

# Liberation Theology as Political Theory: Marxist Sociology and Systemic Corruption in José Míguez Bonino and Camila Vergara

Mario I. Aguilar

Centre for the Study of Religion and Politics (CSRP), University of St. Andrews, Scotland, UK

Email: mia2@st-andrews.ac.uk

**How to cite this paper:** Aguilar, M.I. (2024). Liberation Theology as Political Theory: Marxist Sociology and Systemic Corruption in José Míguez Bonino and Camila Vergara. *Sociology Mind*, 14, 168-184.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/sm.2024.142010>

**Received:** July 22, 2023

**Accepted:** April 25, 2024

**Published:** April 28, 2024

Copyright © 2024 by author(s) and Scientific Research Publishing Inc.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

---

## Abstract

This paper examines the relation between the work of liberation theology, particularly of the Argentinean José Míguez Bonino and the political theoretical analysis of Chilean Camila Vergara, with her analysis and activism of populism as plebeian politics.

## Keywords

Liberation Theology

---

## 1. Introduction

In a recent paper, Marta Wojciechowska has argued that “political theory often targets problem or phenomena that arise in more than one context,” and further, “when doing so they face, political theorists face the methodological challenge of how to evaluate and accommodate differences both across and within the contexts in which the studied problem arises and how to create theories which are sensitive to the pluralism of real-life experiences” (Wojciechowska, 2023). Therefore, the main challenge is not what political theory attends to or says that it attends to, i.e., the global, but the realization that it deals with very limited places unified by theories as ways of speaking rather than experiences as ways of theorizing. In the context of Latin America, and within the political theory that has arisen out of Argentina I am asking the same question that Wojciechowska asked in the urban context. How do we diversify political theory and incorporate epistemologies and experiences that arise out of other contexts and experiences within majority worlds that not necessarily would agree with the main names that are used as epistemological discourses of identity in a localized place such as

Scotland, Europe or the United States.

In fact, I am asking questions that in a post-colonial European context I have asked previously such as if it is the same to read Hegel in London or in Buenos Aires or as I have argued elsewhere if Hegel and his *Lectures on History* (1892) should be read at all in the Global South (Aguilar, 2002). My conclusion is that the reading and application of political theory in either place, North or South, cannot be the same because of the pluralism of real-life experiences. However, I want to go further and assume that the theoretical ideas of Marx, Engels or Lenin have already evolved through the hermeneutical epistemology of thinkers that have reinvented the originals into their own realities, be philosophical or socio-political. Thus, Marx in his 1843 commentary on Hegel's *Philosophy of Law* argued that Hegel's sense of the monarchy did not evolve while Marx provided such development by arguing that "democracy is the truth of monarchy; monarchy is not the truth of democracy" (Marx, 1975).

As we are in Buenos Aires, an example of the development of philosophical materialism within a Latin American context is relevant because in Argentina Marx has already three, if not more, diachronic extensions: Marx as the first Marx, Enrique Dussel as the political theorist of the historicity of Latin America, and Eduardo Mendieta (Dussel & Mendieta, 2003). Mendieta has provided the discontinuity of a post-colonial thinker that moves through time and space not only as far as Mexico, as Dussel did, but into the linguistic synchronicities of the absence of dialogism personified in Mikhail Bakhtin and his arrival by chance and fate in his non bodily writings at the University of Texas (Bakhtin, 1982).

This paper examines the relation between the work of liberation theology, particularly of the Argentinean José Míguez Bonino and the Chilean Camila Vergara, with her analysis and activism of populism as plebeian politics. In the context of a politics conference in Buenos Aires, it is all fitting that we examine Míguez Bonino an Argentinean, and Vergara, a Chilean, not because of their nationalities but because they were shaped and formed by their context, one of social injustice and oppression where both took to social activism with and on behalf of the persecuted and excluded by the state.

The key features of liberation theology were of a theology that dialogued with political theory, and that gave preference to actions of solidarity with the poor and marginalized (praxis) as first acts and considered reflection and theology as second acts. Thus, liberation theology challenged democratic institutions if they did not foster justice and a preference for the poor, the marginalized, and those oppressed by society. However, liberation theology arose out of religion, and actively engaged those social actors that professed the Christian faith with social agents of change in the name of God. Liberation theology made use of Marxist terms such as praxis to develop a methodology of action, a social tool, where reflection was secondary to such action (Aguilar, 2007a). In particular, the dialogue between Christianity as a political system allied to the Kingdom of God on earth and structural Marxism as a form of totalitarian revolution became allies for the people and by the people. Camila Vergara has used the term praxis

in her own work on plebeian revolutions in order to suggest that networks of communities are able to articulate the same revolutions outside the democratic structures because such structures are systemically corrupt (Vergara, 2020b). As in the case of Bonino and his dialogue with Marxism and Pablo Richard and his totalitarian biblical popular network one could ask if Camila Vergara's work offers a complementarity view and some newness to liberation theology in the 21<sup>st</sup> century by advancing closely the model of the poor of Gustavo Gutiérrez and Jon Sobrino, and the praxis of freedom of Dominique Barbé (Barbé, 1982; Gutiérrez, 1986; Richard & Torres, 1975; Sobrino, 2015).

