centurias siguientes, fue impuesta sobre la población del planeta como parte de la dominación colonial de Europa.¹

From that time onward, racist theories developed, but it was only in the nineteenth century that racism finally took shape as a “scientific” mode of thought that divided human beings into separate categories (races) based primarily on a number of phenotypical markers that were thought to correlate directly with mental qualities. These qualities were understood to be inherited and unchangeable, which allowed for the ranking of *races* from superior to inferior. Under this

¹ Segato, R. *La crítica de la colonialidad en ocho ensayos* (2021: 53)

logic, was constructed white supremacy to dominate people of color: Asians, Africans and American Indians.

History has shown us that *racism* has been useful, it has been the european countries and powerful groups who have benefit in order to facilitated social divisions and oppression.

We can see the evidence by looking at the period of the formation of world capitalism and the begining of the accumulation of wealth in Great Britain. Between the mid-sixteenth century till the abolition of human traffic in Brasil, more than fourteen million people, mainly from West Africa, were torn from their communities of origin to be taken to the european colonies in America. The “black cattle” allowed to promote the development of the colonies in diverse activities like: agriculture, mining, domestic activities on the farms.²

The history of this new order began in the sixteenth century during which people became merchandise, exchange objects, disposable bodies that did not end until the twenty first century.

In a time of economic expansion of the global market, the privatization of the world, and the pos-imperial military complex. People from Africa, Asia and Latin America are disposable through economic and political policies: low salaries, trafficking and sex trade, enviromental deterioration due to extractive economic activities (mining, oil, monocultures).

So we can see *racism* is not a fix category and for that reason we can see new modes of racial expressions.³ The procedures of differentiation, classification, and hierarchization for purposes of exclusión, expulsión, even eradication are reactivated in all parts of the world.

In the Americas, one important argument has been the ideology of *mestizaje* use by the elites to deny and disqualify the racial discrimination against the indigenous population.

Between 1808 and 1826 all of Latin America except the Spanish colonies of Cuba and Puerto Rico slipped out of the hands of the Iberian powers who had ruled the región since the *Conquista*.

The examples of rebellion in the British Colonies in America and the French revolution, empowered Latin American leaders to built an alternative to colonial rule. Most of these american leaders were influenced and educated in Enlightenment ideals of liberal principles of democracy.

² Williams, E. *Capitalismo y esclavitud*

³ Mbembe, A. *Critica de la Razón Negra* (2016: 56-59).

These new nascent republics, founded in the early eighteenth century who defeated the colonial power, were a national elite leaders who were mainly “white” educated in Europe with Enlightenment ideals of democracy but at the end they excluded the indigenous populations with the same racial arguments that they were inferior and barbarians. As the sociologist Anibal Quijano affirmed “the new state was independent of the colonial power, but, simultaneously, in its character it was a tight expression of the colonial and racial state.”⁴

As a result we can see, Latin American history as a continuation of colonial structures in neo-colonial domination, till today. National bourgeoisies has been involved in “neo-colonial” agreements with international enterprises (from Canada, USA, Europe) which strengthened economic and political dependency and deepened inequality in Latin American societies.

There are approximately fifty one million of indigenous people in Latin America which is around 11% of the total regional population, with wide variation among states and regions within them. All Latin American states contain some percentage of indigenous populations. Bolivia, Guatemala and Peru have the highest indigenous population in the región.⁵ Just to remind you, that this are the official statistics that usually are more conservative in their projections.

Until the 1970’s the ILO (International Labor Office) was the only institutional member of the United Nations who has consistently expressed an interest in indigenous people’s rights. This was in response to the widespread exploitation of indigenous labor around the world. They wrote a document, ILO Convention 169, who has two basic principles: the right of the indigenous populations to hold and strengthen their cultures, life forms and own institutions; and the ownership of the lands they traditionally occupy. Besides that, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous people was approved by a majority of states. Part of the document affirms:

“Indigenous people have the right to maintain and strengthen their distinct political, legal, economic, social and cultural institutions, while retaining their right to participate fully, if they so choose, in the political, economic, social and cultural life of the state.”

(art. 5)

⁴ Quijano, A. “El movimiento indígena y las cuestiones pendientes en América Latina” (641).

⁵ Inter-American Development Bank 2006:47

“Indigenous people shall not be forcibly removed from their land or territories. No relocation shall take without the free, prior and informed consent of the indigenous peoples concerned and after agreement on just and fair compensation and where possible, with the option of return.”

(art. 10)

Unfortunately, even though most countries support the UN declaration, except the US, as a universal framework of minimum standards for indigenous rights; nation States have not fulfill those agreements. First, by adopting policies of assimilation and integration disrespecting their rights of self determination; secondly by the violation and the exploitation of their territories. Basically, extractive international enterprises in mining, oil and monoculture agro-industries.

