Twenty Theses on Politics

Enrique Dussel

[TWENTY THESES ON POLITICS]

A Book in the Series
LATIN AMERICA IN TRANSLATION / EN TRADUCCIÓN / EM TRADUÇÃO
Sponsored by the Duke–University of North Carolina Program
in Latin American Studies

TWENTY THESES ON POLITICS

ENRIQUE DUSSEL

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DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS

DURHAM AND LONDON 2008

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UNITED STATES
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PAPER ∞

DESIGNED BY
JENNIFER HILL

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THE LIBERATION OF POLITICS: ALTERITY, SOLIDARITY, LIBERATION

Eduardo Mendieta

Historical periods are sometimes referred to by descriptive names such as the age of reason, the age of faith, the age of revolutions, the age of totalitarianism, the age of global wars, and so on. The prophets of neoliberal globalization, with their vision skewed by the shadow of events barely past, undoubtedly would like to call our times "the age of the abolition of politics." Globalization is an ideology that would have the world surrender to a blind technological and economic drive. Globalization is a fetishizing way to represent for others—those who can't represent themselves, as Marx and Spivak claimed—the present state of humanity primarily because it subordinates the political to the economic and the economic to the technological. The maps of globalization, drawn by the master cartographers of the Pentagon, the World Bank, the Deutsche Bank, Microsoft, and the International Monetary Fund, are utopias in which the space of the political is violently colonized and then abolished by monetary and legalistic imperatives. The political, or rather the spheres of the political, as Enrique Dussel points out in this book, is assimilated and subordinated to the management of investments, technological modernizations, and budgetary calculations. The political is thus translated into an algorithm that maximizes profits and returns on investments while minimizing costs by passing them off to future generations.

This mistranslation that legitimates the massive private accumulation of

collective wealth, which is proportionally matched by generalized dispossession and impoverishment, is but an alchemy that turns what is most fundamentally human—the political—into the most anti-human: thus the necrophilic love of profit—politics as the expression of the lust for and the will to live off the human—turns into necropolitics (to use that most apropos expression by Achille Mbembe). The abolition of the political is thus the negation of human life, not just as naked existence but as collective, communitarian, dialogical, communicative freedom. Without others, without the other, there is neither ethics nor politics. Without others, without the other, there is no politics as the horizon of the possible—the possibility of continued existence. It is this continued existence as coexistence, as surviving and flourishing with others, that is the source of the political. It is this politics that is being abolished by the profiteers of global war and neoliberal pillage. Against this necropolitics of neoliberal globalization, a politics of liberation—a politics of life with others and for others—is proclaimed from below. It is this politics of life, and for life, that proclaims that politics is the proper vocation of the human being. It is this proclamation from below, from the victims of capitalism, imperialism, ecocide, and genocide, that gives us reason to pause and to affirm that ours will be the age of global politics, the age of the politics of alterity. Enrique Dussel's *Twenty Theses on Politics*, originally published in Spanish in 2006, is the manifesto of this politics of alterity, a politics of life and for life, a politics from the underside of necrophilic globalization.

While this manifesto is brief, and almost telegraphic in its presentation, it is neither simple nor a mere exercise in oracular proclamation. Behind every paragraph stands decades of philosophical work as well as hundreds of pages of philosophical analysis. Dussel is unquestionably the best-known living philosopher from Latin America, and surely he is to have the most lasting effect on planetary thinking. His work, since its earliest formulations in the 1950s and 1960s, was avowedly articulated as a philosophy of liberation. In 1975 he published *Philosophy of Liberation*, which summarized a decade of work on what at the time he called a "deconstruction of ethics" and "an ethics of Latin American liberation." *Philosophy of Liberation* articulated not just a project for the liberation of philosophy but also an ethics and politics of liberation. Through the late 1970s and early 1980s, Dussel dedicated himself to a recon-

struction of Karl Marx's philosophical itinerary from that of a young Hegelian to a mature critic of political economy. This decade of philological, archival, and exegetical work at the Marx-Lenin Institute in Moscow yielded what some have called the most important reconstructive readings of Marx's political economy to be done in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Just as it was not possible to read Marx during the 1960s without the aid of Rosdolsky, Lukács, and Marcuse, now it is no longer possible to go back to *Capital* without the aid of Dussel's three volumes on Marx's manuscripts and drafts of that work. Yet Dussel's work is not produced primarily in library halls or in the solitary reading rooms of archives and institutes; rather, it emerges from his pedagogy across the Americas and the world and from his continued and dizzying dialogues, debates, and encounters with other philosophers. Perhaps one of his most notorious encounters was with Karl-Otto Apel in a decade-long dialogue on the relationship between Dussel's proposal for an ethics of liberation and Apel's version of discourse ethics.