This is an experimental paper that asks questions about the relation between ecclesial basic communities and plebeian revolutions within the theoretical realm of political theology (*mysterium liberationis*) and political theory (*plebeian revolutions*) (Vergara, 2020a; Ellacuría & Sobrino, 2006). This paper fits within the area of political theory as an experiment on the Foucauldian archeology of knowledge (Foucault, 2002). Thus, it might include areas that given the secularized and Western notions of the so-called political realm bridges political theory and political theology. Narratives about the divine in any kind of religious expression create an effect that is socio-political; religious narratives express the voice of a community, so that a religious statement is a political statement. Thus, religions as ideologies have become of concern not only of the contemporary sense of transitional democracies but remain central within the Global South and their non-liberal democracies, and mostly non-democracies at all. The question is not what are the normative forms of “do” or “don't” within political theories but the personal choice that makes the plausibility of newness appear. The archeology of knowledge of Michel Foucault seems to be an archaeology of personhood and identity that resembles “the problem of generations” as posed by the Marxist Karl Mannheim. It is not about what unites a biological generation but the problem of how a new generation challenges what happened previously through what kind of knowledge is archived and re-archived. Thus, I examine the archaeology of knowledge of these two Latin American thinkers: the Chilean Camila Vergara and the Argentinean José Míguez Bonino. The authors are my own choice, complemented with the “historical ontology” of Sumi Madhok, and the *Mysterium Liberationis* of Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (Madhok, 2022). What divides such authors is the chronological difference of time and space in a synchronic sense that could ask how it is possible to compare two or three thinkers and their *sitz im leben* with the diachronic sense of connectiveness and relationality. The challenge of the paper, and of the work ahead, is to expand the limited way of shared speaking in which we speak about the same with the same people, and to break the hegemony of the few vis-à-vis the diversity of the many, the Global as geographically important rather than the Global as a limited epistemology.

## 2. Religion as Praxis and Political Theory

Political theorists have subsumed religion within politics because religion and its

practice has been treated as responding to an ideology which belongs in the realm of political theory as the critique and foundation of the state. One could argue that such statements are not incorrect but that provide a reading and reaction to religion as causative vis-à-vis self-made oligarchies responsible for the suffering fate of the oppressed and marginalized. Indeed, such analysis of religion is not very far from the Marxian conception of the superstructure and the infrastructure by which the only plausibility was the challenge to the oligarchic superstructure and the agency given back to those who worked within the means of production. The unity within the systemic corruption as described by Camila Vergara finds its resonance in the liberation theologies of the 1970s in which different sectors of society preferred praxis and liberating praxis as action on behalf of the rejected rather than a theoretical acceptance of some models of the state and the rejection of other models. Thus, religion did not exist as an idea, instead religion existed as a liberating praxis understood as action within the social context of oppression that became an ideological variance known by many as liberation theology. Liberation theology was not a system arising out of political theory, but the praxis of politics as described by Vergara in the participation of forgotten social groups within the ancient cities of Rome and Athens, thus evolving from practice to political theory rather than the other way around.

For the common ground diachronically between Vergara and Míguez Bonino (died 2012) is the (in)possibility of finding the agency of the oppressed within democratically elected or Western democracies that certainly did not offer justice or solidarity to those who did not share corrupt means for a corrupt end. In a Latin American context, the agency of the oppressed assumed a different sense of the epistemologically plausible because the praxis of political theory went beyond political systems and the theoretical discussion of an oppressive state.

### **3. José Míguez Bonino and the Dialogue with Marxist Political Theory**

The social and political context of Míguez Bonino's early work was the cold war that is the international tension and distension between the United States and the Soviet Union and their spheres of influence. Within that distension the Latin American armies had been allied with the United States and a significant number of Latin American army officers had been trained at the military academy for Latin America, the School of the Americas located in Panama and with headquarters at Fort Benning, Georgia (Nelson-Pallmeyer, 1997).

However, and despite those efforts to align Latin Americans with the political values of the United States there were groups of social activists in Argentina that sided with a Marxist view and analysis of society, some of them armed groups that became part of the "subversive" threat to Argentinean society. Those groups were encouraged by the Cuban Revolution, the example of the Argentinean medical doctor Ernesto "Ché" Guevara and the Colombian priest Camilo Torres, who left his traditional pastoral ministry to fight together with the Colombian

guerrilla, both activists killed as guerrilla fighters (Guzmán Campos, 1968). Most Argentina's guerrillas were part of the extreme left of the Peronistas and many of them received training in Cuba (Max, 1971).<sup>1</sup> Due to the Catholic base of Argentinean society most of those groups were formed by utopian youth who had been part of youth Christian movements but had decided that the only viable way of changing Argentinean society was a guerrilla type armed struggle. In the case of the guerrilla group Montoneros, for example, the group declared itself Marxist and Christian and all guerrilla organisations found support in progressive Catholic organisations sustained by the social doctrine of the Church and the conclusions of the 1968 General Meeting of Latin American Bishops in Medellín (Colombia), 1968 (Documentos de Medellín, 1968). Within those organisations there was also a constant dialogue about the possibility and impossibility of violence and revolution within the Latin American context with the progressive Argentinean movement "Priests of the Third World".

