

Culture, 'The People,' and Political Transformation in Enrique Dussel's Twenty Theses on
Politics

Robert Cavooris

Prof. Rob Albro

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“How is it possible to get *out of Egypt*?”¹ If there were ever a question that screamed liberation, this is it. The forlorn, excluded, and oppressed Hebrew slaves plan an escape into the desert, ready to risk it all in order to shed their chains. But why? What sparks this questioning, and what characterizes the moment in which they actually choose to act? These are difficult questions to say the least, and these are the very questions that Enrique Dussel’s politics of liberation seeks to answer. Liberation, in this conception, is freedom from all forms of domination, from the largest international disparities in power between, to the domestic repression of one person by her partner. In this sense, the question of liberation is always contextual and contingent in form, yet universally.

In this discussion, I will examine how Enrique Dussel addresses liberation as a political question in his introductory text on the subject, *Twenty Theses on Politics*. In this text, he employs a number of unique concepts and philosophical understandings to explain his view of how politics can lead to empirical liberation, drawing all the time on the particular experience of Latin Americans in pursuit of this goal. Two important concepts that come out of this discussion are *culture*, which holds a unique and, I argue, contradictory position in his theory, and “*the people*,” a recurring collective political actor that Dussel places at the center of political progress.

In Part I of my discussion, I will contextualize *Twenty Theses on Politics* by exploring some of the relevant themes in Dussel’s thought that make an appearance in that text. This includes Dussel’s take on the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, his conception of history based the sociological analysis of world system theory, and his connection of this these concepts to the question of ethics. In the first section of Part II, I will pursue a deconstructive approach toward the idea of “culture” as it appears in *Twenty Theses in Politics*. This is a central point in Dussel’s

¹ Dussel, *An Ethics of Liberation*, 138.

theory, as he maintains that the new politics of liberation must take the form of a cultural revolution. I contend that culture holds an unresolved position in the text however, appearing both as a material practice, and as a set of ideas or worldviews. In the former role, culture is described as the content of politics, and the latter, it is the form. I argue that the irreconcilability of these positions indicates that politics is itself a movement of these two points in relation to each other, and that the space between material and ideal cannot be fully overcome.

In the second subsection of Part II, I examine “the people” as the actor that emerges in the moment of political transformation. Drawing on my conclusions about the irreconcilability of material and ideal culture, I question the notion put forth by Dussel that “the people” shares a unified consciousness as it acts. If the people is a heterogeneous actor with a number of different social constituencies, then how can it be united, even momentarily, in its subjective position? And if it is not united, how can we know when it is acting legitimately to fulfill the needs of the truly oppressed and excluded in a political community? To address these questions, I examine the theory populism put forth by Ernesto Laclau, on which Dussel draws heavily to construct “the people,” as well as Slavoj Žižek’s critique of that theory. Ultimately, I argue that there is no reason to assume that “the people” has a singular moment of consciousness, and that as such, we must consider the specific social make-up of the people when questioning the legitimacy or potential outcomes of collective political action. On this final point, I suggest that the concepts of law and justice in the philosophy of Jacques Derrida may of use in thinking about how different groups interpret their political goals to make decisions. In Part III, I will recap my conclusions and point to their potentially broader implications for politics.

Part I: Relevant Themes in Dusselian Thought

Enrique Dussel has long been engaged with the question of liberation and the experience of the oppressed and excluded. But it was not always so: for a thinker so engaged with Latin America today, and with the existence and position of the Other, it is perhaps surprising that much of Dussel's formal training was done on the Continent, among French scholars and with a concentration in European thought. Through his doctoral years, his study was of the Greek philosophers and their twentieth century descendents such as Heidegger, Husserl, Sartre, Scheler, and in his first few years after returning to Argentina from ten years of study abroad, his lectures concentrated on these thinkers. But before his homecoming, the seed of Dussel's future movement away from this tradition and back toward his Latin American roots had already begun to sprout. In 1961, Dussel wrote to his friend, historian Esteban Fantana, "One day we shall have to write the history of Latin America from the other side, from the underside, from the perspective of the oppressed, the poor."² Dussel would go on not just to write history from this angle, but also to take an important role in the development of a theology, ethics, philosophy, and politics of the oppressed.³

Dussel really began to undertake these projects to answer the question, posed in the title of Augusto Salazar Bondy's 1968 book, *¿Existe una filosofía de nuestra América?* In 1971, Dussel met with several other Latin American philosophers in Santa Fe, Argentina to try to respond to this question.⁴ Liberation Theology, a unique brand of Latin American leftist Catholicism, had been developing for some years, along with sociological advancements in the theory of dependency and a widespread Latin American interest in Marxism. These intellectual bases set the stage on which these thinkers would try to undertake the task of defining a Latin American philosophy. And against this background, it is not surprising that the result would be a

² Dussel, qtd. in Alcoff and Mendieta, 17.

⁴ Scannone, 60.

“Philosophy of Liberation.” This philosophy would be rooted in a “social re-reading and situated from the ethical phenomenology of the face of the poor of Emmanuel Levine’s,” whose *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* Dussel had recently read, and which he said shook him out of an “ontological slumber.”⁵ Thus, a philosophy rooted in the otherness of Latin America, in the substance of its experience, would come to mark the continent—with Dussel’s contributions—and would lead eventually to the volume considered here, where I will further discuss the questions of exteriority that Levine’s’ thought brings to the table, and what this idea means for politics.

Dussel on Levinas

The ethical categories that Dussel uses and projects into what he calls the political “field” are taken, as noted above, from the work of Emmanuel Levine’s. The key theoretical categories are Totality and Exteriority. In political terms, Levine’s discussed the State as a Totality, and those who are excluded by the State as the Exteriority, or Other. The State, on Dussel’s reading of Levine’s, embodies war itself. That is, it is a violent imposition that protects its own existence by any means necessary, coming to stand as the winner of an originary state of conflict.⁶ The State—the state of war—“suspends morality.” Moral and ethical questions become secondary in politics to questions of power, and the continuation of existing power. Out of the anarchy of a world without institutions the State “closes on itself.”⁷ It creates a closure around the things it can control and excludes all else, defining its own boundaries. It is this closure that permits the continuation and reification of the state. According to Dussel, this characterization of the State is Levine’s’ most important contribution to an adequate understanding of politics.

⁵ Alcoff and Mendieta, 20.

⁶ Dussel, “‘The Politics’ by Levinas,” 79.

⁷ Ibid., 79.

But for Dussel, there are two sides to the closure of the State. At the same time that it excludes all of that which does not conform and submit to the control its totality, it also denies the very uniqueness of the excluded position. Thus: “Politics would be the strategic action whereby all members of a community, all considered as part, are affirmed as functional, as ‘the Same.’ Their alterity and exteriority are denied, so they cannot be considered as ‘the Other.’”⁸ In other words, the establishment of political institutions—such as, but not limited to, the State—identified here as politics itself, is the process of establishing a coherent totality, a political “self” that understands its own position and includes even its that which is different from it within its own totalizing worldview.

Part of Dussel’s political project is to take Levine’s’ philosophizing and draw it into a more empirical analysis. Levine’s was not primarily concerned with looking at the categories of Totality and Exteriority within an analysis of existing material economic and social conditions. Part of what Dussel is trying to do in his deployment of an explicit politics of liberation is to take these ethical, philosophical, categories, and explore more precisely how they play out on the material level. He seeks to place the notions of Totality and Exteriority on the special-temporal map of the material world, and to critique and delineate, looking at the historical development of society, where the exteriority lies today, in the first decade of the 21st century.

