

The Story of *Praxis*: Liberation Theology's Philosophical Handmaid

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Praxis from Aristotle to Hegel

To reach an understanding of the philosophical underpinning of liberation theology, the primary task is to come to terms with the idea which crops up so frequently in the writings of its exponents: *praxis*. To grasp, in turn, the concept of *praxis* as found in Marxian-influenced thought, some acquaintance with the history of this word, and idea, is necessary.

The foundation, as with so much of our philosophical heritage, lies in ancient Greece. Whilst Aristotle can use the term *praxis* to cover all kinds of activity, such as making things or contemplating the eternal realities, his more characteristic tendency is to keep the word for more specific purposes: to denote men's free activity in political life. Life in the *polis* combines ethics and politics (as later understood). It requires some kind of understanding, but only that modicum of knowledge which is needful for *eupraxia*, doing things well. Aristotle concurred with Plato's position in the *Statesman*: owing to the irregularities, *anomoiotétes*, of men and actions, there cannot be universally valid rules in politics. In political science we must be content with presenting what applies, in approximate fashion, to most cases, and to reach conclusions proportionate to such premises.¹

Political understanding, for Aristotle, is counterposed to philosophical, since only the latter, in contemplating things divine, attains familiarity with what cannot be other than it is — and so enjoys the status of knowledge strictly so called. In the course of time this distinction between philosophy and politics was gradually converted into a contrast between theoretical thought and human activity, notably productive activity. It should also be noted that, while Aristotle had a very positive view of the shared life of the *polis*, such that, for him, the pre-political is hardly more than the pre-human, his

¹ *Politicus*, 294, D-E; *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.3, 1094 b 20. Cf. E. Kapp, 'Theorie und Praxis bei Aristoteles und Platon', *Mnesmosyne* Vol. 5 (1937), pp. 179-94.

philosopher is nevertheless to strive for something which radically transcends the political order as a whole, for there is in man an element which is divine: *nous* or intelligence.² The conviction that there are legitimate philosophical concerns which go beyond the realm of social creativity would be integral to western Christian thinking in the *philosophia perennis*.

The fate of these ideas in the subsequent history of ancient philosophy turns on what individuals thought about epistemology, but also on the development, or regression, of institutional life. For the Stoics, *theoria* seems to have been a wisdom concerned with practical behaviour: but then they showed little confidence in the capacity of mind to explore the intelligible order of the world as such.³ For Plotinus, politics is an occupation for the herd: its value lies simply in the opportunities it offers to grow in those virtues which contemplation requires. Such contemplation is, for him, not *theorising*, producing theorems, theories, in propositional form and demonstrating them to be true, but a living and immediate contact and union with the Source of all things, and, in an especial way, of mind itself.⁴

The first Christian theologians, the Church Fathers, were obliged to take up some position vis-a-vis these notions, not simply because they were current in the philosophy of late antiquity, but because analogues to them, often expressed in non-technical form, as maxims, narratives, parables, were found in the Bible itself. St Luke's story about Jesus as a guest in the home of busy Martha and adoring Mary is a case in point.⁵ Translation of Greek patristic writings into English and other modern vernaculars has obscured the fact that the Fathers' discussions of the respective roles of 'contemplation' and 'action' in the Christian life are, so far as language goes, discussions of the relation of *theoria* and *praxis*. Thus Origen, taking up the remark of the Book of Proverbs that 'the starting-point of the good path is doing what is just', explains that *to praktikon*, the dimensions of doing, will probably occupy most of a Christian's biography, yet *to theoretikon*, contemplation, is the 'end' of the path whose beginning is just action. Such contemplation is for Origen the completion of all doing, in the *apokatastasis* or ultimate reconciliation of all things in the transfigured world of the Age to Come.⁶ In Augustine, the debate is

²N. Lobkowitz, *Theory and Practice. History of a Concept from Aristotle to Marx* (Notre Dame: London 1976), pp. 17-33.