For Achille Mbembe, the politics of death initiated in the sixteenth century persist in the present in exclusion contexts in which those in power make the decision of who lives and who dies in this neoliberal scenery.

“any historical account of the emergence of modern terror must take slavery into account, which can be considered one of the first manifestations of biopolitical experimentation”⁶

He calls *necropolitics* the right of the Nation state under *state of exception* to decide who lives and who die. The army does not fight against external regular armies anymore; instead operates internally against those who question or are in the boundaries of the nation state. Even the controls and guarantees of the judicial order can be suspended due to the violence of the *state of exception* supposedly operating at the service of “civilization.” The *necro-power* can occur in different ways: under the terror of real death or under a more “condescending” form whose result

⁶ Mbembe, A. *Necropolítica* España: Editorial Melusina (2011:31)

consists of the destruction of culture (forced sterilizations, extermination of environmentalists, subjugation of the body through medical regulations, social Darwinism, and eugenics)⁷

The work of Mbembe, philosopher from Camerun, interrogates the contexts of non-humanity today, where life is reified and death begins to invade the life of micro-power groups such as detentions and killing the gangs or maras in El Salvador and Ecuador; the killing of indigenous leaders who defend their territories and the environment in Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, and Honduras⁸; law impunity to the high rate of femicides in the región. The argument use to defend the rule of law and impunity during *state of exception* is the right to kill if is necessary in the name of the democratic state and order; which the real effect is ethnic cleansing.

John Wesley and slavery

Reviewing Methodist history, we can see that opposition to human traffic and slavery express by John Wesley and other leaders was a minority viewpoint in the society and religious context of the eighteenth century in Great Britain.

Besides en 1840 some methodists preachers in the colonial American south like William Capers and William A. Smith used biblical quotes and arguments in order to justify slavery.

The Bible does not explicitly say anything that slavery is wrong. Slavery seems to be tolerated by biblical writers like Paul. The slave institution was allowed by the government and since Christians have to submit to their authorities.⁹

Before Methodism came to North America, slavery was legal in the thirteen American colonies. So in North America, Methodists were pressured to treat slavery not as an abstract ethical matter but as a legally established institution. Which led the Methodist societies in North America decided to

⁷ Ibid. P.36

⁸ At least 126 defenders of human rights and the environment were murdered in Latin America in 2023 according to the data Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos (CIDH).

⁹ Painter, K. "The Pro-slavery argument in the development of the American Methodism" in *Constructing the Past*. Volume 2 Issue 1. Illinois: Wesleyan University, 2001

agree on the following: 1) Methodism was obliged to present the Gospel to the slaves; 2) Although slavery was an evil institution, methodists had to find the best possible methods to deal with that evil.¹⁰

Regarding the first agreement, it has highly criticized by other denominations and missions because the members of these groups did not agree that blacks should be evangelized. Basically for two reasons: 1) They questioned the humanity of black people; 2) and secondly “baptizing” them could risk their slave status and use baptism as an excuse to be free.

As the years go by, the situation of slavery becomes unsustainable with a series of events. In August 1772, Wesley wrote in his Diary that he was reading a book *Some Historical Accounts of Guinea* published by Antonio Benezet an anti-abolitionist quaker living in America. Around the same time, news of public interest emerged in the London Society about the case of James Somerset. He was a runaway slave owned by Charles Stewart from Boston. Somerset was captured in Jamaica and his master intended to sell him because of what happened. This case was brought to the court of justice on June 22, 1772. Lord Mansfield would decree that “no master may take a slave to be forcibly sold abroad because he does not desire their services or for any other reason,” so Somerset was acquitted. Triumph that does not necessarily abolish slavery, but it did establish a precedent.

These facts challenged Wesley who wrote a booklet titled *Reflections on Slavery* in 1774, when he was seventy-one years old. Becoming a best seller at its time reaching four editions.

This writing by Wesley marked a new milestone in Wesley’s theology in a time in which he had matured in his faith and leadership. First, he re-read Benezet arguments, asking his permission, to adapt his writing to the London public opinion. Second, he develops an alternative way of doing theology against the fundamentalist theology of his time who use the Bible in order to justify the status quo (slavery).

His writing is divided in three main parts. The first section is a rejection of the argument that European slave traders rescued Africans from barbaric and degraded cultures; the second section *describes* the cruelty of the slave trade and of the practice of slavery; and the third section addresses people who directly perpetrate or benefit from the enslavement of people.

¹⁰ Idem.

In his **first section**, Wesley *de-construct*, using Derrida terminology, putting into question meaning, arguments, interpretation, and language of preconceptions about slavery.¹¹

He starts by giving a historical background about slavery. Showing a knowledge of a critical historical analysis in his argument, as we have mentioned before:

“From the time of slavery was nearly extinct till the commencement of the sixteenth century when the discovery of America...”