A Dusselian World History

For Dussel, the grandest empirical Totality/Exteriority played out on the world stage today is that of a world system centered in Western Europe and the United States, which has established itself in what we know as modernity. He has written multiple works about the history of Latin America from a world system perspective. The major tenet of this sociological school of

⁸ Ibid., 79.

thought is that advanced capitalist countries today represent the center of the world system, and “developing” countries a periphery that cannot possibly advance in the same way. The developed countries of today were only able to do so by exploiting and colonizing other countries of the world, thus affecting their future economic possibilities. “What is today called the Third World reached its present state by being systematically underdeveloped,” say sociologists Chirot and Hall, explaining this central thesis of world system theory.⁹

Dussel has taken up this theory in his essay “The ‘World System’ Europe as ‘Center’ and Its ‘Periphery,’ Beyond Eurocentrism.” Here, he paints a picture of modernity in terms of the establishment of the present world economic and social system. Dussel identifies geo-political factors as the immediate cause of European primacy within the present stage of historical development. Using the concepts of developed core and dependent periphery drawn from world-system theory, Dussel explains how the phenomenological concepts of Interior and Exterior, or Totality and Other, play out on the world stage, showing how the developed world closes itself off as a political community and relegates the periphery to the position of the Other.

To begin his historical analysis, Dussel opposes a global understanding of modernity to the Eurocentric one that sees modernity as European cultural phenomenon, slowly exported throughout the world. Dussel presents the historical period that we call modernity as the most recent of four interregional socio-economic systems, beginning in 1492 and being the first to subsume the entirety of the world. In the Eurocentric conception, European primacy in this period is a result of *internal* factors—namely, a cultural affinity for ‘Reason’—which gave Europe an edge in establishing itself as a dominant cultural, political, and economic force throughout the world.¹⁰ Here, Dussel cites Weber’s discussion of Western civilization’s “cultural

⁹ Chirot and Hall, 83.

¹⁰ Dussel, “The ‘World System,’” 93.

phenomena” that made it particularly suited to universalization, as well as Hegel’s claim that the “Spirit of Germany” (which Dussel equates with the Spirit of Europe) was destined to become “The Spirit of the new World” through its establishment as “absolute Truth.” Dussel refutes these points, and in telling moment of historical materialism, eschews these cultural bases as the reasoning, or even justification, for Europe’s domination of modernity, and seeks a more grounded understanding of the epoch by looking at the material reality that led Europe to its status as the center of a world-system.

In the third interregional system (preceding the modern era), argues Dussel, the center was the Persian Empire of central Asia, and, after the seventh century, in the Islamic caliphates of the Middle East.¹¹¹² These places were the centers of trade, where the goods of East, West and South (Africa) crossed and were dispersed. From the European perspective, there was a “rupture” in the system in which the Ottoman empire cut off Western Europe from the center. This, as a geo-political factor, was crucial. It explains precisely why it was Europeans, or Spaniards more specifically, and not the Chinese or any other nation, who came upon and used the Americas and their abundance of material and human resources to build the largest empire of modernity.

The Chinese, for instance, in seeking greater connection with the center of the system, would have to look West, and not East to further their integration. That is, economic success relied on closeness to the center that was at present in central Asia, and going East— around the world towards a peripheral Europe—would be useless. The Portuguese managed their way through the Mediterranean and came to dominate trade in the Indian ocean, thus excluding the other great Western European empire of the time, Spain. Though Portugal connected many of the

¹¹ Ibid., 95.

¹² Mendieta, “Beyond Universal History,” 119.

peoples of peripheral Western Europe to the center, Spain had been excluded. It is for this reason that Ferdinand and Isabella accepted Christopher Columbus's proposition to go *west*, circumnavigating the world and establishing a link with the center. The end result, of course, was a the discovery of a bountiful land with easy access to resources that Spanish empire desperately needed, which for Dussel was the key to the rise in Europe's hegemony after 1492.

This historical explanation of the development of modernity is meant to show how the rise of advanced capitalist countries depended up the discovery of the Americas and the exploitation of the resources and peoples who lived there, as maintained by the world system perspective. This material conception of historical development contrasts with an idealist perspective, represented by Hegel and Weber, which Dussel explicitly condemns as a product of a closed totalizing center. Here, we seem he seems to portray an understanding of history that implies that in order to do away with the large-scale dominations on the world stage, one would have to alter the material conditions (the dependency of the Global South) that maintain an imbalance of power. However, there is an ideological side to this imbalance of power relating to how people view each other across the lines of center and periphery. Dussel makes use of Levinisian categories to connect the above material analysis with the development of ideas and ethics.

The Reductivist Fallacy

In Dussel's discussion of Totality and Exteriority in his essay "Domination—Liberation: A New Approach," he shows how the interaction of two closed systems—that of the European conquistador, and of the Native American—come "face-to-face." By closed systems, I mean societies that had not come face to face with others who had developed in isolation. This

encounter between Europeans and Native Americans marks the very awareness of the humanity of the Other—is the originary human social relation in which one closed system opens itself up to another. But such an opening does not last. It always results in an act of domination—an act of violence. Indeed, such is the natural consequence of what Dussel calls the “deified *I*.” Such is nothing less than the foundation of modern philosophy—Descartes’ *cogito*. The closure and certainty of the self leads to the Other becoming a *thing*. The full humanity of the Other becomes but a position in one’s own *I*, and can therefore be controlled, dominated, used.¹³ Dussel refers to this as a reduction—the end of the face-to-face encounter and its supplantation by domination. The nature of the European economic system mandates that the full humanity of the Other, that is, of the American Indian, or the African, be excluded. Even humanity itself must be reduced so as to become property, as the idea of property for all that is other was acceptable in the construction of empire. This is what Dussel refers to as “the reductivist fallacy”—the necessary suppression of all conceptions of the Other (and of everything) outside the sphere of economic interest.¹⁴ The European state bent on economic growth could not manage its ‘discoveries’ any other way. The developing mode of production mandated such ways of thinking. So the black African or the Native becomes a slave object, thus denying their alterity as a human.

In contrast to the simplified alterity-denying conception as viewed from within the Totality, Dussel emphasized the subjective position of the Other. That is, the position of the Exterior as a reality creates a unique subjectivity that Dussel regards as the only ethical position—that is, the position from which the ethical critique of the totality, of politics, can take place (79). Thus:

¹³ Dussel, “Domination—Liberation,” 30

¹⁴ Mendieta, *Global Fragments*, 137.

The ‘face-to-face’ relation with the Alterity of the ‘somebody’ (Autrui) is the ethical relation par excellence. This relation breaks the functionality of the actor subjects (the ontic) within the system (the ontological) and situates them one in front the other as Others [sic], as responsible for the Other (metaphysics).¹⁵

So here, we find that the critical dimension of the Other: in coming face to face with its dominator, in coming to a moment of equality, of humanity, where the Other is not reduced to “slave,” or “subject,” or “laborer,” the Other can show, by its very existence, the flaws of the current Totality. The Other is then a kind of surplus that exceeds the system that seeks to domesticate it, and by its very existence, it presents and perceives the shortcomings of that system.

But, for Dussel, this ethical process, as espoused by Levine’s, is only one half of the question of Liberation. For it is not enough to simply point out the flaws in a system—one must also address them, with a positive project of one’s own. At the heart of this imperative is the story of revolutions all over Latin America and all over the world: it is very easy to demand that something ends (that a president leaves, that a foreign occupier leaves, that an economic system falls), but this must necessarily be countered by some positive political project. Thus, Dussel writes, “Levine’s’ criticism of politics as the strategy of the state of war is accurate, courageous, and clairvoyant. However, his critique does not avoid the difficulties involved in reconstructing the *positive and critical emancipatory* sense of the new politics.” In other words, the critique is not enough—it is a negative act in that attempts to end what exists. Something Other must also be established in its place. Dussel sees this new positive project in the contemporary political period of Latin America. The critical popular unrest at various points throughout the region in

¹⁵ Dussel, “‘The Politics’ by Levinas,” 80.

the last twenty years—the mobilization of Cochabamba, Bolivia in 2000, the ousting of (three) consecutive presidents in Argentina in two years by popular protest, the popular restoration of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez after an attempted coup in 2002—marked the end of what he considers a neo-liberal period of transitional democracy. These manifestations are thus conceived by Dussel as negative moments of critical politics. They are saying moments of negation. These negations however are being followed by moments of new political development, and it is this development that Dussel seeks to capture in *Twenty Theses on Politics*.