³*Ibid.* p. 51: 'the *theoria* of the Stoics was little more than the knowledge required for the *kata phusin zén*, the life according to nature'.

⁴R. Arnou, *Theoria et Praxis. Une étude de détail sur le vocabulaire et la pensée des Ennéades de Plotin* (Paris, 1921).

⁵Luke 10: 38-42.

⁶In *Joannem* I. 16, with reference to *Proverbs* 16: 5.

about the relation of contemplation and *charity*. The exiled Czech historian of philosophy Nicholas Lobkowitz, to whom my account is indebted, wrote that Augustine's ideas on this subject

surround the notion of 'practice' with peculiar existential ambiguities unknown to the pagans. Even in this world, contemplation is man's greatest achievement, and yet charity may demand that one temporarily give it up. Actions are bitter necessity, and yet the Christian should pursue them without bitterness whenever charity demands it.⁷

In his earlier, lay period, Augustine seems to have held that charity includes not only meeting our neighbour's needs but also contributing to the values and works of culture. But, under the stress of his duties as a bishop, as the pastor of, predominantly, North African fisherfolk, he later restricted the *vita activa* to, on the one hand, helping our neighbour in his most fundamental necessities of life, and, on the other, carrying out the works of religion, meaning, primarily, the Liturgy.⁸ His influence can be detected in the discussion of these issues by St Thomas, for whom a whole range of activities from administering the sacraments to governing a city fall under the common rubric of *necessitas praesentis vitae*, to be distinguished from the prayer, wisdom and contemplation which anticipate the life of heaven.⁹

The first theologian to ask, *Quid sit praxis?* was the Franciscan scholastic John Duns Scotus. Although his successors, like the Thomist Capreolous and the Nominalist William of Ockham, answered Scotus' question in a way which allowed them to defend intellectual activity as a kind of *praxis*, Scotus himself, because of the privileged place given to the will in his theological doctrine of man, defined *praxis* in a resolutely non-intellectual way which is uncannily prophetic of Kant, or even of Marx. It is, for him:

the act of a faculty other than the intellect which, by its very nature, succeeds intellection, and may be elicited in accordance with right intellection so as to become right.¹⁰

In other words, *praxis* is deliberate post-theoretical human action of a kind that can be morally right or wrong, yet does not belong to ethics *tout court*.

Other mediaeval developments relevant to our topic are, firstly, the conviction of the Islamic Aristotelian thinker Ibn Sina (Avicenna) that

⁷Lobkowitz, *op. cit.* p. 66.

⁸Cf. J. Mausbach, *Die Ethik des heiligen Augustinus* (Freiburg, 1909), Vol. I. pp. 264-98, 414-27.

⁹*Summa Theologiae* IIa, IIae. q. 179, a. 2.

¹⁰*Ordinatio*, prologus, pars V, q. 2, n. 1.

sound ethical and political decisions may not be, as Aristotle himself considered, the work of prudence, but rather the practical applications of sheer theoretical insights,¹¹ and, secondly, the massive extension of technological control over nature which mediaeval inventiveness produced.¹² Thus Avicenna's rejection of Aristotle's belief that ethics and politics are founded on the ethical and political experience of virtuous men, in favour of the view that they are essentially the realisation of axioms, was confirmed by the emerging image of man as artisan, *homo faber*, a figure with a well-designed master-plan which he subsequently proceeds to carry out.¹³