Twentieth Century Argentinean politics was dominated by the figure of Juan Domingo Perón, and the effort by his followers, mostly working class based to exclude the middle classes from the ongoing running of the nation. However, it is also possible to argue that Argentinean politics were dominated by the dichotomy Peronist/Anti-Peronist with the trade unions forming the social base for the Peronist movement (*sindicalismo peronista*) and the Argentinean Armed Forces pushing for an anti-Peronism narrative for political action (Tedesco, 1999; James, 1988). That political and social dichotomy, suppressed for years, came back to the political arena with the return of Perón and his new wife María Estela Martínez de Perón to Argentina (20 June 1973) after 18 years of exile. Subsequently, and on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of September 1973 Perón was elected president of Argentina but he failed to reach an understanding with the trade unions and the business organisations. The situation in Argentina became very violent after a full economic crisis unfolded. Inflation rocketed and by 1974 the European Common Market closed down meat imports from Argentina.

Moreover, the main political crisis took place within the movement that followed Perón (*peronistas*) in which some revolutionary factions were not happy with his economic practices and the subsequent alliance of Isabel Perón with private businesses that took place after Perón's death in July 1974. Within 1975 there was a full economic crisis and the displaced left-wing groups among the followers of Perón, i.e., the revolutionary wing of the Peronist Party *Montoneros* and the Marxist *Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo* (ERP), continued the armed struggle with attacks on military barracks, kidnappings of well-to-do people and assassinations. In response to those events the right-wing military groups organised by the *Alianza Argentina Anti-Comunista* (AAA) targeted opponents, par-

---

<sup>1</sup>Between January and April 1970 the FAP (Peronist Armed Forces) attacked police stations, army and naval installations in order to secure weapons and ammunition; on the 30<sup>th</sup> May 1970 the former Argentinean president Pedro Eugenio Aramburu was kidnapped by the *Montoneros* and subsequently shot dead by this guerrilla group that declared itself Marxist and Christian; other groups such as the *Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo* (ERP), *Fuerzas Argentinas de Liberación* (FAL), and the *Movimiento Revolucionario Argentino* (MRA) also appeared.

ticularly those supporters of the left-wing organisations that because of their positions didn't go into hiding, i.e., teachers, lawyers, university professors, medical doctors and middle-class professionals. The Minister for Social Welfare, José López Rega, had organised the triple AAA as a neo-fascist group in order to cleanse the Peronist Party of Marxist elements and their supporters and restore a peaceful state of affairs to Argentina.

As a result of the political chaos and political violence, and encouraged by the experience of the Chilean military, the Argentinean Armed Forces deposed Isabel Perón and took over political power. Argentinean pastoral agents suffered heavy casualties due to sustained political persecution of “subversives” while the Argentinean Bishops did not speak openly about the gross human rights violations by the military junta led by Jorge Videla, who became president of Argentina in March 1976.<sup>2</sup> Other civil organisations such as the mothers of the disappeared (Madres de la Plaza de Mayo) took a public stand against human rights violations and every Thursday they paraded in silence at the May Square requesting information about their loved ones who had been arrested, tortured and made to disappear by the repressive state apparatus (Fisher, 1989). The military regime supported an anti-communist pro-American crusade throughout Latin America and remained in power until the war for the Malvinas/Falkland Islands challenged military authority and their capabilities of leading the Argentinean nation in the future (Armony, 1997). On the 30<sup>th</sup> of October 1983 the Radical Party won 51.75% of the total vote and on the 10<sup>th</sup> of December Raúl Alfonsín became the newly democratically elected president of Argentina.<sup>3</sup>

#### 4. Theological Proposals

Míguez Bonino was aware that already by the mid-1970s many books on liberation theology had been written and that the conclusions of the 1968 Latin American Meeting of Latin American Bishops had been either deemed as a unique moment of Christian history or had been ignored by those who decided that Marxist-oriented bishops had lost their way. Therefore, in a more systematic but concise manner he assessed the new developments in Latin American theology through his seminal work *Revolutionary Theology comes of Age* (Míguez Bonino, 1975).

Míguez Bonino proposes the following actualisations of twentieth century theology as moves forward, as unique developments and as beacons of hope for Christian practice and Christian life, as possibilities of dialogue with Marxism, social theory, and political theory, rather than as isolated interpretations of divine commands or narratives (Aguilar, 2007b). First of all, the context of theology evolved from the study of religion or metaphysics. Secondly, there was a closer alliance between the study of biblical research and human experience.

<sup>2</sup>The Military Junta was made by the Commanders-In-Chief of the Argentinean Armed Forces: Lt. General Jorge R. Videla, Brigadier Orlando E. Agosti and Admiral Emilio E. Massera. Following a previous agreement Videla took over as president.

<sup>3</sup>The Peronist Party got only 40.16% of the total vote.

Thirdly, the realm of history mediated biblical research and human experience. Fourthly, theology used a more political language through which experience, action and history became prime movers of an ongoing theological reflection. Further, those theological developments were radicalised by Latin American theologians who asked questions about the social, political, and religious realities of a particular context, i.e., Latin America (Míguez Bonino, 1975: 78-79).