Part II: On *Twenty Theses on Politics*

In *Twenty Theses on Politics*, the idea of culture holds a privileged yet uncertain position. In the first part of this section, I contrast two contrasting roles that culture plays in his notion of political transformation. On the one hand, culture appears as a set of ideas, or ways of thinking, that take the form of narratives that a society tells itself about the world. On the other hand, culture is described as the very practical activity of everyday life. I suggest that we can think about this difference, an apparent opposition of meaning that characterizes most discussions of culture, in terms of Marx and Engels' distinction between idealism and materialism. Given that Dussel calls for a cultural revolution, a definition that privileges culture as “ways of knowing” leads to an idealist interpretation of political development, while a definition that privileges the idea of culture as “ways of doing” results in a materialist interpretation. I suggest that culture does in fact occupy both of these positions in Dussel's conception, but that it also exceeds this distinction. If we think of culture as the intersection of ways of knowing and ways of doing, then cultural transformation is a change in the location of this intersection. Cultural transformation

considered as such is both the form and material of politics itself--it is what Marx calls “the real movement to abolish the present state of things.”¹⁶

In the second part of this work, I will suggest that the emergence of Dussel’s ephemeral political actor, *the people*, represents a moment at which cultural transformation takes place. This moment occurs when material practice and ideal understanding--the two traces of culture that I’ve identified--find themselves in undeniable disaccord. Far from representing the unified will of the political community to put these things into coherence, I argue that it represents an unpredictable convergence defined by the power relations within the political community. In other words, depending on the social constituency of *the people*, its aspirations, decisions, and outcomes vary. Dussel, using Emmanuel Levine’s categories of Totality and Exteriority, tries to show that the excluded portion of a society, the exteriority, exercises a particular ethical-critical position on politics, but he is ambiguous about whether this is their primary role as a political actor. He also implies that it is the nature of their unfulfilled material needs that makes them an important actor. I propose that Žižek’s idea of universality can help clarify what it means to be in such a position. Ultimately, I argue that we cannot think of universality only in material terms, and that Dussel overlooks this in the later part of *Twenty Theses on Politics*. That is, it is not only that by helping this one group of excluded people that society helps itself. This might be true, but to understand the full power of the excluded portion of society, we must look to how these people *know* the world, and defer to their interpretations about what particular ideals mean in practice. To explain the process by which these open-ended ideals come to have particular, practical meanings, I suggest that Jacques Derrida’s notion of contextual justice explains how an ambiguous ideal goal is constantly but provisionally defined in practice.

¹⁶ Marx, *The German Ideology*, 162.

Culture, Ill-defined

In his preliminary words to *Twenty Theses on Politics*, Dussel lays out the goal of his theory. Rejecting the stances of both capitalism and the “real” socialism of the U.S.S.R as two sides of the modern Eurocentric worldview, Dussel hopes to guide a new Leftist political tendency that can be seen operating today (to varying degrees) in Latin America in the movements of Hugo Chavez’ Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela, Evo Morales and the *Movimiento a Socialismo* in Bolivia, and the autonomous development of the Zapatista National Liberation Army in Mexico. The principle difference that separates these movements of the new Left from the leftism of the 20th century is that these new movements are “intrinsically participatory and without vanguardism in having learned from the *people* to respect its millennial culture.”¹⁷ It is because these two concepts, the people and culture, underlie Dussel’s new theory that they need to be questioned and clarified.

Very early into the text, Dussel reveals the importance of culture in his theory: “Socialism, if it still has any meaning, needs to take the form of a ‘cultural revolution.’” How are we to understand this statement? Is cultural revolution a means to an end? Is it, like socialism in V.I. Lenin’s understanding of the term, merely a lower phase leading to some higher formulation of society? In other words, is a first step that can move a society toward “real” revolution? The binary that Dussel announces here is that of form and matter: If cultural revolution is the form of Dussel’s politics, then socialism is the matter. And if socialism is the matter, it is because it is, ultimately, a material system. It deals with “material political principles” that they relate to the needs of the poor (food, water, shelter, etc). “First is the sphere leading to the production,

¹⁷ Dussel, *Twenty Theses on Politics*, xvi,

reproduction, and enhancement of the lives of the citizenry. This is the *content* of all political action and therefore I call it the *material*,” says Dussel.¹⁸

But if cultural revolution is form of Dussel’s politics, and the satisfaction is the content, then how do we move from one to the other? That is, what does Dussel mean here by cultural revolution? As a starting point we can parse the question down to an even more basic one: what, in Dussel’s view, is culture? Here, we find a slippery point in Dussel’s discussion. The idea of culture, which justifies his entire theoretical elaboration, presents a significant gap in meaning. Recall: the new political movement should be “intrinsically participatory and without vanguardism in having learned from the people to respect its millennial culture.” He continues, “culture--the mythical narratives within which it has developed its own critical thought and the institutions that must be integrated into this new project.”¹⁹ It is necessary to unpack this definition of culture in order to understand the process of political transformation.

The notion of culture has historically been employed under innumerable definitions and contexts. It has always held an elusive position in intellectual inquiry. A brief genealogy of culture, like that of Michael M.J. Fisher in *Anthropological Futures*, highlights the concept’s complexity and incoherence. “Culture, defined as a methodological concept or tool of inquiry might best be understood in terms of its historically layered growth of specifications and differentiations,” says Fischer, explaining that the role of culture has varied constantly throughout its time as a concept in academic study.²⁰ He continues, “Historically, concepts of culture have been rhetorical as well as analytical tools in struggles over class and religion; universalistic versus particularistic claims about reason, aesthetics, morality; legitimate versus

¹⁸ Dussel, *Twenty Theses on Politics*, 46.

¹⁹ Fischer, 3.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

illegitimate forms of power; science, politics, public spheres, civil societies, and rights and justice.”²¹ Fischer means that culture has developed as an accessory to meet the needs of various intellectual endeavors, and changed according to its purpose. Because of this, it always defies simple explanation or definition.

One of the tensions that marks Fisher’s genealogy is that between practical material culture (including the economic system of production itself), and ideological culture in the form of ethics, worldviews, understandings, and values. Marx and Engels, as we shall see, saw culture as an extension, an “armature,” says Fischer, of the material power relations of political economy.²² Weber, for instance, took a different stance, but one in which this opposition was still apparent. According to Fisher, he saw cultural development as the product of “a conjunction of material and cultural causes,” including on the one hand “world historical changes in global markets and technologies, and on the other “the anxiety structure of theological beliefs” that gave rise to a Protestant ethic.²³ Even while these are two parts of the same whole for Weber, we see that the material and the ideal are irreducible. The question of their relationship carries over into any discussion of culture.

Another example of this opposition is recognize the various ways in which anthropologists understand culture as “ways of doing,” or as “ways of knowing.” The former interpretation is expressed by linguistic anthropologist Louise Damen who defines culture as “learned and shared human patterns of models for living; day-to-day living patterns...mankind’s primary adaptive mechanism.”²⁴ In this sense, culture is seen as a set of practices shared by a group of people. But John Paul Lederach’s definition of culture has a different emphasis:

²¹ Ibid., 4.