If, as E. Zilsel has argued, the origins of the idea of scientific progress are to be found in the mentality of European artisans at the close of the mediaeval epoch,¹⁴ then the spokesman for that idea was Francis Bacon whose *Novum Organon* declares the purpose of all theoretical knowledge to be power: that is, the mastery of nature.¹⁵ Whilst Bacon's anti-theoretical attitude was fuelled by the radical scepticism of late mediaeval Nominalists towards our capacity to grasp the truth of things, the natural scientists of the early modern period attempted to reinstate the notion of 'absolute truth' in the study of nature — but in mathematical, not metaphysical form. For Descartes, the mathematical method is the paradigm of what human reason is like. One single self-identical method should be applied in every aspect of knowledge: but in morals and politics, where the decisions facing us cannot await the acquisition of a mathematical kind of certainty, we must opt by a determination of sheer will, appealing to a provisional ethic which alone can serve our turn until a greater state of educated enlightenment supervenes.¹⁶ Similarly, Locke held moral and political ideas to be, in principle, as incontestable as those of mathematics, while for Leibnitz they were as theoretically scientific; Spinoza worked out a 'geometrical ethics', and, on the very eve of Kant's 'Copernican revolution' in philosophy, Christian Wolff used a 'mathematical method' in his *De philosophia practica universali*.¹⁷

Kant's ethics are, paradoxically, even more divorced from experience than are his mathematics. While, for Kant, intuition (in a somewhat technical sense) is relevant to the latter, the ethicist has rigorously to disregard both the nature of man and circumstances in

¹¹ Lobkowitz, *op. cit.*, pp. 78-79.

¹² L. White, *Mediaeval Technology and Social Change* (Oxford, 1962).

¹³ Lobkowitz, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

¹⁴ E. Zilsel, 'The Genesis of the Concept of Scientific Progress', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 6 (1945), pp. 325-49.

¹⁵ F. Anderson, *The Philosophy of Francis Bacon* (Chicago, 1948), p. 183.

¹⁶ Ch. Adams and P. Tannery (ed.), *Oeuvres de Descartes* (Paris, 1897), VI. p. 22.

¹⁷ Lobkowitz, *op. cit.*, pp. 119-20.

the world around him, so as to concentrate on *a priori* concepts of pure reason. Kant, in a step of enormous consequence for the future, identified the 'practical' with the 'free' in the sense of the 'self-determining'.¹⁸ In so doing, he gave to the term 'practical' a wholly new connotation. Although Thomas, for example, could define free will in terms of the moving of self to a definite action by way of rational deliberation, Kant makes the characteristically modern claim that it belongs to man's essence that he is free to define his position in the world for himself. All laws save those of physics, are, in the last analysis, imposed upon man by himself. In this sense, Kant's philosophy represents the final unveiling of the main hidden presupposition of humanism since the Renaissance. Peculiar to Kant, however, is the notion that since freedom is not among the objects that show themselves to intuition in the world of appearance (it is 'noumenal'), theoretical philosophy must have as its sibling practical philosophy. For Kant, the need for practical philosophy is due entirely to the subjective constitution of our mind. If a genuine theoretical knowledge of intelligible realities became possible, practical philosophy would evaporate — which it does in Kant's successor, Hegel, whose 'practical' philosophy, *The Philosophy of Right*, is itself theoretical from start to finish.

Praxis from Hegel to Marx

The key to an understanding of Hegel's project is that he wishes at one and the same time to preserve the autonomy of reason, as discovered by Kant, without abandoning the claim to objectivity typical of pre-Kantian philosophy. Hegel's solution to this dilemma — autonomy or objectivity? — is to declare thought infinite. Autonomous thought must be boundless thought, and if boundless, then the subversive opposition between (knowable) *phenomena* and (unknowable) *noumena* resolves itself into a harmless contrast between what is already known and what still awaits the knower. The objects of sense are appearances whose imminent truth it is to lead us on beyond them, to what lies behind them: to the point where, for Hegel, even God himself ceases to be the 'unknown God'. He invites his readers to share with him an effort of intellectual understanding that culminates in a vision of all reality as the self-manifestation of the Absolute. As Hegel understands it, this vision transforms the whole of man's being; at the same time, insofar as it is expressed conceptually in his own philosophy, it reproduces something that has actually happened in the historical process, the ultimate goal which history has

¹⁸ *Werke*, ed. E. Cassirer (Berlin, 1922 ff.), V. p. 239.

reached.¹⁹ For Hegel, the aim of all willing, all action, is the satisfaction of thought. Our actions in and on the world would leave our thirst for rationality unsatisfied were we unable to contemplate the rationality achieved. Moreover, the importance of will and action dwindles as history progresses: as desire, will disappears when its thirst, of which action is the product, is slaked. And this it is in the contemplative acceptance of the rationality of reality. At a certain point, human history has unfolded all its main potentialities, and after that point the task of the wise man is not to teach the world what it *should be* but to help it contemplate the rationality that it *is*.