## 5. Christians and Marxists

One of his main concerns following from that context and its related theological reflection, not an intellectual but a practical concern, was the work that Christians and Marxists were pursuing within the Latin America of the early 1970s. Indeed, Míguez Bonino was present in Santiago, Chile, during the international meeting on trade and commerce of those nations considered part of the Third World that were represented by the United Nations agency UNCTAD. In 1972 the international meeting of the UNCTAD took place in Santiago, at a purposely built conference centre in Alameda Avenue, meeting that was hosted by the socialist government of Salvador Allende.

However, Míguez Bonino was not part of the trade delegation sent by the Argentinean government but he was attending an international meeting of the movement Christians for Socialism that was taking part on the same days in Santiago, without the blessings of the then Archbishop of Santiago, Cardinal Raúl Silva Henríquez (Castillo, 1977; Donoso Loero, 1975; Eagleson, 1975). Míguez Bonino saw hope in those priests, nuns and pastoral agents who were challenging the traditional view of the Church and who were asking questions about social realities of poverty, violence and oppression, without knowing that a year later Chile was going to be dominated by the military while another Argentinean military coup was going to follow years later.

Míguez Bonino could have been accused of leaning towards Marxism but he wasn't. He lived the action by Christians and Marxists at that particular time and thought that it had made a difference to the ongoing dialogue and understanding of Christians and Marxists within European circles. If within Europe Christianity and Marxism were understood as two different systems of thought, what united them within the Latin American experience was their common action for the poor and the marginalised that took precedence over systems of thought and intellectual debates about ontology or even theodicy. Despite further questioning of those contextual alliances Míguez stated clearly in the context of the 1974 London lectures in contemporary Christianity: "The God of the covenant has himself designed a pattern of action which such words as justice, righteousness, the protection of the poor, active love, help us to discern" (Míguez Bonino, 1976: 41).

Nevertheless, within the Latin American context in which Míguez Bonino was operating many Christians considered themselves Marxists and vice-versa. For Míguez Bonino there was a "strategic alliance" that responded to a common

concern and a common project: the social and political challenges that arose out of a situation of poverty, oppression and marginalisation of a larger part of the Latin American population and that in the case of Argentina and Chile had given way to socialist utopias led by Salvador Allende and by Juan Domingo and Evita Perón within their base among the Argentinean workers. In the Argentinean case, Míguez Bonino allied himself with the Christian position of the minority as the Argentinean Bishops were much more conservative and traditional than those in Chile.

For Míguez Bonino there could not be a person who could embrace a hybrid identity as a “Christian-Marxist” or a “Marxist-Christian”, however there could be a contextual position in which a Christian could follow the Marxism paradigm to extend his own analysis of a social situation of injustice or oppression. On the other hand, there could be a Marxist that having been brought up as a Christian or realising the challenging demands of “love of neighbour” could also find useful and appropriate to follow those narrow parameters of Christian interpretation in order to achieve the same goal: the defence of the poor and the marginalised and the advent of a more just society.

Four areas of common theoretical understanding as political theory did exist and were outlined by Míguez Bonino as follows:

- 1) Knowledge is not abstract but an engagement with concrete social realities,
- 2) There is a common shared ethos of human solidarity,
- 3) There is a need for a historical mediation of any humanist intention, and,
- 4) The ultimate horizons of life, as understood by Christians and Marxists, are radically different (Míguez Bonino, 1976: 118-119).

The “strategic alliance” provided a contextual unity in action and within some limited theoretical understanding but separated Christians and Marxists when the aims of such alliance were achieved. At the end of the road Marxists wanted to achieve a socialist society through revolution with a base on the workers while Christians wanted to achieve the realisation of the Kingdom of God with a base on the Christian communities. Both, Marxists and Christians sustained a utopian dream by the fact that neither the revolution [in Marx’s understanding] nor the Kingdom was to be solely achieved within a particular moment in human history.<sup>4</sup> If a Marxist had a structural way of perceiving the world and of reading history, a Christian had a critical way of reading God’s intervention in the world called faith, which following Gutiérrez had to be critical and engaged with the realities of underdevelopment, oppression and sin.

For Míguez Bonino this “strategic alliance” served the Church well because at the centre of his personal option was the moulding of a Church that has the poor at the centre and that is less involved in disappointing academic (and European) theological debates but comes out of a given individualism in order to be closer

<sup>4</sup>With the collapse of the Soviet Union, it was impossible to see how Christians and Marxists would have interacted in a democratic system as Marxism lost its momentum and Christians who allied themselves with them joined new political coalitions that departed from a contextual Marxist-Christian dialogue.



to the poor, and through other groups and communities that are also looking after and learning from the poor.

Míguez Bonino's critical approach to Marxism and Marxists activists did not arise out of a critique or distrust of a "strategic alliance" but from the fact that Míguez Bonino criticised the lack of power control within Marxist oriented groups, usually manifested in a personality cult or the uncritical behaviour in politics due to a total allegiance to a person, a party or a system.<sup>5</sup> However, Míguez Bonino also recognised that the Marxist is a person fully given to a way of life, a "militant", who gives it all and puts the selfish individual comforts and aspirations of life as secondary. Christians and Marxists do not share a common political theory but both have one common call, understood by Marxists as "militancy".