²² Ibid., 6.

²³ Fischer, 8.

²⁴ Damen, 367.

“Culture is the shared knowledge and schemes created by a set of people for perceiving, interpreting, expressing, and responding to the social realities around them.”²⁵ In other words, Ledarch is saying that culture is a set of shared ways of seeing the world. Every understanding of culture highlights must mediate in some way between these two definitions, even if it does not explicitly favor one over the other.

In Dussel’s case, the question of culture translates into a question of political and social transformation--the nature of such transformations will depend on what it means to have a “cultural revolution.” The task would be to identify what ‘culture’ Dussel is talking about in *Twenty Theses* so that we could determine whether Dussel’s theory implies an idealist or a materialist view of historical development. But a clear answer on this proves elusive. The key contradiction that I wish to highlight is that Dussel moves in two seemingly opposed directions in his analysis--on the one hand, he seems to say that political transformation that changes the people live will come from a change in ideals and values. But on the other hand, he seems to say that material changes, achieved through politics, will change the way in which people see the world and the values that they have.

I return here to Dussel’s first given definition of culture (as we shall see, this definition fluctuates throughout the text): “The mythical narratives within which [the people] has developed its own critical thought and the institutions that must be integrated into this new project.” So culture is comprised of narratives, stories that people tell, narrate, and pass along through millennia. And the narratives are mythical: their origin and their degree of truth remain unknown to the narrator. They explain some fact or belief about the world, to illustrate a

²⁵ Lederach, 9.

particular reality and explain its unknowable origin. Later in the text, Dussel develops what he means by way of example:

Public opinion interprets political events: it is the final Judge of politics, politicians, leaders, candidates, public affairs, etc., playing the role fulfilled by Osiris in the grand chamber of the Egyptian goddess of justice, Ma'at, a *narrative* originating in Memphis more than five thousand years ago.²⁶

We see in this quote an attempt to define, through the use of a time-tested (if relatively obscure) narrative, the role of public opinion in a political community. The implication in using this ancient narrative is that it contains a way of thinking that can be opposed to “the presuppositions of the past five hundred years of capitalist and colonialist Modernity.”²⁷ Yet, it is older than these modern presuppositions. It is an example of millennial culture, despite being from outside of the specifically Latin American past. So it can be said that a mythical narrative is something inherited--a set of ideas passed along over time.

Through such mythical narration, the narrator broaches the question of identity. By receiving and passing along the inherited narration, she establishes who she is, asking and answering the question, ‘How did I (we) get here?’ It was a concern for identity that drove Augusto Salazar Bondy to ask the question, “Existe una filosofía latinoamericana?” which Dussel tried to answer with the Philosophy of Liberation. Culture is, for Bondy, “the organic articulation of the original and differentiating manifestations of a community—susceptible to service as a guide to contrast the historic work of peoples—“ and the quest for this culture spawned the philosophy of liberation. The politics of liberation, introduced in *Twenty Theses on*

²⁶ Dussel, *Twenty Theses on Politics*, 129.

²⁷ Dussel, *Twenty Theses on Politics*, xvi.

Politics, is a corollary to this philosophy. It is a way to make Latin American self-consciousness manifest in the field of politics through use of the mythical narratives of Latin American culture.

Dussel says that it is *within* these narratives that new institutions are developed. Does this mean that it is within *particular* narratives that we discover particular institutions? For example, does the mythical narrative of Osiris provide people with a new way of organizing human activity with regard to public opinion? Or does it mean that through the practice of contributing to a collective narrative the institution is defined and arises? Or is history itself a sort of narrative, and Dussel is simply noting that the development of new institutions takes place over time, in the course of the historical narrative? This ambiguity surrounding what it means for institutions to arise *within* narratives will have to wait to be addressed. But what is important here is the relationship between mythical narratives—stories we tell ourselves—and practical institutions. The former, a culture of ideas, *encompasses*, the latter, a set of material organizations. The ideas are the form through which the political material—human institutions and human needs--can be affected. These narratives become the site for cultural revolution.

If Dussel sees the true potential for political change in an alteration in this inherited body of thought, then I contend he is taking a position of what Marx and Engels would call idealism. The distinction between materialism and idealism that I am using to demonstrate the difference between these two traces is found through the works of Marx and Engels. Engels, in an 1893 letter to Franz Mehring meant to clarify the tenets of historical materialism explains that “ideologists,” who do not ascribe to the materialist theory, believes that the advancements in knowledge throughout history have been determined solely through the power of human thought to overcome the thought of its predecessors. “It is above all this appearance of an independent history of state constitutions, of systems of law, of ideological conceptions in every separate

domain that dazzles most people,” he says.²⁸ It is necessary to step beyond the sphere of thought conceived by the ideologist as that which has “gone through its own independent process of development in the brains of successive generations.”²⁹ This is opposed to a conception rooted in “actual conditions,” in which thought is not believed to have an independent development, apart from material reality.

Earlier, in the 1840s, Marx was drawing up this material/ideal distinction even if its terms were not entirely clear. In his *Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx calls for a move to analysis of the concrete, which would consist of “human activity as *objective* activity,” that is, as the object of social studies.³⁰ Marx calls this human activity “practice” throughout the theses, and explicitly opposes it to abstract mysticism in the form of “religious sentiment,” which is “itself a social product,” an outcome spawning from the material relations of production. This does not mean that philosophy and religion are illegitimate objects of inquiry from the materialist viewpoint. But it does mean that these things cannot be considered on their own as the engines of historical development. Dussel takes the opposite, idealist, position when he says a new political project that finally moves out of the modern paradigm, “beyond liberalism and beyond real socialism,” will be rooted in a shift in ideals.³¹

To be clear, it is not the mere consideration of narratives or ideals that lead to a characterization as idealism. As Engels says in the letter to Mehring, the numerous bodies of thought that develop over time (philosophy, religion, law) certainly affect historical development.³² But the materialist conception considers the importance of that thought as it

²⁸ Engels, 765

²⁹ Engels, 766.

³⁰ Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach,” 143.

³¹ Dussel, *Twenty Theses on Politics*, xvi.

³² Engels, 767.

exists within certain material conditions. Dussel stakes out the opposing position; he says that new institutions, and ultimately new systems, arise *within* the mythical narratives of a culture. Furthermore, these narratives border on mysticism. Their mythical nature implies that they serve as explanations of the inexplicable. This is the root of all religious sentiment from the materialist viewpoint. Indeed, it is not coincidental that Dussel, as a theologian, sees religion itself as an important cultural narrative. Ironically, however, it is in the explanation of religion where one can also begin to see a trace of materialism in Dussel's thought.

"Latin American theology," says Dussel, "always starts, not from a theological position but from the state of affairs as they actually exist. We start, therefore, not with what theologians have said about the situation but with the situation itself."³³ In order to understand the world as it exists, "All theology, in any given historical moment, uses some specific scientific discourse to construct its reflection."³⁴ In the case of twentieth century Latin America, Marxism provides a discourse to understand the social and political conditions in which theology operates. This does not amount to an acceptance of the entirety of Marx and Engels' philosophical thought. Generally, "Marx is accepted and used as a social critic," and the observations of contemporary Marxists provide different descriptions of the empirical world from which one can begin theology.³⁵ So the cultural theological narrative of is to be rooted in and considered within the problems of material reality. This runs contrary to the idea that narratives should tell us how to understand and resolve material problems, expressed once again when Dussel implores readers to bear in mind the "the political importance of the theology of liberation as a narrative that

³³ Dussel, "Liberation—Domination," 21.

³⁴ Dussel, "Liberation Theology and Marxism," 55.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 58

provides a basis for the praxis of the people in Latin America.”³⁶ Praxis for Dussel is positive political action. So on the one hand, theology depends on the state of the material world, and on the other hand, the state material world depends on how the narrative of theology (among others) is employed.