Hegel's belief that this unsurpassable goal had been reached in his own time, the Prussia of the early 19th century, is scarcely intelligible, psychologically speaking, without adding further premises not mentioned in his philosophy itself. The young Hegel had been brought up, in fact, in an atmosphere of religious and social expectation, eschatological in its intensity. Religiously, the Lutheran theologians dominant in the Swabia of his birth, and notably Friedrich Christian Oetinger, taught a version of Christianity in which history was the process whereby the Absolute realised its own potential, with the 'Spirit' at once God himself and a force emanating from him, and penetrating history.²⁰ Socially and politically, the experience of the Great Revolution of the West, beginning in 1788-89, led to a dizzy sense of liberation, combined with a more sober feeling of bewilderment at the disappearance of familiar landmarks. People rationalised the experience of the revolutionary upheaval by putting forward, in somewhat crude form, a dialectical theory of history: from naive harmony, through disturbance, confusion and tension to a final stage where all contradictions are resolved in a new and better harmony which incorporates all previous values.²¹ It was, in this respect, a convenient coincidence that for the New Testament, the advent of the Kingdom is heralded by a crescendo in the machinations of the powers of darkness. To Hegel's eyes, the French Revolution was the incarnation both of freedom and of terror: because the absolute freedom whose reign it declared was not rooted in objectivity, it was self-destructive. Again, he speaks of it as at once the expression of terror and of virtue: for subjective virtue, working on mere sentiment, brings in its train 'the most dreadful of tyrannies'. Convinced, however, that the Prussian reformism of the years of the

¹⁹The *Philosophy of History* and the *Phenomenology of Mind* consider this from different perspectives.

²⁰See E. Benz, 'Die Mystik in der Philosophie des deutschen Idealismus', *Euphorion* 46 (1952), pp. 280-300; idem., 'Johann Albrecht Bengel und die Philosophie des deutschen Idealismus', *Deutsche Vierteljahrschrift für Literatur-wissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 27 (1953), pp. 528-54.

²¹G. Cottier, O.P., *Du romantisme au Marxisme* (Paris, 1961)

war of resistance against Napoleon constituted a transition to a genuinely new stage in the working out of Spirit or Reason, Hegel concluded his *Philosophy of Right* with the statement of belief that:

Presence has discarded its barbarity and unrighteous caprice, while Truth has abandoned its beyond and its arbitrary force so that the true reconciliation which discloses the State as the image of actuality and reason has become objective. In the State, self-consciousness finds in an organic development the actuality of its substantive knowing and willing; in religion, it finds the feeling and the representation of this its own truth as an ideal essentiality; while in philosophy, it finds the free comprehension of this truth as one and the same in its mutually complementary manifestations; i.e. in the State, in nature and in the ideal world.²²

Here we find Hegel attempting to marry Christian theology to secular self-confidence. The Protestant State in its constitutional, law-regulated form, as experienced by Hegel, is nothing other than the reign of the Holy Spirit promised by Jesus Christ, the Son, the Father's Chosen, and become self-aware, and in that sense complete, in Hegel's own philosophy which is thus the finished presence of the glorified Christ, the Spirit, among men.

Marx's thought takes its rise from the debate among Hegel's pupils which followed his death from cholera in 1831. Whilst disagreeing about what, practically speaking, was to be done with the rest of world history, those pupils agreed that, conceptually, in the master's thought, the incarnation of the Logos was now complete.