Two decades after his *Philosophy of Liberation* and his numerous books on Marx, Latin American philosophy, and contemporary philosophy, Dussel published one of his most important works, *Ethics of Liberation in the Age of Globalization and Exclusion*. This volume synthesized Dussel's unique reading of Emmanuel Levinas's ethics of alterity, with Dussel's own Schellingian reading of Marx (which affirms that Marx's notion of "living-labor" is the central category in *Capital*) and with his new appreciation of procedural formalism, which he gained through his debates with Karl-Otto Apel. *Ethics of Liberation* is a strikingly original, prodigiously documented, staggeringly systematic and coherent work of moral philosophy, and it is, furthermore, unusual in its historical scope. The book opens disarmingly with an introduction subtitled "Global History of Ethicities," which given its length could easily have been printed as a separate book with the title "A World History of Ethical Systems." The rest of the book is divided into two parts: "Foundations of Ethics" and "Ethical Critique, Anti-Hegemonic Validity, and the Praxis of Liberation." *Ethics of Liberation* is probably one of the most extensive, detailed, and well-argued systematic articulations of the principles of moral reasoning that is at the same time linked to a cosmopolitan, decolonized, post-occidentalist history of moral philosophy.

Enrique Dussel's ethics of liberation argues that ethics has at its foundation a material moment—that is, it has to do with corporeal need. Ethics is grounded in practical truth, namely survival. But simultaneously it is entwined with the moments of what Dussel calls intersubjective validity and feasibility. The ethical has to do with our relations to others, and through those relations, our relations to ourselves, and thus it entails a series of principles of intersubjective solicitude and respect. At the same time, the aim of ethical acts must be within the horizon of the possible. The ethical is related to feasibility; what can be properly described as ethical is part and parcel of a possible act or action.

Yet every positive and normative description of the foundations of ethics (meant in the Kantian sense of offering both a point of departure and a "justification") also entails the critique of them. Every ethical system, or *Sittlichkeit*, is always already incomplete and in violation of its own assumptions and normative commitments. Thus, Dussel devotes the second part of *Ethics of Liberation* to an analysis of what he calls negative ethics. The first principle of negative, or critical, ethics demands that we critique every ethical system that entails the production of certain victims. Ethical critique commands that we look at our ethical system from the location of its specific victims. Every ethical system cannot but exclude some who are affected by the very performance of that system's goals and expectations. Thus anti-hegemonic ethical critique demands that we critique the system of intersubjective validity from the perspective of the voice of those who are not heard and the claims of those who are intentionally or unintentionally excluded from our ethical deliberations. Finally, the praxis of liberation commands that we engage in the processes of transformation of our ethical system so as to allow for the coexistence of those the system has made into victims. There is no ethics if there is no praxis of liberation, and only those who engage in such a praxis of liberation can be granted the name of having sought after "goodness." Thus ethical goodness synergizes practical truth, intersubjective validity, and feasibility as enacted from the locus of the victims of each and every ethical system.

The overview given above is indispensable for a proper appreciation of the disarming succinctness and terseness of this volume. Behind *Twenty Theses on Politics* are three hefty volumes in a set titled *Politics of Liberation*. The first volume, which was published 2007 under the title *Política de la liberación:*