At another point in the text, it is this very state of the material world that Dussel identifies as culture. In particular, he highlights the direct experience of material needs as the driver of political change without acknowledging potential shifts in values as having the same effect. He builds upon Freud’s definition of culture, providing a purely material conception:

Freud believed that “culture is the postponement of desire,” in the sense that the desire to sleep—for example, of a farm worker—needs to be disciplined, interrupted, and postponed in order for that worker to be able to wake up early to work the field [...] The discipline of the farmer entails a certain degree of pain, but the hunger pains of those who are forced to look for food all day without any certainty is even greater [...] But this discipline—which Foucault would seem to condemn—is useful for life and necessary for its qualitative improvement. This is moment [sic] of the institution.³⁷

Note that the idea of a narrative is completely absent in this definition of culture, as well as in the description of political transformation that follows:

But when the pain produced by that institution reaches such a degree--[...] when the suffering it causes is such that the satisfaction it produces is not sufficient to compensate, this means that the moment of transformation has arrived.

³⁶ Dussel, *Twenty Theses on Politics*, 49.

³⁷ Dussel, *Twenty Theses on Politics*, 46.

The purely material understandings of culture, cultural revolution, and political transformation at work here seem to have no need for any sort of mythical narrative. Conversely, the previous descriptions of narrative as culture make it seem as if one only needs to change the way we think about the world, or the stories we tell ourselves about it, in order to effect eventual institutional changes.

What I hope I've made apparent is that culture, in Dussel's conception, is not clearly and consistently defined. It, like previous descriptions of culture, is torn between material institutions and perceptual understandings. What becomes apparent in this inconsistency is that the play of culture is an interaction, or non-interaction, of these elements. Culture, thought of as such, is always open to shifts between ways of knowing and ways of doing. It is a ubiquitous space of play between material and ideal.. Considered in its broadest, non-substantial form, it is the entire field of human activity-- precisely what we are always trying to change when we seek political action. It is a gap in which anything can take place, with unforeseen, incalculable consequences always forthcoming.

What is of interest then is the moment of these shifts. The "moment of institution" as Dussel calls it, is still obscure in this paradoxical formulation. I will now explore this moment, represented by the formation of "the people" in Dussel's theory, and the relationship of this moment to the development of mythical narratives.

The People and Political Transformation

Dussel's notion of the people, properly understood, shows how the indeterminate play of culture manifests itself in politics, becoming visible and acting with greater force at some particular points in history. "The people" is itself a point of movement within a narrative: an

ambiguity that is never reconciled, and thus preserves the openness of the concepts of culture political transformation. The autonomous nature of mass political action is always contained in this concept of the people. When “the people” is formed as a political actor, possibilities for cultural change abound. This political actor interjects itself into the slow development of culture and indicates a potential crossroads at which exceptionally broad shifts may occur.

In defining and developing this category of the people as a recurring political actor, Dussel hopes to move away from any determinant privileged status of class, especially any particular class, as a political force. “In this reformulation, the *people* is transformed into a *collective political actor* rather than being merely a substantialized and fetishized ‘historical subject’” he says, drawing a distinction between a political grouping and a concrete social category.³⁸ Instead of including one particular social demographic, “the people” is “a category that can encompass the unity of all the movements, classes, sectors, etc.”³⁹ This is an explicit rejection of Marxist-Leninist dogmatism that speaks in the name of the proletariat, or of a Maoism (as in the case of Peru’s *Sendero Luminoso* for example), that would understand the *campesino* as a mass of force to be steered by a vanguard party. Responding to this experience of Latin America in the latter half of the 20th century, in which so-called revolutionary political movements surfaced brandishing Marxist rhetoric and strategies, Dussel seeks here to open up a broader notion of collective political action as cultural revolution, and thus, a broader collective political actor.

The 20th century diffusion of the dogmatic Marxist paradigm and rhetoric is a primary example of what Salazar Bondy discusses as rootless importation of a European concept into the Latin American context. This, says Bondy, is when “thinking is done according to theoretical

³⁸ Dussel, *Twenty Theses on Politics*, 75.

³⁹ Dussel, *Twenty Theses on Politics*, 73.

modes already shaped in the pattern of Western thought—mainly European—, imported in the form of currents, schools, and systems totally defined in their content and orientation.”⁴⁰ In other words, the early understandings of Marxism grabbed hold of a complete theoretical system and sought to transplant it, at times seeking to mold more appropriate strategies from it (the *Foco* strategy that emerged in Cuba comes to mind), but scarcely seeking to develop a new body of thought by fully Latin Americanizing it. It was as if Latin America had to be assimilated to a Marxist frame, and not the other way around, leading to paradoxical and anachronistic discussions throughout the continent—rhetoric about the working class in countries with massive rural populations, for example, or romanticism about the Soviet Union even in the late 1980s, when it was imperialistic and repressive as than the oft-derided United States.

As mentioned above, Dussel describes Marxism as a useful set of tools that offers the theologian a critique of empirical that he would otherwise lack. But, employed uncritically, this could result in another version of the reductivist fallacy that Dussel believes we must reject. Thus, Dussel believes it is necessary to move from an emphasis on the working class to the people.

When Dussel discusses “the people” he does not mean the entirety of a given nation or political community. To the contrary, “The *pueblo* establishes an internal frontier of a fracture within a political community.”⁴¹ So in using the term “the people,” one almost always has a specific part of the political community in mind. The *people* is, as rethought by Dussel, is comprised of the materially oppressed and excluded in a given socio-political system, or “those

⁴⁰ Bondy, 388.

⁴¹ Dussel, *Twenty Theses on Politics*, 74. **Note:** the translator chose to keep the term in its Spanish form here as it was used in the context of differentiating the concept of “the people” in that language as compared to in other language. In the original text, Dussel uses the term “el pueblo” throughout, but in the translation, minus this one instance, the translator uses the term “the people,” which is why I’ve chosen to use in this discussion.

whose needs remain unsatisfied.”⁴² In order to distinguish this particular reformulation of “the people” from other possible interpretations, he uses the Latin term “*plebs*.”⁴³

The people, who, like a Derridean trace, seems always to be and not-be under the surface, becomes visible in moments when the excluded and oppressed achieve a “consciousness of the domination of the prevailing system.”⁴⁴ This consciousness, when directed toward a concrete political possibility, forms a consensus, a collective will-to-live, that Dussel calls a *hyperpotentia*:

If *potentia* is a capacity belonging to the political community, which now in a position of dominance has organized *potestas* [institutional political power] in favor of its interests and against the emerging *people*, then *hyperpotentia* is the power of the *people*, its sovereignty and authority [...] that emerges in creative moments of history to inaugurate great transformations or radical revolutions.⁴⁵

Potentia describes the power or will inherent in the Totality of the political community. It is the potential energy (to use a scientific metaphor) resting in the political community that justifies, or claims to justify, the existence of political institutions of dominance. *Hyperpotentia* represents the power of those dominated or excluded by politics. All political communities—thought of nationally, regionally, municipally, etc.—have *potentia*, but *hyperpotentia* comes into play in moments when a part of this community becomes conscious of its own position vis-à-vis the position of the included. It is this awareness of *material* difference that, for Dussel, ultimately leads to the *hyperpotentia* that characterizes the people. Dussel refers to the realization of difference as “critical consciousness” unified through consensus.

⁴² Dussel, *Twenty Theses on Politics*, 75.

⁴³ It should be clear however that when Dussel uses the term people in the remainder of the text he is referring to “the people as *plebs*.” Likewise, when I refer to “the people” I am talking about the *plebs*.