This outlook accounts for the almost insane presumption which many of Hegel's pupils displayed whenever they explored what 'ought to be done'. Since they were absolute knowers, their critical, 'transformatory' or revolutionary deeds could no longer be considered a mere groping in the complex universe of things, values and ideals. They were salvific acts paving the way for a New Jerusalem already present at the level of thought. 'Practice' from now would always have a salvific connotation.²³

While the 'Right Hegelians' held that the existing order was basically sound, simply needing a little developmental tinkering here and there, the 'Left Hegelians' found that, in the light of Absolute Knowledge, it was so wanting as to warrant nothing less than outright abolition. For a Hegelian like the Germanophile Pole August Cieszkowski, the only philosophical endeavour which remained after Hegel was to lay out

²²*Sämtliche Werke*, ed. H. Glockner (Stuttgart, 1932 ff.) VII. p. 456.

²³Lobkowicz, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

the future plan of history.²⁴ And here, according to Cieszkowski, post-theoretical practice is king. Absolute Spirit finds its ultimate realisation in *praxis*, in which being and thought, art and philosophy will perish to be re-born as social existence. Pre-Hegelian practice is simply factual, what people happen to do; post-Hegelian practice, by contrast, is incarnated Absolute Knowledge, ultimate wisdom becomes real life. The *praxis* of the future is the action of the Absolute Knower. To realise this programme, Hegelianism had to be made the ideology of the masses. Cieszkowski thus announced the Kingdom, but what materialised was Marx.

Marx was deeply influenced by three Left Hegelians: Bruno Bauer, Arnold Ruge and Moses Hess, whose common interest was: how to translate absolute theory into practice. Bauer contributed the idea of critique: criticism unmasking the irrationality of what must disappear before the world enters on the age of salvation.²⁵ Ruge stressed the need for reason to return to itself at the level of brute existence, the 'nasty ought of *praxis*'.²⁶ Hess, mixing a *pot-pourri* of Jewish Messianism and French Socialism, argued that, to reach freedom, humanity must project itself into the future through self-conscious action. Action, as the synthesis of self-consciousness with the future, constitutes the ultimate realisation of freedom. The future it brings about will consist, according to Hess, in a process of social equalisation, ushered in after the conflict of wealth and poverty has reached its zenith, and issuing in the re-creation of the equality of paradise. In this utopia, a religion of universal love will reign; the Church will wither away from inanition, and the State whittle down to a mere administrative function.²⁷

Marx, who shared Bauer's conviction that nothing of moment was to be expected from the German middle class, despite its high culture, sought, and found in the proletariat, an agent capable of the act of *praxis* required to propel humanity towards its final salvation. For Marx, the Hegelian State, whose task is to reconcile the individual with society, to enable particular social atoms to transcend themselves into something universal, is an illusion — comparable to the religious illusion of a transcendent God denounced by Ludwig Feuerbach. The existing civil society must be transcended, not by the erection of a political super-structure but historically, by the coming into being of a

²⁴ *Prolegomena zur Historiosophie* (Berlin, 1838); see Lobkowitz, *op. cit.*, pp. 193-206 for a presentation of the man and his work.

²⁵ J. Gerhardt, 'Karl Marx und Bruno Bauer', in: *Politische Ordnung und menschliche Existenz. Festschrift E. Voegelin* (Munich, 1952), pp. 202-42.

²⁶ W. Neher, *Arnold Ruge als Politiker und politischer Schriftsteller* (Heidelberg, 1933). The brief citation is from Ruge's *Aus früherer Zeit* (Berlin, 1863) ff.) IV. p. 569, cited Lobkowitz, *op. cit.*, pp. 229-30.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 231-35.