Historia Mundial y Crítica, is a global and critical history of political philosophy. Like the introduction to *Ethics of Liberation*, the first volume of *Politics of Liberation* offers a critical, decolonized, and post-occidentalist history of political philosophy which, as Dussel notes in his introduction, seeks to "destructure" and "re-structure" seven major limitations or limits. A global or planetary history of political philosophy must seek to overcome the skewing and refracting influences first, of Hellenism; second, of occidentalism; and third, of Eurocentrism. As an evident consequence of these three limitations, the fourth limit is the privileging of a certain periodization of world history. The fifth limitation to overcome in any political philosophy with pretensions to planetary relevance is a fallacious and obfuscating secularism that misrepresents not only so-called Western culture but also its putative others. The sixth limitation to overcome is a hubristic theoretical and mental colonization that disowns and suppresses the political-philosophical contributions of marginalized societies. Seventh, and finally, Dussel urges in this *Politics of Liberation* that a decolonized, decolonizing, and planetary political philosophy must aim to denounce and correct the systematic exclusion of the Americas from the sociological, political, and philosophical narratives of the emergence of modernity. Volumes two and three, respectively titled *Politics of Liberation: Architectonic* and *Politics of Liberation: Critique*, are scheduled for publication in 2008 and 2009, respectively. In addition to the first volume of *Politics of Liberation*, Dussel published in 2007 a collection of his essays entitled *Hacia una filosofía política crítica*. This compilation of some twenty essays produced since the publication of his *Ethics of Liberation* anticipates and elaborates aspects of the *Politics*.

Although *Twenty Theses on Politics* is a synthesis and a summary of the three volumes of *Politics of Liberation* it neither duplicates them nor offers their theoretical density and presentation as a monumental work of scholarly analysis and cosmopolitan scope. What *Twenty Theses on Politics* does do, however, is to anticipate the general structure of the three-volume *Politics of Liberation*. The first part of *Twenty Theses* concerns the "prevailing political order," for which Dussel lays out the positive description of the three normative principles of politics: the material principle, the formal or normative principle, and the principles of feasibility. Politics concerns the preservation, enhancement, and continuation of the life of the political community—the people. But it also

concerns in an originary and simultaneous way the principles of communal recognition and political delegation, as well as the principles of political realization and actualization. The second part of *Twenty Theses* is devoted to the development of the critical principles of a politics of liberation. Thus, if the positive principles of the first part are partly summarized by the shibboleths of the French Revolution, namely, equality, fraternity, and liberty, then the negative principles—that is, the principles of political critique, or critical politics—are alterity, solidarity, and liberation. If the former begins with the positive and formal affirmation of the right to life of every political subject in a fraternity and formal liberty that acknowledges those who are already treated as equals, then the latter begins from the negativity of the victims of any given political system: these victims could be those whose lives are made impossible by the ruling political system, or they may be victims because they are excluded from the processes of deliberation that endow representatives with political power, or they may be victims because their claims are ignored as either unrealistic, utopian, or unacceptable.

Twenty Theses on Politics also illustrates a major tenet of Dussel's philosophy, namely that there is no mere universality but rather always a universal claim that is particularly and singly articulated. The abstract is not the most universal, and the concrete is the most universal. This is exhibited in the dialectical arch traced by the theses: that is, from the universal particularity of the last decade of constitutional assemblies in Latin America to the abstract generality of the process of delegation of political power. This work, thus, is not simply a manifesto of a politics of life and for life, but also a manifesto that proclaims and articulates the lessons of the Latin American Left from the last three decades—since the path of military revolution was defeated on the fields of military confrontation by the superior military forces of the United States. To the force of weapons, the Left that matured through the defeats of the 1980s and 1990s has now learned to juxtapose the force of democratic elections and constitutional assemblies. To the Clausewitzian slogan that war is the continuation of politics by other means—which entailed that politics is the continuation of war by other means (as Michel Foucault argued), both formulations thus presupposing and entailing the violence against and obliteration of the opponent—a new slogan is herein proclaimed: politics is the continuation

of life through the means of deliberation and delegation whose aim is the very preservation of the opponent. This politics is a biopolitics—a politics not only of the preservation, enhancement, and continuation of the life of the political community but also of its very condition of material reproduction: the planet earth, the cultural communities, and the traditions within which naked life is transformed in political life.