Meanwhile the defenders of slavery had argued that Africans were stubborn, stupid, and wicked and that their societies were barbaric and degraded cultures; Wesley put into question those preconceptions asking the testimony of two prominent leaders as Monsieur Brue and Monsieur Allanson, the latter a correspondent of the Royal Academy of Science of Paris, to give their personal accounts of their experience in Africa.

Monsieur Brue mention:

“are rigid Mahometans, drinking neither wine nor brandy. they are industrious and laborious, keeping their ground well cultivated and breeding a good stock of cattle..”

Monsieur Allanson said:

“Which way soever I turned my eyes, I beheld a perfect image of pure nature: An agreeable solitude, bounded on every side by a charming landscape... they are, generally speaking, very good-natured, sociable and obliging..”

Wesley ends this part saying:

“we have now seen what kind of country it is from which

¹¹ Derrida, J. *Of Grammatology*, 1976.

the negroes are brought, and what sort of men (even white men being the judges) they were in their own country.”

In his **second section**, first he describes the cruelty of the slave trade and of the practice of slavery. After Wesley *de-construct* the preconceptions that pretend to justify slavery; he shows us the x-rays of the wounds and scars caused in mutilate bodies by slavery.

He not only de-construct Western misconceptions but also describes the disposaval bodies saying:

“burning their towns and taking the inhabitants by force.
Little blacks of both sexes are stolen.
with burning-iron with the name of the Company are marked
on the breast.
They are exposed naked to the eyes of all in order to examination
of their purchasers....”

After making a detailed observation and description of the social reality, Wesley raises his theological voice, not based on biblical quotes, but with critical questions to the Western Christian society:

“Did the Creator intend that the noblest creatures
in the visible world should live such a life as this?
Are these thy glorious work, Parent of Good?”

Following his argument Mr. Wesley describes all the inconsistencies of the laws in reference to slaves in Virginia, Jamaica, and Barbados. He argues the following :

“But can law, human law, change the nature of things?
Can it turns darkness into light or evil into good? By
no means notwithstanding ten thousand laws, right
is right, and wrong is wrong still.
These must still remain an essential difference between
justice and injustice, cruelty and mercy...”

To finally, end up contrasting: human law with natural law; human justice with natural justice saying “I absolutely deny all slave-holding- to be consistent with any degree of natural justice.” With this parallelisms in opposition Wesley develops a theoretical basis for the limitation of the human laws and also of human justice.

Ending again raising a theological critical voice:

“Have you carefully taught them, that there is a God, a wise, powerful, merciful Being, the Creator and Governor of heaven and earth? That he has appointed a day wherein he will judge the world; and the wicked shall be cast into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels?”

Finally he not only addresses this booklet to everyone who wants to listen but also to people who directly promote and sustain the enslavement of people.

I have offered a close reading of John Wesley work to explore how to unveil how power operates and argue from a theological perspective that shakes rigid ideas and promotes a critical view from a faith perspective.

The world as a whole is facing an unprecedented crisis. While living standards have increased for some, inequality is more pronounced today than ever before and affects more people than ever. The neoliberal abandonment, the increase in violence that ranges from the increase in homicides due to the increase in *sicariato*, the growth in femicide rates, the new narratives against sexual and ethnic minorities, and the increase and popularity of religious fundamentalisms; do not stop converging in exclusion, marginality where resistance, sacrifice and necropolitics show their face day by day.

These problems are not merely social in nature, these life-and-death struggles are also of theological nature when you take seriously the utterly destructive nature of sin as Wesley did “denying all slave-holding to be consistent with any degree of natural justice.”

I do think it is important as theologians and church leaders to *de-construct* and dismantles the mechanisms of power of this new world order and the fundamentalist sentiments and concepts that have been used to reinforce the top-down domination that often exists in a symbiotic relationship with an aggressive modernity is vital.

The good news is that we do not have to start from scratch. Alternative theologies such as liberation theology around the world that not only resist against oppressive powers but also to new, constructive approaches. Alternative theologies less confessional and more about defending life in its broad sense. A theology that is not obsessed with the truth but with the search for new languages that speak to us of encounter liberation and hope of the living God who continues to reveal and challenge us today.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Derrida, J. *Of grammatology* Maryland: John Hopkins University Press, 1998.

Mbembe, A. *Crítica de la razón negra – Ensayo sobre el racismo contemporáneo*. Barcelona: Ned Ediciones, 2016.

_____. *Necropolítica*. España: Editorial Melusina, 2011.

Quijano, A. “El movimiento indígena y las cuestiones pendientes en América Latina” *El Cotidiano*, No. 151. Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, México.

Segato, R. *La crítica de la colonialidad en ocho ensayos*. Buenos Aires: Ediciones Prometeo, 2021.

Willimas, E. *Capitalismo y Esclavitud*. Madrid: Traficantes de Sueños, 2022.