new social order. Accepting Feuerbach's naturalism, which found the 'really real' in matter (not spirit), in the senses (not reason), in living (not philosophising), Marx was led to emphasise the importance, in the constitution of society, of economic factors. Some months after completing the *Critique of the Philosophy of Right*, he turned, accordingly, to the serious study of economics. The critique had to be given historical efficacy. To do this, it must become a material force — for material forces stood over against it in the shape of the State, the churches, and a 'philistine' bourgeoisie which, however delusory their self-description, were, unlike God, real enough at the social level. This the critique could do if it were able to become the dominant consciousness, and so the guide, of a social group which was already a material force to be reckoned with even before it embraced the fledgling Marxian theory. Marx proposed, therefore, that *praxis* is, in Lobkowitz's words:

the deed of an extra-philosophical humanity, or a part of it, which meets the theory half-way (later Marx even will feel that this humanity fulfils its task without at all needing theory). In short, whereas all other Left Hegelians considered *praxis* as an effluence of Absolute Knowledge, Marx discovered that it also might be an almost 'ontological' development on the part of history. If present society contained a group powerful enough to transform the world, and if this group was to accept the critique as its program of action, then it was possible to argue that history had destined this group for being the world's ultimate saviour. In that case, however, real history rather than Knowledge was the true principle of salvation.²⁸

What Marx sought was a group who could, through the operation of historical laws of a fundamentally economic kind, become agents of saving *praxis* without even, necessarily, being aware of the fact. Social salvation was certain if it happened through those who acted by virtual necessity.

Since the 16th century, the term 'proletariat', especially in its French guise, had referred to the lowest social class: beggars, vagrants, in a word, the poor. But in the early 19th century, it found itself transferred, thanks especially to the Saint-Simonian economists in France, to the industrial wage-earning class, seen as the modern version of the antique slave, or the mediaeval (or contemporary Russian) serf.²⁹ But, as a German commentator on French affairs,

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 276: cf. K. Marx, *Early Writings*, tr. T.B. Bottomore, (London, 1963), p. 58; Karl Marx-Friedrich Engels, *Historisch-kritisch Gesamtausgabe*, ed. D. Rjazanov and V. Adoratskij (Frankfurt, 1927 ff.), I. 1/1, p. 614.

²⁹ Lubkowitz, *op. cit.*, pp. 278-82.

himself a contemporary of Marx, pointed out, the distinctive feature of the modern proletariat lay in its awareness of the significance of revolution — as its role in the First French Republic had showed.³⁰ For Marx, the proletariat embodied the negation of the existing social order; it attracted his attention not so much because its members suffered but because they could constitute the ‘material weapon’ of his critique.

The concept of *praxis* continues to be of the greatest importance for classical Marxists. As one contemporary Marxist theoretician, Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez, has written,

Marxism is above all a philosophy of *praxis* and not a new philosophical praxis. . . The very fate of Marxism as theory (as a new theoretical arm of the revolution) depends upon the role accorded to praxis within it.³¹

This same author provides a succinct provisional definition of *praxis*: it is the ‘material activity of social man’.³² He goes on to explain that writers of his school produce their philosophical work, i.e. the theory of revolutionary *praxis*, in order to meet two ends. Their first goal is the overcoming of the ‘instinctive and spontaneous point of view of ordinary proletarian consciousness’.³³ The second is the countering of that unenlightened consciousness by a correct understanding of *praxis*, something desirable both for theoretical reasons (the proper understanding of Marx’s achievement), and for practical ones (the advancement of the revolutionary process). Sánchez Vázquez himself stresses that a true philosophical consciousness of *praxis* cannot be arrived at until certain necessary theoretical premises have matured in the history of ideas (we have traced schematically such a progress in the foregoing), and until, furthermore, the history of actual *praxis*, of socially transformative activity, has itself reached a point where such a new level of consciousness becomes imperative. Imperative for what reason? Imperative because from this point on men can no longer act upon and change the world ‘creatively’, that is, in a revolutionary way, without first gaining a true philosophical consciousness of *praxis*. Marx has made his essential breakthrough by creating an original synthesis of English political economy, classical German philosophy and French socialist thought, a synthesis which was not merely a summation, but a revelation of new dimensions and implications. The result, as Sánchez Vázquez makes clear, must

³⁰L. von Stein, *Der Socialismus und Communismus des heutigen Frankreich* (Leipzig, 1842), pp. 8-12.