For the Christian that militancy is expressed as the revolutionary following of Jesus, symbolised by the actualisation of faith, love and hope within a person's life and within the daily work in order to construct a more just society for all. For many that realisation becomes an act of self-immolation in joy, as a person gives his life and comforts so that others may have life too (Míguez Bonino, 1976: 136-142). For the Marxist the call to join the struggle and a militant struggle leads to the same state of self-immolation that one can see in Antonio Gramsci, dying slowly but with a purpose in one of Mussolini's jails or the life of Ernesto Ché Guevara who left his sheltered existence and the possibility of a brilliant medical career in order to join others throughout Latin America and Africa who were struggling for a more just society (Míguez Bonino, 1976: 135). Míguez Bonino preferred to call such "militancy" a Christian spirituality because of the joy attached to a Christian life, so that "Christian faith becomes an invitation under the conditions of responsible, joyful solidary militancy" (Míguez Bonino, 1976: 141).

## 6. Sociological Marxists on the Streets

Míguez Bonino engaged himself not only with groups of Marxists but also with others who didn't believe in the existence of God (atheists). In the context of a church hall attached to a Protestant congregation in Buenos Aires he gathered a group of Christians and Atheists in order to open an ongoing human dialogue about the Christian faith within the context of Argentina. The format of the meeting followed Míguez Bonino's preferred style of teaching: he gave a short presentation, immediately after the participants formed small discussion groups and after the meeting, he put together the initial presentation and the common thoughts shared during the meeting in a small publication available for further discussion (Míguez Bonino, 1975 [1979]).

Míguez Bonino's exposition starts not from the point of view of asking if there

---

<sup>5</sup>A contemporary example of this criticism can be found in the life of the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, who as a member of the Chilean Communist Party always refused to condemn the persecution of intellectuals, writers and poets exercised by the Soviet regime and seemed to be enchanted by those who were in control of the Soviet Union during the period of the Cold War (Feinstein, 2005: 318-9).

is a God but from the fact that to show belief in a God there is the need to reject belief in others. Therefore, the Christian and the Atheist have a starting common point of view in their rejection of some gods, rather than in their acceptance of a particular one. Once that initial foundation is laid Míguez Bonino accepts that faith is a gift and therefore the possibility of believing in God requires more than a human effort. In his words the free action of God provides the possibility of believing so that ‘the Christian is like a beggar who says to another beggar “Let’s go together. I know where they will give us bread” (Míguez Bonino, 1975 [1979: 8]). However, he asserts that most of the further contextual disagreements between Christians and Atheists come from a misunderstanding of Christianity, either by the atheists or by Christians themselves.

Those disagreements between Christians and Atheists include issues of religion and science, suffering in the world, the wrong doings of the Christian communities, the separation of religion and politics and the spiritualization of religion with a distorted concept of the goodness of humanity. Míguez Bonino’s conception of religion as an expression of belief in community is very clear: human beings become Christians in community so that without an incarnated principle of humanness and human goodness expressed in solidarity with the world and in community there is no belief in God, who after all is an incarnate God.

The issue of suffering in the world is not a metaphysical discussion but an expression of humanness, with its frailty and its need for care and compassion. The image of God’s Son dying in a cross and its incarnation as a ministry of healing and solidarity with the people of his time brings not further metaphysical or ontological questions but the belief that God exists because his Son became one with us in suffering and death.

The spiritualization of religion provides a further bridge between Christians and Atheists but the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth is not only an example of human solidarity with others but also a lead in matters of religion and politics. Therefore, Míguez Bonino rejects the notion that they are separated only because some clerics tend to speak too soon about matters where they don’t have proper technical expertise. Despite those bad examples, the immersion of Jesus in the world and within the society of his time shows not only the possibility but also the mandate for Christians to get involved in the running of society and in the challenges that the creation of a more just society demands. For Míguez Bonino,

Politics is the attempt at retrieving the world for people, at seizing power from the irrational, from the high-handedness of an inhuman system, and of then restoring it to its original proposition – to serve the enrichment and fullness of the human community. And this is a fundamental Christian obligation. You can’t be a Christian without accepting it, because you can’t be a human being without doing it (Míguez Bonino 1975 [1979: 42]).

Within those discussions it is possible to see the liberating and social strand that Míguez Bonino brings to discussions that could be totally philosophical and

ontological. For him, there is no contradiction between religion and science because Christians as human beings, first and foremost, take part in science research and are as many others interested on knowing more about the world which after all is the world that God created. God loved the world and so we do as well. However, he is very weary of a Christianity that dwells on too many intellectual arguments or that provides a middle-class isolation where people cannot share their faith and do not have any relation with a material and social world. Míguez Bonino provides a sharp critique of middle-class Argentinean society by asking if they actually live the Christian faith or is it that they believe in God rather than practising their faith. His sociological analysis is both devastating and realistic when he writes: “They live for themselves, introvertedly, dreaming of their houses, their own vacations, their own privacy. And their religion has the same characteristics. Since they do not share their lives, they do not share their faith” (Míguez Bonino, 1975 [1979: 78]).

Míguez Bonino’s involvement with society and particularly non-Christians has made a different contribution to the history and development of Latin American theology in that most other Latin American theologians assumed that they were challenging and reflecting on the action of Christians within an unjust contemporary society. In doing so they didn’t see the possibilities of embracing the challenges of nations that for the most part had a majority of professing Christians but actually minorities of people involved directly in processes of human and societal liberation.