⁴⁴ Dussel, *Twenty Theses on Politics*, 80.

⁴⁵ Dussel, *Twenty Theses on Politics*, 81.

One point I want to question in this description of “the people” is the extent to which a collective political actor can really be a *unified* or shared consciousness. Certainly, a people acts in unison temporally. But does this mean that they share some singular understanding of their status? Even if a bloc of excluded and oppressed persons formulates explicit principles for its unified action, as Dussel suggests they should, does this mean that they are necessarily sharing a consciousness of their overall goal? The first concern to note is that if that what supposedly unites a people as *plebs* is a difference, an exclusion from the political Totality, then it is a paradoxical unity—a unity based on difference. The second concern is that Dussel refers entirely to material exclusion as the basis for a unified consciousness. In the second section of *Twenty Theses on Politics*, there is scant mention of narrative as a form of culture. The only point at which mythical narratives are alluded to in this “critical” section of the book is when Dussel says, “The *people*, then, gains ‘consciousness *for-itself*.’ It recovers the memory of its moments, its forgotten deeds and those hidden by the history of the victors.”⁴⁶ This appeal to a common popular history obscures the differences that might exist in the narratives of different groups within “the people.” Why are we to believe that excluded or oppressed groups, such as the working class, the peasant class, indigenous peoples, feminists, and anti-racists, all share the same narratives?⁴⁷ And furthermore, what of the narratives of “the petty bourgeoisie suffering an unemployment crisis and the national bourgeoisie destroyed by transnational competition,” which Dussel says can also be constituents of “the people?”⁴⁸ In what way could such a variety of social actors obscure the difference of their material needs, historical experiences, and inherited bodies of thought in order to form as single political actor with a unified consciousness and *hyperpotentia*?

⁴⁶ Dussel, *Twenty Theses on Politics*, 80.

⁴⁷ These are some potential groups that would comprise “the people,” as mentioned by Dussel. 80-81.

⁴⁸ Dussel, *Twenty Theses on Politics*, 73.

Dussel refers to Ernesto Laclau's understanding of populism as described in *On Populist Reason* to explain the conditions and factors that lead "the people" to emerge through "univocal equivalence."⁴⁹ If a unified consciousness does exist in the formation of a people, then it should be apparent in this process. Indeed, Laclau's concepts of "logic of equivalence" and "logic of difference" appear, initially, to answer both of the concerns above. What I hope to show however is that while Laclau's theory might explain unified political *action*, it actually does not imply any unified *consciousness*. With the help of a brief empirical analysis of the popular Argentine response to the political and economic crises of 2001, I will argue that the unreconciled material heterogeneity of any collective political actor impedes the development of a unified consciousness. I will also draw on Slavoj Žižek's critique of *On Populist Reason* to argue that that the power relationships of groups within "the people" can have a determinant effect on the outcome of "populist" political action, thus the direction of "the people" is always contingent. Žižek raises an important question that has implications for whether or not Dussel's theory ultimately proves to be useful: how do we know when the success of "the people" will be a positive development, and when "the people" will turn out to be reactionary in its cultural goals? I hypothesize that this is likely related to the composition of the political actor, and that as such, one can accept a greater exercise of power on the part of the most excluded groups. These are the groups that, in Dussel's formulation, will have the most "universal" interpretations of ethics and mythical narratives. This means that when it comes time to put an ideal into practice in the moment of institutionalized cultural change, they can be expected to offer the most widely applicable ethical position on the matter.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 72.

In his analysis, Laclau differentiates between two types of demands made upon an existing political totality: democratic demands and popular demands.⁵⁰ Democratic demands are based upon what Laclau calls “the logic of difference”—that is, they are seen as isolated, specific demands, each arising from a distinct social or interest group as “the assertion of a particularity.”⁵¹ Each collective actor pursues its own demands without consideration—let alone solidarity or empathy—of the entirety of the political community. The role of the state in the logic of difference is to mediate and absorb these conflicts. A state by this logic fundamentally relies on the notion that all the existing democratic demands can be fulfilled, or at least entertained, be it through compromise or some utopian “win/win” outcome.

By contrast, a popular demand is a demand that exists within what Laclau refers to as the logic of equivalence.⁵² This equivalence is found within the very formation of the people as *plebs*. It is, according to Laclau, “a *partial* surrender of particularity, stressing what all particularities have, equivalentially, in common.”⁵³ In such scenarios, the many differentiated unmet demands are constructed as similar in their difference. The plurality comes to be one great, but ephemeral, counter-hegemonic challenge to the existing power structure through recognition of common exclusion. For example, the homeless beggar sees his struggle as one-in-the-same as that of the poor shanty-town dweller. And the shantytown dweller sees that *afrodescendientes* are also prevented from getting steady work. And the *afrodescendiente* comes to equate his own plight with that of the *campesino*, who must buy all his seeds from Monsanto to make a tiny profit, and so on.⁵⁴ These groups, when they begin to act together, in a temporary

⁵⁰ Laclau, 74.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁵² Laclau, 78.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁵⁴ Modeled on Dussel’s example, *Twenty Theses on Politics*, 72.

moment of coalition, formulate a popular demand, like say, for the example above: “Equality.” Laclau points out that, by definition, a popular demand can never be a met demand within the existing political totality. If it were met in isolation, it would be a democratic demand. By contrast, it is a popular demand when it becomes broad enough to mean that its satisfaction would alter the foundations of the political totality itself.

In Laclau’s explanation of how a series of popular demands come to the formation of a people, he explains how one particular demand becomes the universal demand—the demand that stands in for all other demands.⁵⁵ This happens in a process of struggle over “empty” and “floating” signifiers. These signifiers come to mean different things for the plurality of the demanders involved in the formation of the people. Dussel gives the example of the demand for “liberty” during the era of Latin American independence movements.⁵⁶ “Liberty” meant one thing for slaves, another for indigenous peoples, something else for poor *mestizos*, and something yet different for *criollo* elites.⁵⁷ What liberty meant for each of these groups was determined to a large extent by their social position—their relationship to the social and political totality. In this example, Dussel says that this movement was “led by white Creoles united strategically and hegemonically with some of the Spanish-born lower classes.”⁵⁸ He does not discuss Laclau’s “equivalential logic.” But later on, in what is supposedly a more deconstructive view of the same process, he brings in Laclau’s theory. What is striking however, is that while Laclau’s theory offers a more open, less classically Marxist, understanding to discuss the formation of a (counter)hegemonic bloc (the people), it cannot fully get outside the implicit logic of class difference that it purports to abandon. Ultimately, I argue, the nature of “the people” at a

⁵⁵ Žižek, 278.

⁵⁶ Dussel, *Twenty Theses on Politics*, 41.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 41.

particular juncture is determined precisely by the social position of its participants. Those who already have power in the social structure, such as the Creoles at the time of Latin American independence, continue to hold a lot of relative power if they enter into the formation of “the people,” so the question of whether their material needs becomes crucial for the outcome of the brief formation.

A quick examination of the history of the Argentine popular political unrest that occurred the economic crisis of December 2001, to which Dussel refers on several occasions, will demonstrate what I mean here, and begin to adumbrate the internal contradiction at work in the concept of the people: “Equivalences can weaken, but they cannot domesticate, differences,” says Laclau. What this means is that on the one hand, the people is characterized by a sort of unified action in the form of an irreducible popular demand. But on the other, there exist inevitable fissures within the body of the people as a collective political actor and thus, fissures within its material interests and consciousness. That is, it has inconsistent unmet needs and thus, I maintain, a fractured consciousness about what the popular demand actually means.