³¹A. Sánchez Vázquez, *The Philosophy of Praxis* (London, 1977), p. xi.

³²*Ibid.*, p. 2.

³³*Ibid.*, p. 4.

involve the total re-casting of all future philosophy. As he writes:

The fundamental problems of philosophy have to be posed in their relation to practical human activity, which is central not only from the anthropological standpoint, because man is what he is in and through *praxis*, but also from the standpoint of history (since history is the history of human *praxis*), cognition (since *praxis* is the basis and the end of knowledge, as well as its sole criterion of truth) and ontology (since the problem of the relation between man and nature, or between thought and being, cannot be resolved without reference to practice).³⁴

In this perspective, Lenin emerges as the saviour of the Marxist tradition. For by emphasising, over against the ethical revisionism of the Second International, the decisive role of practical revolutionary activity (albeit only when integrated in the movement of objective factors, namely, social and economic forces), he restored the centrality of a theory of *praxis*, with its twin pillars: the primacy of the practical, and the unity of theory-and-practice. Marxism-Leninism is a 'scientific theory of the revolutionary praxis of the proletariat'.³⁵

In such a philosophy of *praxis*, while productive *praxis*, in its two main forms of labour and artistic creation, retains an importance of its own, it is political — that is, revolutionary — *praxis* which holds the key to the humanisation of man. Such revolutionary *praxis* is, in one sense, the end of all theory, since it conceives of philosophy in function of *praxis* itself, 'at the service of, and integral to, the actual effective transformation of the world'.³⁶

To carry out that transformation, however, philosophy is not simply to deny its own theoretical character, but to transcend itself, seeking suitable 'mediations' between theory and *praxis*, the better to give direction to practical activity: that is, to clarify the content of *praxis*, not to justify that *praxis*. For in Marxism, it is social practice which reveals the truth or falseness of all theory. Even though practice is effective only to the extent that it is informed by theory, yet theory itself is limited by its status as an ideal anticipation of an activity that cannot yet be seen in action. Nonetheless, the primacy of practice does not remove a certain limited autonomy from theory. Though *praxis*, as practical social activity transforming reality in obedience to practical needs, implies some degree of knowledge of the reality it transforms and the needs it satisfies (*praxis* is not wholly blind, in some measure it already sees), it cannot, for all that, explain itself. It is not directly theoretical; nor can it generate theory in some

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

automatic way. As Marx's *Eighth Thesis on Feuerbach* points out, beyond practice lies a further stage: the comprehension of practice, without which its rationality remains hidden. It is that comprehension which calls for the development of an adequate theoretical framework.

Praxis in Liberation Theology Today

With these concepts in our possession, we are now in a position to discuss their appearance, and modification, in the work of the liberation theologians. Most importantly, the relation of theory to practice as described above throws light on the insistence of such theologians that theology must be, in terms of the concrete social situation of the theologian concerned, 'engaged', 'committed', 'partisan' and even 'classist'.³⁷ For the 'engagement' in question, though made not to the sociologically quantifiable 'proletariat' of Marx's use, but rather to a more diffuse, messianic 'poor', reproduces in formal terms the stance of its secular rival. As the Brazilian Servite friar Clodovis Boff notes, political engagement functions here as an antecedent epistemological condition for the development of an appropriate theology in a given setting. He records, fairly enough, two difficulties attached to this approach. First, the refusal to justify the 'engagement' of a theologian in a movement for liberation — on the grounds that the 'truth' of the condition of the disadvantaged masses of the Third World stands in no need of theoretical 'proof' — renders that engagement intellectually vulnerable. It has no basis in any prior analytic evaluation of what is at stake in such a struggle. Secondly, the logic of politics and the logic of theology, so far from being identical, are in themselves strictly incommensurable. And yet theology, as any discipline, can develop only on certain conditions, and where what is being attempted is a theology of the political as such, then the likelihood is that these conditions will include political ones. Thus Boff, the most sophisticated methodologist among the liberation theologians, speaks of a suitably argued for political engagement as 'permitting' the emergence both of pertinent theological themes, and of a rhetorical style suited to the needs of a particular social conjunction.