## **7. Contemporary Assessments**

In his last years Míguez Bonino was been involved in writing about the period of the “dirty war”, the most atrocious period of atrocities and violations of human rights in Argentina (ca. 1976-1982). In several interviews and papers, he analysed the three political periods lived by Argentineans since the military took over the government in 1976 and the “dirty war” started. His reflections on justice and impunity come out of his own involvement in a forum for human rights (Asamblea Permanente de Derechos Humanos) since 1975, a group that included a wide political and religious spectrum, religious and non-religious, academics and non-academics, who gathered with only one aim: to stop the brutal violence that was taking over Argentinean society (Míguez Bonino, 1998).

During a first period, and it must be remembered that Míguez Bonino was writing his more seminal works throughout this period, the military took over the state in 1976 and until 1982 they illegally arrested people, they used systematic torture as a state practice and they forcefully made to disappear the bodies of political opponents and those who were suspects of aiding subversive groups, without trials or juridical defence or appeals. Human rights groups during this period used the Argentinean Constitution and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as legal referents in order to alert the general public about illegal detentions and situations that were taking place in Argentina. Further, they filed

information and data on the cases at human rights committees of the United Nations and the Organisation of American States in order to prepare future investigations and prosecutions. Together, they filed legal appeals of *habeas corpus* at the Argentinean Courts and they organised public and pacific acts to alert public opinion of what was happening in Argentina.

During the second period from 1983 to 1989 the human rights organisations supported the national return to a democratic state of affairs and tried to find archives that would provide information about the whereabouts of the thousands who had disappeared in Argentina. Those archives were never found and therefore due to the unstable democratic situation the Argentinean Congress was not able to push the military to reveal the truth. However, in 1983 the Argentinean government appointed a Truth Commission as it had been the case in several other countries, named Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas (CONADEP). The Commission's Report mentioned 8900 cases while human rights organisations put the figure of disappeared citizens close to 15,000. Legal cases and testimonies were filed in the Argentinean Courts, and the verdict was clear in assigning responsibility to the state and to the military who ran the state and the centres of detention and torture.

Despite those large steps towards truth and justice Míguez Bonino regrets the passing of two laws by the Argentinean Congress; the *ley de obediencia debida* that denied legal responsibility to those who followed superiors' orders to arrest, torture, kill and made to disappear, and the *ley de punto final* that didn't allow for an ongoing legal investigation but prevented new investigations taking place after a particular date specified by the Courts. The exception to that process of legal impunity was the investigation related to foreign citizens who disappeared in Argentina, legal processes in France, Italy, and Spain, who triggered an Interpol red alert in the cases of several Argentines, high ranking military officers, who were wanted in Spain for crimes against humanity.

During a third period, from 1989 onwards the democratic governments in Argentina have struggled to provide justice while the truth of many more disappearances has come out. A sad moment for many Argentines came when President Carlos Menem, using his legal presidential prerogative, granted freedom from prison to the leaders of the military junta that ruled Argentina. This step could not be ruled as illegal, as Menem was acting within the law; however it provided a lack of hope for justice and truth for many Argentines, a situation of social tiredness and desperation for a nation in need of justice and truth. For Míguez Bonino the current difficulties of the legal system point to the need of limiting state power without preventing the state to investigate economic misuse of public money and a general legal and penal insecurity faced by all Argentines.

Thirty years after the 1976 military coup Míguez Bonino was still critically involved in a socio-theological reading of Argentinean society but he was also deeply concerned about the ongoing life of a Church that should be closer to the

poor and the marginalised, namely those who suffered from penal insecurity and suffered hunger because of a state mismanagement of resources, human expectations and democratic stability.

Despite those social and economic sobering assessments Míguez Bonino remained optimistic that the continuous involvement of Christians within those difficult social and political processes had been not only necessary but mandatory. Those Christian movements influenced the development of the Church in Latin America and provided the start of an ongoing theological method of suspicion that has made Latin American Christianity one of the strongest in the world by returning to a close Gospel-link between Christian life and social ethics embodied by the action, theology and writings of Míguez Bonino.

## **8. Camila Vergara: Political Theory outside the Political System**

Míguez Bonino and his dialogue with Marxism on the streets of Buenos Aires is a precursor of later political theorists, interested in populism and constitutionalism such as Camila Vergara. In the work of Karl Mannheim, the Marxists generational paradigm is a generational one whereby, I would argue, Míguez Bonino and his generation were not able to articulate clearly a rejection of the state and an option for the poor and the marginalised as political theory because they were being persecuted, killed, and made to disappear. However, the diachronic sense of solidarity with the poor is reconceptualised by Camila Vergara in a continuity and discontinuity that effects the historicity but not the historical materialism of the same human cause: the liberation of the oppressed and the constitution of the infrastructure as a powerful force for social justice be it in the Boninean utopian Marxist Kingdom of God or the Vergarean sense of solidarity of a plebian revolution.

*Systemic Corruption* and *República plebeya* by the Chilean critical legal and political theorist Camila Vergara provide a two-side menu of complementarity: while in the English volume she delves into the aesthetic of oligarchic corruption in democratic systems and proposes a realist utopia, in the Spanish manifesto such political diagnosis and imagination are followed by a concrete path for plebeian revolution in Chile. Her work offers a socio-constitutional system in which the people (“El pueblo”) have the possibility and the plausibility of creating a new system through communal assemblies and a very detailed sense of a different agency in popular and democratic representations.