The late 1990s in Argentina saw an end to the debt-driven growth binge of the country’s economy under President Carlos Menem, resulting in massive jumps in unemployment, inequality, and social exclusion that had never been apparent in that country.⁵⁹ The result was a concurrent growth in independent social movements that sought to represent this expanding exteriority of society. Throughout the 1990s, masses of newly unemployed formed into groups of *piqueteros* who tried to bring their plight to the fore through protests that blocked major streets and highways.⁶⁰ A boom in the ranks of these unemployed made visible an unseen exclusion

⁵⁹ Petras, “Argentina: 18 Months After the Struggle.” 2255.

⁶⁰ Carranza, 68.

inherent in the neo-liberal model. But even as the numbers of the unemployed and other excluded peoples grew, their protests were rather easily quelled or ignored. Society generally continued to function unimpeded.

In 2001, however, everything changed. The government had racked up billions in debt during the 1990s, and in December 2001, fearing a default, investors pulled \$140 billion out of the country. The government defaulted on \$100 billion in debt, and banks closed their doors to longtime customers.⁶¹ In order to pay back the IMF, the government liquidated private pension funds, and many middle-class families saw their entire lives' savings disappear. Now, the middle class took to the streets in widespread protests that cut along class-lines and social divides, resulting in what Dussel has cited as an example of "the people," which included this instantly impoverished middle class and the *piqueteros*, as well as university students, human rights advocates, intellectuals, and trade unionists.⁶²

The people drove out five presidents in two weeks following the crisis, chanting "*Que se vayan todos!*" or, "Out with all of them!" Naomi Klein, in *La Toma*, her documentary on Argentine factory occupations during this period, said that the people were "rejecting the whole model."⁶³ And Laclau has said it was a rejection of the entire political class.⁶⁴ In reality, it may well have been both these things and more, depending on the social perspective of the observer from within "the people"; the particular language used at the center of the protest (*Que se vayan todos!*) meant different things to different people.

⁶¹ Dangl, 61.

⁶² Petras, 2256.

⁶³ *The Take*:

⁶⁴ Laclau, interview with Oscar Guardiola, 102.

It is because of this variation in consciousness, in the protestors' understandings of the needs and role of "the people," that as soon as certain groups have their expectations met, "the people" falls apart. In Argentina, this group was the large middle class which had only recently begun to feel the pinch of economic oppression. Once middle class Argentines thought someone might be able to solve their particular problems, they returned to the realm of institutional politics. Many of the middle-class neighborhood assemblies and social movements endorsed presidential candidate Nestor Kirchner in the election of 2003. Benjamin Dangl, in his journalistic look at Argentine political developments of the period, concludes that though Kirchner's economic policies did lead to growth, he and his successor (and wife) Christina Fernandez altered almost no core government or social institution.⁶⁵ The move from the neo-liberal market of the 1990s to a clientelistic welfare-regulator state hardly left a dent in the shape of the political or social totality. There was no transformation that reformed society on the basis of the inclusion of the other. As Dussel says of the populist "quasi-revolutions" of the 20th century, the Kirchners remained confined "within the capitalist horizon of a 'social pact.'"⁶⁶ At the very least, we can say that the demands of the middle-class were more easily met than the demands of others. And, while their mobilization fizzled out, the protests of the *piqueteros* continue to this day. The nature of middle class demands was such that it could be peeled off from the supposed popular equivalence.

What this brief narrative demonstrates is that "the people" is always an uncertain political actor. As Dussel acknowledges, it frequently fails to create political transformation.⁶⁷ Whether it succeeds is a function of its social make-up. This calls into question the usefulness of the

⁶⁵ Dangl, 71-74.

⁶⁶ Dussel, *Twenty Theses on Politics*, 76.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 75.

concept of “the people” as a “strictly political category,” which is how Dussel describes it.⁶⁸ To understand the nature of its transformative power, one must also understand its social constituency in a given situation.

Beyond the question of *whether* “the people” succeeds is that of the definition of success. In this vein, Slavoj Žižek’s critique of Laclau’s *On Populist Reason* raises another possibility to be aware of and a new theoretical question with it. From a rather extensive treatment of the work, I want to pull out a key point that Žižek makes regarding the definition of populism itself, since this is most pertinent in our discussion of Dussel. Namely, Žižek emphasizes that “For a populist, the cause of the trouble is ultimately never the system as such, but the intruder who corrupted it (financial manipulators, not capitalists as such, etc.); not a fatal flaw inscribed into the structure as such, but an element that does not play its part within the structure properly.”⁶⁹ In other words, the division that ultimately characterizes the constitution of the people—the difference—is more about the perception of social division itself than about the particular content of any specific demands. The ambiguous chant of the Argentines (“Que se vayan todos!”) exemplifies this.

By contrast, in the situations that Dussel envisions, the difference between the Totality and Exteriority and the division between the people and its enemies (the people formed “in opposition to the elites, to the oligarchs, to the ruling classes of a political order.”⁷⁰) should overlap. That is, the people as an actor should be comprised of the excluded and oppressed sectors of society, and would address the denial of their needs. But such is not the case in practice, and as a result, many instances of *the people* could never be expected to truly reach the

⁶⁸ Ibid., 73.

⁶⁹ Žižek, 279.

⁷⁰ Dussel, *Twenty Theses on Politics*, 75.

level of holding a popular demand. The alternative, highlighted by Žižek, is a sort of proto-fascism, necessary to maintain the actor of the people. The need for a “pseudo-concrete” enemy can drive a people to all-too-thinkable horror: for Žižek, inscribed in the people itself is the possibility of a vile Nazism that sketches difference in opposition to the imagined figure of the Jew, who serves as “the equivalential point of a series of [...] threats experienced by individuals.”⁷¹ In other words, the possibility of fascism arises when the people needs to *create* an enemy, since in fact, all of its elements may not really share the same enemy. If the people as an actor is substantially arbitrary (not comprised of any particular classes or sectors of society) then almost any division that defines a people might be viewed as valid. This raises an important question with regard to “the people” as it exists in Dussel’s theory: how do we know when “the people” is making a legitimate claim, and when it is relying on a “pseudo-concrete” enemy?

The only feasible way to gauge this is to seek through an understanding of the actual social constituency of the people, difficult as this might be in the brief moment of its existence. The question with regard to any given instance of “the people” becomes: to what extent are the actors here actually in the exterior of the political? To refer back to Levine’s’ understanding of the terms, to what extent does this collective political actor represent “ethics” as opposed to “politics”?

In asking this question, we find that idea of *plebs*, as Dussel conceives it, is insufficient. “On the one hand,” he says, “they are ‘the social bloc of the oppressed’ within the system (for example, the working class), but they simultaneously comprise the excluded (for example, the marginalized, the indigenous peoples who survive through self-sufficient production and

⁷¹ Žižek, 278. Nazism is Žižek’s own example.

consumption, etc.)”⁷² I argue however, that the legitimacy of the people relies precisely on a measurement of this distinction. That is to say, if we consider the subjective consciousness as a differentiated one, the more excluded sectors of the people have a must have a *leading* role in the formation of “the people” for it to be legitimate. It is their subjective, ethical position that should be looked to for direction. The ethical ideal components of culture are the reason that, as Dussel says, the people “tends to encompass all of the citizens (populus) in a new future order in which their present claims will be satisfied and equality will be achieved thanks to a common struggle by the excluded”⁷³ Dussel himself misses the point when he attributes the uniqueness of the excluded to the fact that “the mere reproduction of the life of the poor requires such changes that, at the same time, *it produces the civilizing development of the entire system.*”⁷⁴ In this material sense, the role of the poor, of the excluded, in political transformation is much like the role of Marx’s proletariat, as described by Žižek: by its own action, it seeks not to assert itself, to interject its priorities as more important than the priorities of others, but rather, it seeks to abolish itself.⁷⁵ In this understanding, if it is negation of material needs that defines this exteriority, then the negation of this negation—the satisfaction of the need—would make it so this exteriority ceases to exist. But if we take Dussel’s understanding of Levine’s, there is more to the Exteriority of the Other than this material happenstance. The most excluded, marginalized people contain a universal character that extends beyond its material need into a broader cultural sphere. Dussel himself is trying to precipitate this ideo-cultural shift of the Left from “Equality, Fraternity, Liberty,” to “Alterity, Solidarity, Liberation.” The outside theorist however, cannot truly steer a political movement to embrace certain values. This shift, if it takes place, must be

⁷² Dussel, *Twenty Theses on Politics*, 78.

