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Emilce Cuda
emilcecuda@gmail.com

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LAND-LODGING-LABOR: THE AESTHETIC, ETHIC, AND POLITICAL CAUSES OF HOMELESSNESS IN LATIN AMERICA

Emilce Cuda, Ph.D.
Dr. in Moral Theology

INTRODUCTION:

Land-Lodging-Labor, that is the question, in the Francis Pontificate. It is impossible to talk about the homeless, understood as a lack of decent housing, without at the same time talking about the lack of work and the concentration of land ownership in one sector of society.

“Homeless” in Latin America, and for the Argentine Pope, is the lack of land-lodging-labor. The problem of the three “T’s” in the Spanish Tierra, Techo, Trabajo is the question I will develop from aesthetic-ethical-theological foundations, according to the theological method of the Latin American teaching: See-Judge-Act. Reflecting the question of the homeless necessarily implies, in the 21st century, putting it in relation with three trilogies, this means thinking of it as Land-Lodging-Labor, from the theological method See-Judge-Act, to make the common house the Good -Beautiful-True. It is to ask: how do we see the crucified Christ in the homeless?

I. STEP 1: SEE: AN ARGENTINE CASE AS A SITUATED REALITY OF THE HOMELESS

The story that I begin with is from didactic material at the Universidad Nacional Arturo Jauretche where I am a research professor. This university is located in a very poor area of south

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of Buenos Aires and some of our students are homeless. In Latin America, homelessness is not limited to street homelessness, although that is certainly present in Latin America. The concept of homelessness is extended to include those who are not owners or tenants of a decent home. They live in precarious neighborhoods in flood-prone areas, contaminated, without asphalt, without electricity, without sanitation. As Francis points out in *Laudato Si’* they are the victims of the social and economic system (Francis, 2015, 4; 44; 149; 152). A room of sheet metal and cardboard, their houses are found in slums known in Argentina as “villas miseria,” in Brazil as “favelas,”

and in Venezuela as “ranchos.” Residents are mostly immigrants or children of immigrants from countries in the region. As a result, they are poor, unemployed, and often victims of drugs, alcohol, prostitution and organized crime.

The university is a social project that tries, among other things, to address this type of homeless by giving students education opening up possibilities of a job that will allow them to access a home and a decent life. The first objective in achieving this is the constitution of an identity; which is a learning objective of my course called ‘Cultural Practices’ and is designed for that purpose. In the course, we use a book by Laura Itchart, the program director

and I will tell a story from one of its chapters to illustrate the Argentine situation of homelessness (Itchart & Donati, 2014, pp. 46-51).

In 1986, Silvia Jurovietzky, single mother of two children, became “okupa” or squatter – the name given to those who are homeless and decide to occupy uninhabited private property. When reading the story for the first time, I was surprised that Sylvia said that to get out of the homeless situation “she had to disarm class issues that dragged on her and reconstruct a real identity.” I began to wonder: is being homeless an identity problem? And if it is, what is the mode of constitution of popular identities?

Surprisingly, at the time of the occupation, Sylvia was already a literature professor in the Philosophy Department of the University of Buenos Aires. She occupies apartment #3 D of 850 Giribone Street in Buenos Aires, a decisive act by which constituted her identity while becoming a poet. Methodologically, symbolic language allowed her to constitute a real identity by making her “roof-less” situation visible—as the homeless condition is called on the subcontinent. According to Sylvia, the homeless are migrants within the same culture. In one of her poems she writes, “we come from the Capital / to the Capital / to make / housing.” From her poem, I begin to understand the experience that not all borders are physical. Only seeing migrants as crossing physical borders is a way to make people like Sylvia invisible. For people like Sylvia, the border crossed is social.

Sylvia’s case is a clear example that the problem of housing also affects the middle sectors (even university professors) and many who are without secure housing deny they are homeless because the system excludes them. In this case, Sylvia rented a house in a neighborhood of Buenos Aires, but could not afford to keep paying rent. Access to financing plans, in the region is targeted for investors. Those who already have money can access financing for a second home as a rental property but not those who need a first home. In response, grass-roots political leaders have intervened and organized families in need to take

land or occupy abandoned properties (Zarazaga, 2017). In some cases, the organizers promise to occupy them, set up a cooperative, fix them and then to adjudicate them providing families with legal title. However, the property title never comes. Occupied dwellings do not have electricity, gas, or water. They do not have doors or windows. Because many are living under one roof without dividing doors, they are accused of promiscuity. Men leave the house, and women are left alone with their children. Others accuse them of not paying taxes or services, yet even if they want to they cannot pay because it is not a finished work.