The author’s assessment is clear: representative governments are structurally corrupt and their juridical-political frameworks have allowed for a small and powerful minority to benefit disproportionately and systematically from a wealth that is collectively produced. Vergara’s work makes a truly sharp fresh analysis of classical authors such as Niccolò Machiavelli, Nicolas de Condorcet, Rosa Luxemburg, and Hannah Arendt with the aim of creating people’s power—not to reform representative governments to make them more democratic.

She seeks to incorporate into the established representative orders new popular institutions through which the people themselves, independently from political parties, can deliberate and have binding decision-making power to the life in common whenever they deem necessary.

Therefore, Vergara's proposed popular constitutionalism is different than just cosmetic constitutional reforms, or the taking over of means of production to enhance participation by the people, as it has been in Western democracies and Marxist experiments. Vergara proposes a fresh way of involving the people in taking binding decisions in communal gatherings (*cabildos*) that function as a citizen network of political judgment. For Vergara only those who do not take part in power structures should be active members; those who already have authority such as political leaders, judges, priests, and ministers, should be excluded because their mere presence could influence decisions (Vergara, 2020a: 244). Vergara's proposal makes sense simply because those involved in corruption might never agree that such power structures are anti-democratic.

The realist utopian sense of the people's role in decision making and the social articulation of grassroots organizations already started in Chile with the popular "awakening" in October 2019. Vergara has been a frequent speaker at local meetings of those who are the current victims of an unjust social and political system, a process of popular self-organization that forced opened, together with mass mobilizations, the work of an elected Constitutional Convention in Chile that later finished a draft for a new constitution that was rejected in the Chilean Referendum on the new Constitution in September 2022.

Vergara's work has triggered fresh constitutional ideas of reform and transformation for the constituent process in Chile but also for principles and institutions to change current oligarchic orders. Within such work there is an interconnected foundational principle familiar to political theologians of the Global South: praxis. Praxis, in the sense of a foundational first step of action, has been fundamental for the faith communities in Latin America, for example, as liberating praxis in the works of Clodovis Boff and Gustavo Gutiérrez. Praxis, originally part of the Marxist vocabulary for the creation of people's power, was borrowed by Hannah Arendt and now used by Vergara in her outline of plebeian assemblies in which liberty is caused "by the periodical pushback of the many against the inevitable, constant overreach of the powerful few" (Vergara, 2020a: 129). Thus, the foundations of liberation theology resonate here where the ecclesiological critique by Leonardo Boff regarding charism and power, who called for a Christian community to participate in local political processes without the leadership of a priestly office. Boff advocated the engagement in a church that serves and walks with the poor and the marginalised within society. In that sense, liberation theologians such as Pablo Richard and Pedro Casaldáliga immersed themselves with the people, not as leaders, but as plebeians standing against authority at the barricades, in common food pots, and within communal organisations for human rights, justice, and political representation for all.

Since its foundation, political theology, associated with JB Metz, assumed the anti-authoritarian principles of empathic action by which a post-holocaust milieu required a humanism by humans in solidarity with other humans rather than more structures of division and strife. Vergara's thought and practice provides a continuation to such ethical stance. Following Arendt, for her the people exercise critical judgement in communal gatherings because judgement can only take place through praxis, with others (Vergara, 2020a: 214). Vergara proposes, step by step, a sound constitutional guide to building a popular infrastructure through popular power and a manifesto to guide genuinely free deliberation for the creation of sovereign mandates through the network of local councils (*red soberana de cabildos*, Vergara 2020a: 139-198).

Is this proposal plausible in contemporary society? Only time will tell but there are already signs that Vergara's work has shaken the hegemonic view that only minor changes within democratic systems are enough to deal with structural forms of exclusion and domination. Our orders continue to be oligarchic, corrupt, and unjust for large segments of the population, especially the poor and the marginalised within contemporary societies. Marx and Lenin, as well as the Latin American liberation theologians, engaged with people's power. Liberation theology and its critiques of empire in Enrique Dussel, José Míguez Bonino, Pablo Richard, Marcella Althaus-Reid, among others, resonate within Vergara's work. For empire is not solely an ideology of global proportions but, at the local level, goes against plebeian emancipation because it creates, in the words of Jung Mo Sung, a desire for power. Vergara's books are subversive of the current power structures and therefore will survive the passing of time and democracy as we know it.

## 9. Conclusion

This paper outlines the start of a larger writing project to come through the common efforts by many to articulate liberation theology as political theory, particularly in the Global South and within actions and theories in the diversity, as argued by Marta Wojciechowska, cited at the start of this paper. Thus, Míguez Bonino and Vergara are elements within a larger universe in which they stand diachronically as clear political theorists from the Global South, versed in the historical sources of the state and its ongoing revolutions but contributors to fresh understandings of the corrupt and powerless global state. One theorist depends diachronically on the other rather than being compared to forward larger projects of understanding the relation in praxis and in theory of religion and politics.