⁷³ Dussel, *Twenty Theses on Politics*, 75.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 85.

⁷⁵ Žižek, 415.

rooted in the experience of the excluded in particular, and not simply of the material satisfaction of one or more group within the people.

Dussel sees ethics here as incorporated through the development of “new *a posteriori* rights” and participatory political institutions. But I would like to suggest that the Derridean distinction between law and justice might be useful to help us understand the way culture moves into the development of these new institutions. To interpret the application of the ethics of the people in particular political institutions or rights, to turn ethics into *law*, we first need to consider them as justice—as open and situational. For Derrida, justice, as opposed to law, is contextual.⁷⁶ The law does not simply operate to enact justice. In fact, law itself is an ingrained attempt to calculate justice. The inquiry of justice always operates in the face of the unknown. The singularity of any ‘moment’ presents the question: what is just? Law is an uncertain attempt to codify a response, in advance, to this question in various possibility situations. But justice is, for Derrida, always justice *to come*, never fulfilled, followed, or enforced as an institution. What constitutes an appropriate (just) law is not given in a situation. It always needs to be defined. And if the collective political actor of “the people” is to define it.

I would like to suggest (and indeed Derrida has done it in some respects), that it would be pertinent to think of other values, or signs beyond “justice” in this way. In a sense, it is through the play of the calculation of empty signifiers, such as justice, that Laclau’s formulation of the people is mediated. The signifiers hold different meanings to different groups and individuals in the popular collective. Thus, when Dussel proposes a shift, or a transformation, from the “bourgeoisie postulates” of “Equality, Fraternity, Liberty,” to the postulates “Alterity, Solidarity, Liberation,” he is implicitly prescribing a content to be embodied in the floating signifiers

⁷⁶ Derrida, 235-250.

around which a people may form. But in fact, the movement is not one of “transformation” in values, but rather, transformation of what a signifier may “mean” at a given moment. (Though keep in mind that it is precisely because these signs have no positive meaning that the struggle takes place). We must not then think of equality, fraternity, and liberty as particular laws, but rather, as spaces which, like justice, are negotiated. In the case of broader practical cultural transformation through politics, this negotiation is over the attachment of a particular material phenomenon to a particular signifier, not as its meaning, but as the law through which the attempt at equality, fraternity, or liberty can be made. The resultant institutionalization, or even the resultant singular instance of this attempt, might seem more aptly described by another term (as alterity, solidarity, or liberation), but this does not change the fact that political change, as cultural transformation, must ultimately be a shift in the location of the intersection of ideal understanding and material action.

The universality of the socially excluded consists then not merely in the nature of their material needs as that which if resolved would lead to a “civilizing development.” It consists in the very cultural understanding of what constitutes an ethical act in a particular historical context, and a certain disposition about the meaning of the values associated with ethics. Put another way, the uniqueness of the exteriority lies in its *interpretations* of mythical narratives that others may or not share. The gap in these narratives, like the people in the narrative that surrounds it, provides the site of play for the question of how certain values can be put into practice as culture.

The context ultimately dictates what this means in a given situation. The arising of the people is a particularly large, significant, and at times radical moment of madness. But these moments are always in play. And alterity, solidarity, and practice are never full, even as they will

always return at the moment of future decisions. So even as a people may come and fall, the effect of the most universal segments of this actor must aim toward cultural revolution: ideas put *into practice*⁷⁷, as this is partially reconciled and combined through actualization in a collapse of the space between “ways of knowing” and “ways of doing.” And since practice is continual, this process too must be continual. And the direction of this continuity, as a normative function, should be taken from the Exteriority. The decision of the *excluded component* of the *plebs*, considered as the constant steering force behind popular action that otherwise could move in any direction, is the decision in which a never ending imperative toward political ethics is put into practice to transform reality.

Part III. Conclusions

I’ve presented here two related points. The first is that Dussel’s concept of culture, and by extension cultural revolution, is ambiguous in nature, and as such prevents any clear conclusion on the nature of political change in his theory. Dussel presents an implicit claim about culture, as a set of mythical narratives containing ideas or worldviews, while at the same time referring to a strictly material definition of culture as practice. We might say then that culture is both of these things. There is a sense however in which culture exceeds even this definition.

Considered as the content and form of politics, or as intention and practice, we see that despite

⁷⁷ This idiom ‘to put [values, ideas] into practice’ is preferable here to the term “to institutionalize,” or even the ostensibly cleaner “to practice.” The moment of political change is not only about creating institutions, though institutionalization is a part of it. There is a moment before institutionalization, and this is what Derrida, quoting Kierkegaard, calls the moment of madness. This is the moment of decision about how one’s value is put into practice setting the stage for, but not entirely closing off, institutionalization. Simply saying “to practice” however, implies a reified law that can already in fact be practiced. That is, it implies that the floating or disputed signifiers have a pre-existing signified, that we can “practice” democracy, or “practice” solidarity, or “practice” liberation. In reality, the trace of these empty terms must be placed within human practice itself, put *into practice*, inscribed into culture whether this is in a moment of institutionalization or a singular instance of action.

being a binary opposition, the Ethics of the Exteriority and the Totality of Politics, as Dussel understands them, are a *divided whole*. Ethics, accumulated and developed in the experience of the excluded, are put into practice in the moment of political transformation, which is the moment of Politics itself. The space between them can never be fully traversed, because the space between the material and ideal is never closed. But they are still nondual—they exist separately together, comprising each other and moving in an always connected but dynamic relationship. This is why to say that culture “both” material and ideal is not to go far enough—there can be no *full* opposition or separation between them.

And it is precisely for this reason that in the moment of political change, the people need not have a unified consciousness to *act* in unison. If the ideal and material are never coming into coherence, but only shifting, then the shift will not look the same to everyone involved. The meaning of the shift changes in the course of political action, and “the people” dissipates as a result. Exclusion, however, will not dissipate. Every alteration in the landscape of human activity brings with it new unknown consequences. As Derrida says in *Of Grammatology*, “The future can only be anticipated in the form of an absolute danger. It is that which breaks absolutely with constituted normality and can only be proclaimed, presented, as a sort of monstrosity.” In other words, the coming of a new and different political institution creates a radical opening of future possibilities, and as such may also bring with it seeds of a new exclusion. It is for this reason that politics carries on infinitely.

Taking this into account, we can see that Dussel’s political theory, though formulated in the Latin American context, is not exclusively a Latin American theory. What society on earth holds no ancient narratives? And what society has no division, fractures, or exclusions that need to be addressed? If we understand culture in the broad terms implied here, then we see that (to

paraphrase Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar) culture is always political, and politics is always cultural. There is no one political community in which culture is 'more relevant' than in others, even if the others do not acknowledge it as explicitly. So long as differences in experience exist in the world, the play of ideas and material circumstance cannot be overcome. What this demands then is a political act that acknowledges this, and cedes to the experience of Exterior in order that this play can happen on the grandest scale. If this play presents the future as an "absolute danger," then this is only in relation to the present. And if the present is a danger to the many lives of the oppressed and excluded, then this present is what we must put at risk in every moment of political action.

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