

Portland State University

PDXScholar

Philosophy Faculty Publications and
Presentations

Philosophy

1-4-2014

Book Review of, Ethics of Liberation: in the Age of Globalization and Exclusion

Alexander Sager
Portland State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/phl_fac



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Citation Details

Sager, Alexander, "Book Review of, Ethics of Liberation: in the Age of Globalization and Exclusion" (2014).
Philosophy Faculty Publications and Presentations. 15.
https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/phl_fac/15

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of PDXScholar. Please contact us if we can make this document more accessible: pdxscholar@pdx.edu.

For over four decades, Enrique Dussel has been developing and defending a philosophy of liberation for an inclusive, egalitarian, and democratic global community. *Ethics of Liberation* (1998) in many respects culminates a project begun in the 1970s with the still untranslated five volume *For an Ethics of Latin American Liberation* (1970-80). Dussel attempts to provide theoretical tools to replace Hellenocentrism ontological Eurocentrism with a global philosophy that prioritizes the victims of neoliberal capitalism and European hegemony. *Ethics of Liberation* emerges from the shadow of the Argentinian junta and the Dirty Wars. It seeks to capture the perspective of the majority of the world's population trapped in the periphery in the developing world or forced to the margins in developed states. It is an ethics of the hungry and the unemployed, addressed to families of the disappeared and to refugees fleeing state-sponsored terrorism and environmental degradation. In the philosophy of liberation, the plight of these oppressed and excluded is not a result of the imperfect institutions and unfortunate leadership; rather, it is the consequence of an international system of imperialism, neoliberalism, and American hegemony.

Dussel criticizes European and Anglo-American philosophers for identifying modernity with the rise of the Anglo-Germanic thought at the expense of the earlier Hispanic modernity and for mistaking European thought as universal. Drawing on world systems theory, he presents a spatial account of modernity in which the first world system arose with the discovery of the Americas and the silver mines of Potosí, Peru and Zacatecas, Mexico and the brutalization of the native population.

Dussel seeks to provide individuals, communities, and cultures excluded from dominant forms of economic and political reason with an ethics that offers more than the uncritical affirmation of the culture of the oppressed. Though he draws on dozens of sources, his ethic's core sources are liberation theology and decades of careful engagement with and commentary on Marx. Though the ethics of liberation is secular, its subject is the emaciated bodies of the hungry, naked, and homeless and it is informed by Exodus, Isaiah, the Gospel of Matthew, and the Egyptian Book of the Dead. Liberation theology shorn of revelation or divine command provides the ethical orientation. The Marxian tradition provides the theoretical model for ethical criticism and for the engaged intellectual.

Dussel divides his ethics into foundational and critical branches. Foundational ethics lays out the universal conditions for any ethical system and consists in three components: 1) a material component that bases ethics on the conscious reproduction and development of human life; 2) a formal component that justifies norms through the discourse of equal participants symmetrically situated in a community of communication, and 3) a feasibility component that places constraints on possible actions and institutions. The three components mutually inform each other and receive priority according to circumstances. Dussel sees political economy as central to ethics and supplements the formalism of Karl-Otto Apel and Jürgen Habermas with a life-affirming ethics based on human reproduction and the capacity to suffer. Simultaneously, he subjects communitarian and utilitarian ethics to the constraints of intersubjective, discursive rationality. Finally, the book is in some respects an extended meditation on the Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach: "Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it." The feasibility component requires that the material and formal components inform and are informed by instrumental reasoning and a clear understanding of the physical and technical limitations of each situation.

The material, formal, and feasibility components are the basis of any system of ethics, but they are insufficient for a philosophy of liberation. A philosophy of liberation must be based on the critical judgment of dominant systems by those excluded from them. The category of victim includes the proletariat, campesinos, indigenous groups, women, the urban poor, and many others. How do victims move from a state without conscious awareness of the causes of their plight to being active participants in social

movements? Dussel responds with a metatheory for the criticism of prevalent systems to guide victims in transforming them.

Critical ethics begins with the criticism of prevailing systems and asks how social movements composed of victims can liberate themselves. It mirrors foundational ethics with a critique of material conditions that deprive victims of the ability to fulfill their needs and a discourse ethics from the perspective of those excluded from dominant institutions. Criticism and dialogue among victims combine with strategic reason to transform their situation.

Marx and, to a lesser extent, the Frankfurt school, Nietzsche, and Freud are central to Dussel's project. Engel's *Conditions of the Working Class in England* and Marx's early criticisms of idealism and analysis of materialism and conscious life activity provide important insights for the philosophy of life. The analysis of class conflict serves as a model for a philosophy based in the experience of the victim who comes to understand the system that oppresses her. Finally, the account of surplus value in the *Grundrisse* and *Capital* provides Dussel with an exemplar for a mature theory that reveals not only how the system – in this case capitalism – functions but also how its fundamental contradictions lead to crisis.