Míguez Bonino and his dialogue with Marxism on the streets of Buenos Aires is a precursor of later political theorists, interested in constitutionalism, the kind of constitutionalism outlined by Camila Vergara. In the work of Karl Mannheim, the Marxist generational paradigm, "the problem of generations" is a generational one whereby, I would argue, Míguez Bonino and his generation were

not able to articulate clearly a rejection of the state and an option for the poor and the marginalised as political theory because they were being persecuted, killed, and made to disappear. However, the diachronic sense of solidarity with the poor is reconceptualised by Camila Vergara in a continuity and discontinuity that effects the historicity but not the historical materialism of the same human cause. Thus, the liberation of the oppressed and the constitution of the infrastructure as a powerful force for social justice be it in the Boninean utopian Marxist Kingdom of God or the Vergarean sense of solidarity of a plebian revolution stand in continuity with each other. The rest is to come as political theory within the Global South, as a diachronic continuity and a challenge to the established theories of the state. Such political theory continues to be a challenge to the centralised theories of the powerful states and their limited conception of political theory. Indeed, the best is still to come.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

### References

- Aguilar, M. I. (2002). Postcolonial African Theology in Kabasele Lumbala. *Theological Studies*, 63, 302-323. <https://doi.org/10.1177/004056390206300204>
- Aguilar, M. I. (2007a). Introduction. In *The History and Politics of Latin American Theology, Volume I* (pp. 1-18). SCM Press.
- Aguilar, M. I. (2007b). José Míguez Bonino. In *The History and Politics of Latin American Theology, Volume I* (pp. 56-71). SCM Press.
- Armony, A. C. (1997). *Argentina, the United States, and the Anti-Communist Crusade in Central America 1977-1984*. Ohio University Center for International Studies.
- Bakhtin, M. M. (1982). *The Dialogic Imagination, Four Essays*. University of Texas Press.
- Barbé, D. (1982). *La Grace et le pouvoir: Les communautés de base au Brésil*. Éditions du Cerf.
- Castillo, F. (1977). Christians for Socialism in Chile. *Concilium*, 105, 106-112.
- Documentos de Medellín (1968). United States Catholic Conference. In *Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops: The Church in the Present-Day Transformation of Latin America in the Light of the Council, II—Conclusions*. Division for Latin America, USCC.
- Donoso Loero, T. (1975). *Los cristianos por el socialismo en Chile*. Editorial Vaitea.
- Dussel, E., & Mendieta, E. (2003). *Beyond Philosophy: Ethics, History, Marxism and Liberation Theology*. Rowan and Littlefield.
- Eagleson, J. (Ed.) (1975). *Christians and Socialism: Documentation of the Christians for Socialism Movement in Latin America*. Orbis.
- Ellacuría, I., & Sobrino, J. (Eds.) (2006). *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*. Orbis.
- Feinstein, A. (2005). *Pablo Neruda: A Passion for Life*. Bloomsbury.
- Fisher, J. (1989). *Mothers of the Disappeared*. South End.



- Foucault, M. (2002). *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Routledge.
- Gutiérrez, G. (1986). *The Power of the Poor in History: Selected Writings*. =SCM Press.
- Guzmán Campos, G. (1968). *El Padre Camilo Torres*. Siglo XXI.
- James, D. (1988). *Resistance and Integration: Peronism and the Argentine Working Class 1946-1976*. Cambridge University Press.
- Madhok, S. (2022). *Vernacular Rights Cultures: The Politics of Origins, Human Rights, and Gendered Struggles for Justice*. Cambridge University Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108961844>
- Marx, K. (1975). Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law. In K. Marx, & F. Engels, *Collected Works, Volume 3* (pp. 3-129). Lawrence & Wishart.
- Max, A. (1971). *Guerrillas in Latin America* (pp. 67-81). International Documentation and Information Centre.
- Míguez Bonino, J. (1975). *Revolutionary Theology Comes of Age*. SPCK. *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation*. Fortress Press.
- Míguez Bonino, J. (1975, 1979). *Espacio para ser hombres*. Tierra Nueva. [*Room to Be People: An Interpretation of the Message of the Bible for Today's World*. Fortress Press].
- Míguez Bonino, J. (1976). *Christians and Marxists: The Mutual Challenge to Revolution*. Hodder and Stoughton.
- Míguez Bonino, J. (1998). Cómo limitar el poder del Estado?—Justicia e impunidad. *Revista Memoria*.
- Nelson-Pallmeyer, J. (1997). *School of Assassins: The Case for Closing the School of the Americas and for Fundamentally Changing U.S. Policy*. Orbis.
- Richard, P., & Torres, E. (1975). *Cristianismos, lucha ideológica y racionalidad socialista*. Ediciones Sígueme.
- Sobrino, J. S. J. (2015). *No Salvation outside the Poor: Prophetic-Utopian Essays*. Orbis Books.
- Tedesco, L. (1999). *Democracy in Argentina: Hope and Disillusion* (pp. xix-xx). Frank Cass.
- Vergara, C. (2020a). *República plebeya: Guía práctica para construir poder popular*. Editorial Sangría.
- Vergara, C. (2020b). *Systemic Corruption: Constitutional Ideas for an Anti-Oligarchic Republic*. Princeton University Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.23943/princeton/9780691207537.001.0001>
- Wojciechowska, M. (2023). From Lived Urban Experiences to Cross-Contextual Theory: A Selection Dilemma. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13698230.2023.2231821>