Political engagement in a given cause within a defined group or class, although failing to guarantee the intrinsic quality of a theological theory, nevertheless constitutes a necessary condition

³⁷C. Boff, *Theology and Praxis, Epistemological Foundations* (Maryknoll, New York, 1987), p. 159.

for the selection by this theological theory of a determinate and adequate theoretical object, or thematic, as well as that of a style proportioned to its task of communication.³⁸

Boff is trying, evidently, to reach an understanding of the relationship between theory and *praxis* which will at one and the same time resemble that of Marxism, in requiring the theologian to situate himself epistemologically within a given *praxis*, and yet depart from Marxism by limiting the significance of such practical engagement vis-a-vis other epistemological factors in the making of good theology. For unless these other factors are also recognised, liberation theology removes itself from the commonwealth of the great theologies of the past which certainly did not conceive of a theory-*praxis* relationship of any such kind.

In his survey of the difficulties facing liberation theology, Boff speaks with some acidity of its

strident, demanding manifestoes on behalf of *praxis*. It exalts the 'epistemological destiny' of *praxis* to the point of threatening the autonomy of theoretical practice — to the detriment of *praxis* itself.³⁹

The 'unelaborated formulation' of the thesis that '*praxis* is the criterion of truth' is, he protests, 'ambiguous' and even 'erroneous'. From what we have seen of the total claims of Hegelian speculation, and their mirror effect in Marx's hopes of revolutionary *praxis* as the agent of total (secular) salvation, such excesses, on the part of theologians who see themselves as standing, philosophically, within the Marxist tradition, are hardly surprising.⁴⁰ Even where the initial act of engagement in *praxis* is seen as a commitment to the poor as *God's* poor, made on the basis of the Gospel, and so in Christian faith, the unique place occupied by the concept of *praxis* in Marxism — unique in importance, unique in comprehensiveness — cannot but threaten the primacy of theology's own source — divine revelation in its two forms, Scripture and Tradition, interpreted under the watchful care of the 'magisterium' or teaching authority of the church.⁴¹ Liberation theology, to maintain its own orthodoxy — which means, in the last analysis, its evangelical authenticity — must, as Boff himself writes, accept the criteria of revealed faith and that

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

⁴⁰ For the continuing importance of the idea of totality in even radically revisionist Marxism, see M. Jay, *Marxism and Totality. The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas* (Cambridge, 1984).

⁴¹ This prescription is based on the accounts of biblical exegesis and dogmatic theology offered by the Second Vatican Council, and notably in the documents *Dei Verbum* and *Optatam totius*.

distinctively Christian ‘practice’ which is charity, and not rest content with the theoretical or political ‘mediations’ of its own social hope. Yet at the same time, as he also rightly notes, both believers and unbelievers do ask of the church today that she will put forth practical *corporate* ‘signs’ of the credibility of her own doctrine. Her doctrine is quizzed about its capacity to shape forms of human ‘conviviality’ — life together — that can give fresh hope to society’s victims and history’s losers.⁴²

But this is not to say, *pace* Marx, that all the contradictions of the human condition can be resolved here below, nor, *pace* Hegel, that the rational understanding of how we are as we are (the ‘rose of reason in the cross of the present’) can ever be complete. If it is the task of philosophy to arouse and sustain questions about all the dimensions of human living, one of the blessings which theology confers on her philosophical handmaid is a sense of the limitations of human thinking, and of human action. Theory may instruct the world, and *praxis* improve it, but only a ‘beatific’ vision, and the advent of a different kind of Agent, can redeem it.

⁴² C. Boff, *op. cit.*, pp. 204-205.