Dussel also turns to Emmanuel Levinas who provides the theoretical tools for an ethics of the dominated and the excluded in his account of the recognition of and responsibility for the Other. In opposition to Apel and Habermas's discourse ethics that fails to adequately address the inevitable asymmetries of communication within and between societies, critical ethics incorporates Paulo Freire's dialogism between marginalized learners coming to develop a critical consciousness and teachers who do the same by learning from students about their world. Freire's *conscientization* involves the denunciation of dehumanizing institutions, but also the construction of alternative realities. The process of liberation is personified by Guatemalan human rights activist Rigoberta Menchú who describes the process in which she came to understand the domination of her community through conversations with other Mayans. Further dialogue led to understanding the source of exploitation and oppression and to a social movement.

Ethics of Liberation is an extraordinarily fecund book with the proliferation of ideas taking priority over unity. Though the book often meanders, one of its rewards is Dussel's interpretation of dozens of major philosophers, many of whom receive extended treatment in 200 pages of footnotes. The attempt to move away from a Eurocentric vision provides poignant insight into the works of some of the most prominent theorists today. For example, the idealized preconditions of discourse of Karl-Otto Apel and Jürgen Habermas, John Rawls' justice as fairness for free and equal citizens, F.A. Hayek's free market, and Richard Rorty's patriotic ethnocentrism seem perverse or absurd from the perspective of the victim. The point is not just that their theoretical idealizations are so far from the reality of much of the world's population. Rather, they do not have the resources to address the reality of these victims because their theories are oblivious to the periphery. Rawls' difference principle and Habermas' discourse ethics do not connect with a world in which the least advantaged are excluded from redistributive schemes and the most marginalized members of society are voiceless. Hayek's talk of market efficiency and consumer choice is hollow where the efficient market serves as an ideological weapon used by core countries and their proxies to extract cheap labor and natural resources. Rorty's pride in his American heritage hardly seems laudable or benign in a world of *realpolitik* where the US government embraces dictators who use American arms to reward their cronies and crush dissidents.

Nonetheless, Dussel's characterization of some philosophers' positions is necessarily selective and in some cases reductive or uncharitable. Philosophical positions primarily serve as ideal types to build his system and this approach does not capture the nuances and tensions in many of the figures and ideas. *Ethics of Liberation* is weakest when Dussel engages the sciences and social sciences. Dussel's engagement with political economy is largely limited to textual exegesis of Marx. His discussion of neuroscience is superfluous and his gloss of Piaget and Kohlberg add little to a more substantial engagement with Freire.

Deeper questions concern the application of Dussel's ideas and, indeed, the role of the intellectual in social movements. Dussel shuns utopias and see every actual social system as creating victims. Ethical criticism is perpetual, though we can move closer to societies in which people are fed and clothed and can raise their voices in solidarity and democratic criticism. The criterion of feasibility constrains people's aspirations and it is revealing that Dussel follows Marx in refusing to entertain anarchism as a theoretical possibility. Against the anarchists (whom he oddly associates with the Shining Path in Peru and the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia), he insists that violence becomes mere coercion if the political and legal order meets people's needs, commands broad assent, and is more efficient than the previous regime.

This dismissal of anarchism may relate to the role of the theorist in social movements. Dussel insists that intellectuals must explain the causes of the victims' suffering and that critical social science as he practices it can show how systems of domination are impossible over the long run. There are two problems with this conviction. First, it is doubtful that philosophers have the theoretical tools to explain suffering and exclusion in complex social systems, let alone make predictions that people who do not share their theoretical or ideological convictions. Dussel's hermeneutical excursions are often compelling, but they do not meet minimal standards of explanation in the social sciences. In fact, the tables and charts scattered throughout the book often suggest more rigor and precision than warranted by the subject-matter.

Second, philosophers may in many ways be superfluous. It is difficult to imagine how *The Ethics of Liberation* could inform Rigoberta Menchú's experience with the exploitation and marginalization of the Mayan people, the torture and murder of her brother and father, or help her in her forays into the political sphere. Dussel agrees that victims are ultimately responsible for their own liberation, but does not consider the possibility that philosophical systems, no matter how imposing, have a limited role. Intellectuals and social scientists engaged in limited and specific inquiries pertinent to social movements and investigative journalists may be more useful collaborators than systematic philosophers.

These reservations aside, Dussel invites ethicists and social and political philosophers to remove their cultural and intellectual blinders and attempt to understand the world from the perspective of the excluded, the oppressed, and the dispossessed. Few people have thought harder on these themes than Dussel and *Ethics of Liberation* synthesizes much of this intellectual trajectory, opening future lines of research explored in the two-volume *Politics of Liberation* (2007, 2009) and in other works. This is an overdue English translation of a major work from one of the most important philosophers of our time.

4 January 2014

Source: *Marx and Philosophy Review of Books*. Accessed 14 August 2014
URL: <http://marxandphilosophy.org.uk/reviewofbooks/reviews/2014/920>

This review is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License.