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A theory of truth from the South

By Charles McKelvey



In last Wednesday's episode of Notes on the Revolution, we saw that the Section on Political Science from the South of the University of Havana is turning to the formulation of a theory of truth, in order to respond to the lies that are the foundation of imperialist policies. The lie is fundamental to the historical development of domination. In the modern world-system, conquest, colonialism, slavery, and imperialism have been justified with lies, sometimes blatant lies, but most often in the form of false premises.

I first became aware of the centrality of the lie in the early 1970s, when I was one of a handful of white students in a black nationalist teaching and research center in the city of Chicago. My African-American and African professors provided a colonial analysis, seeing global inequalities as rooted in European conquest and colonial domination of the world, which had established a foundation for an international system that then was completing a transition to neocolonialism. I could not avoid being aware that the perspective of my black professors was fundamentally different from that of white professors, under whom I had studied previously at the university, whose sincere commitment to the truth I do not doubt.

I wondered if there could be an objective social science and historical analysis that transcended the cultural boundaries of "race." I thought that perhaps we could do no better than to recognize the existence of black scholarship alongside white social science, with political power being the ultimate arbiter. If this were so, truth becomes what those in power say it is. But I could not accept this, because I believe that there is truth independent of the claims of the power. The question is, how do we find it?

These reflections led me to the study of the Jesuit philosopher and theologian Bernard Lonergan, who analyzed the various forms of human knowledge in order to address the possibility of attaining objective knowledge. Lonergan maintained that when we seek to understand, we proceed within a particular social context, which includes a coherent set of values, facts, and assumptions concerning the world. Stressing that this worldview is rooted in a particular social place, Lonergan calls it our "horizon," analogous to a place from which we view a physical landscape. He wrote, "As our field of vision, so too the scope of our knowledge, and the range of our interests are bounded. As fields of vision vary with one's standpoint, so too the scope of one's knowledge and the range of one's interests vary with the period in which one lives, one's social background and milieu, one's education and personal development. . . . What lies beyond one's horizon is simply outside the range of one's knowledge and interests."

Lonergan maintains, however, that we can overcome the limitations imposed on understanding by horizon through personal encounter with persons who possess social positions and horizons different from our own. Personal encounter involves "meeting persons, appreciating the values they represent, criticizing their defects, and allowing one's living to be challenged at its roots by their words and their deeds."



Here Lonergan focuses on what he calls “relevant questions.” As we seek to understand, we respond to questions that are relevant to the issue at hand. We are not aware of relevant questions that are beyond our horizon, but through encounter with persons of other horizons, we become aware of relevant questions of which we were previously unaware. If we are driven by the desire to understand, we will address these newly discovered questions, which cannot have any other consequence than transforming our understanding, taking us beyond what was possible in the context of our horizon. Personal encounter enables us to discover relevant questions and to arrive at a more comprehensive understanding.

Accordingly, the limitations imposed on human understanding by horizon can be overcome through personal encounter with persons of different horizons. I have coined the term “cross-horizon encounter” to refer to this process. Cross-horizon encounter is integral to attaining an understanding of particular issues that transcends cultural differences.

In understanding the particular issues that societies confront, emphasis ought to be given to encounter with the dominated and exploited, whose insights are excluded from the prevailing societal narrative. With respect to understanding the structures of the world-system and the world-economy, this implies the duty, for persons of the North, of encountering persons who live and have their being in the social world of the colonized. As a result of the tendency of the colonized since early eighteenth century to form anti-colonial social movements, the duty to truth obligates all who seek understanding in the North to encounter, more precisely, the speeches and writings of leaders and intellectuals of the anti-colonial and anti-neocolonial movements. For the South, it should be noted, an intentional methodology of cross-horizon encounter with the North is not necessarily required, because the colonial/neocolonial situation itself includes the transmission of the assumptions, values, and ideologies of the colonizer.

Some anti-colonial social movement leaders and intellectuals have formulated a penetrating understanding of the modern world-system and world-economy, whose advanced understanding is both the foundation and the result of practical gains. Our duty to take seriously persons of other horizons requires us to have the humility to recognize such achievements of persons and social movements in other social contexts. Let us reiterate that Lonergan defines personal encounter with others of different horizons as “allowing one’s living to be challenged at its roots by their words and their deeds.” Accordingly, long-standing revolutions in China, Vietnam, and Cuba cannot reasonably be dismissed or explained away; nor can the renewed efforts at challenging U.S. imperialism in Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Bolivia, and Ecuador. These projects are constructing something out of the contradictions of the neocolonial world-system, and all who seek to understand have the duty to try to understand their understanding and their vision for humanity.

The leaders and intellectuals of the Third World, especially of the Chinese, Vietnamese, and Cuban revolutions, are not merely expressing views at various with the prevailing ideologies of the world-system. They are formulating an alternative understanding, rooted in political practice and in the development of nations. They are formulating an alternative knowledge of society and history, precisely when the major Western universities, shaped by structures that distort scientific methods in the service of particular interests, are demonstrating a limited



understanding of the structures of the world-system, and even less a capacity to address its problems.

The understanding of the Third World socialist revolutions not only surpasses that of the universities. It also surpasses the understanding of the feminist, ecology, and racial identity movements of the North. These movements are founded on the solid epistemological foundation of taking seriously the insights of the dominated and excluded, and accordingly, their understandings have universal significance. However, on the level of practice, they have not accomplished anything comparable to the Third World socialist revolutions, which have developed several nation-states under its principles, nations that cooperate with one another in the establishment of alternative international norms of cooperation; and which have forged a comprehensive theory and practice that includes the fundamental principles of the racial identity, gender, and ecology movements. These social movements find their most mature expression in the context of an umbrella of theory and practice created by the Third World socialist revolutions, which in the context of the neocolonial world-system, are formulating the wisdom from below.

In our next episode, we will look at the content of knowledge formulated from below by the neocolonized peoples of the earth.

This is Charles McKelvey, reflecting on the unfolding global popular socialist revolution forged by our peoples in defense of humanity.