This book, then, is both a summary and an introduction to what will surely become Enrique Dussel's magnum opus. While the world is hurled into the whirlwind of economic chaos, political ineptitude, and impending ecological disaster by the forces of neoliberalism with their cynical and sinister theodicies of progress, the dispossessed masses of the world clamor for a planetary politics. Dussel's book seeks to give voice to this clamoring by positing once again what was one of the greatest discoveries of early humans—namely that the political is posited by a communal will in order to grant a will to live rational efficacy. Against the gospel of market theologies with their necrophilic idols, Dussel affirms the secularism of the people's determination of their will to live through the noble vocation of the political. Martin Luther's theses were nailed to the gates of the church; Marx's on the gates of dispossessing bourgeois affluence; Dussel's are to be nailed on the walls of the brutal and seemingly unassailable prisons, military bases, banks and board rooms of the IMF, World Bank, and the Pentagon.

These twenty theses on politics are primarily aimed toward young people—that is, toward those who need to understand that the *noble vocation of politics* is a thrilling patriotic and collective task.[1] It is true that political activity has become largely corrupted, especially in postcolonial countries, because our elites have been governing for five hundred years in the interests of the dominant metropolis of the time (Spain, Portugal, France, England, and today the United States). There is little press or prestige to be gained by taking into account those at the bottom: the national political community, the poor, oppressed, and excluded *people* (see thesis 11).

Recently, Latin America has seen a sort of "political spring," which has been developing since the birth of many new social movements—the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, the Argentinean *piqueteros*, the movements by the landless and by the coca farmers, the indigenous movements in Ecuador, Bolivia, Guatemala, and elsewhere—that have come together at the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre. These movements have coincided with the unexpected elections of Nestor Kirchner, Tabaré Vásquez, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, Hugo Chávez, Evo Morales, the perennial and proverbial figure of Fidel Castro, and the symbolic figure of Sub Marcos. These movements and events represent signs of hope, in the face of which we must begin to create a new theory—a coherent interpretation of the profound transformation that our *people* are experiencing.

This *new theory* cannot merely respond to the presuppositions of the past five hundred years of capitalist and colonialist Modernity. It cannot set out from bourgeois postulates or from those of *"real"* socialism (with its impossible perfect planning, its squared circle of democratic centralism, its ecological irresponsibility, its bureaucratized cadres, its dogmatic vanguardist theory and strategy, and so on). What is coming is a *new transmodern civilization*, which will be as a result *transcapitalist* and *beyond liberalism* and *real socialism*.

The "Left"—that position occupied by progressive groups in one of the assemblies of the French Revolution—requires a complete ethical, theoretical, and practical renewal. The Left has either governed through its Central Committees or has been in the opposition. Transitioning to the democratic political responsibility of exercising *obediential* power is not an easy task: it is intrinsically participatory and without vanguardism in having learned from the *people* to respect its millennial culture—the mythical narratives within which it has developed its own critical thought and the institutions that must be integrated into this new project.

The twenty-first century demands great creativity. Even socialism, if it still has any meaning, needs to take the form of the "cultural revolution" suggested by Evo Morales (a revolution that has nothing to do with the events in China in 1966). Now is the time of the *people*, of the originary and the excluded. Politics consists of having "the ear of the disciple every morning," so that those who "command, command by obeying." The delegated exercise of *obediential* power (see thesis 4) is a vocation to which the youth is summoned, without personalistic clans, without currents that pursue their own corrupt interests that become corrupted through fighting for the interests of a group rather than that of the whole (whether it be the party, the *people*, the fatherland, or humanity).

The twenty theses in this book, situated at first on an abstract level, become progressively more concrete as they develop. Hence, theses 1 through 10 are the simplest, the most abstract, and the most fundamental, thereby providing the basis upon which the rest of the work is constructed. As Marx suggested, it is necessary to ascend from the abstract to the concrete. Accordingly, theses 11 to 20 are more complex and concrete, since they include the contradiction of the *people* speaking up and taking center stage, thereby entering into action collec-

tively. In the future, new theses should situate these levels with an even greater degree of complexity and concreteness, taking into account the integration of the subjects of colonialism, postcolonialism, metropole, and Empire, and the struggle for liberation from these international forces. There still remains room for other theses, in which all levels of domination and alignment would enter into play on the highest level of complexity, and in which normative principles would confront one another, forcing us to choose one over another (within a situation of inevitable uncertainty). And this is because the *people* do not act as a pure subject, but rather operate through contradictory blocs that frequently throughout history betray their most fundamental demands. How else could entire nations elect Hitler, G. W. Bush, or governments like those of Menem and Fujimori?[2]

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24 March 2006