Sylvia comes from a middle class family, the daughter of engineers, who were tenants themselves, never owners. In Argentina, it should be noted “middle class” is very broad compared to other countries in the region, and it is not customary to rent. Homeownership is identified with the higher sectors. Herein begins the problem of false identity in the popular imagination. Silvia tells us that because she ‘occupies,’ it made her aware of her real identity. This is reflected in the symbolic language of her poetry. But she does not use the language of the enlightened (educated) elite but that of the popular sectors, allowing her to express her own needs and be understood by the people. Something similar suggests Pope Francis in *Laudato Si’*, when he says “no form of wisdom can be left out;” this includes the language of the people expressed in art and poetry (Francis, 2015, 63). Silvia says: “There was a moment when I realized that I was poor... I lacked money, although I had work and I taught from eight in the morning until eight at night.” It was at that moment that she assumed an *okupa (squatter)* -mode which she names homeless-, as a way of standing in an “analectic” way, as Scannone calls it (Cuda, 2016, Parte III), in the situation of exclusion. Without denying her homeless status as a denial of her identity as human, she is affirming herself in this homeless condition to recover her identity and dignity. The language used for this formation is not that of the word colonized by elite, scientific discourse, but the symbolic language of the people. It is aesthetic discourse not yet hegemonized.

When her fellow university professors questioned her homeless situation, she made them see that “they were also housing insecure, either because they were living in their parents’ house, or because they worked only to pay rent for a house in the periphery” -it is not exactly the same situation but a prompt from her to get their attention. The poor are always blamed as if they did something wrong, or they did not do enough to try and succeed. At fault is always the ‘other,’ the homeless person, and not the ‘one,’ the system. Even one’s own families blame individuals or deny they qualify as invisible victims of the social and economic system.

From Sylvia’s story we must ask critically whether private property of the land has been sacralized in Latin America. She says: “It’s as if part of the identity of Argentines goes through property: We are our homes.” It is as if we live in a system where everything can be desecrated, from God to the human dignity, everything except property. “Thou shalt not steal” seems to be the most valued of Ten Commandments, as evoking Victor Hugo in *Les Misérables*. “Thou shalt not kill” is out of circulation. The Latin American bishops highlight this point in their 2007 *Aparecida Document* distinguishing between the culture of life and the culture of death. In the culture of death, where the god of money reigns, the commandment is Thou shalt not steal, but in the culture of life, where the One and Triune God reigns, creator, provident and merciful, the commandment is Thou shalt not kill (Francis, 2015, 95).

II. JUDGE: THEOLOGICAL-POLITICAL CAUSES

Moving from Seeing to Judging, I will focus on the idea of borders, frontiers, or marginal spaces wherein the homeless person is caught. A homeless man is a frontier man, the one who is on the edge of the social system and even of life itself, trying to remain. Fabian Banga, born in the Buenos Aires rust belt and now a literature professor at the University of California Berkeley, observes that border often means a simple physical border to cross, but borderland refers to a territory not just an isolated line. This allows one to broaden and emphasize that we are not simply speaking of a dividing line but of a frontier territory, a space

that exists within that division. This is the space inhabited by those who are excluded. Not only are they excluded from the assets of society, and civil and social rights, they also feel excluded from the cultural and national imaginary. They are not on either side of the border but in between. It is a space of tension, both from the perspective of ethnicity, as well as from the perspective of gender, belief and social class. Border crossing is not simply a phenomenon of migration from one physical location to another. It is also a phenomenon of migration from one cultural place to another. It is a historical event of reorganizing territories and bodies. Some are able to achieve migration, that is, they have the capacity to enter the territory of the cultural imaginary. Others cannot enter the new, nor can they return to the former. Those caught in the border space are without Land-Lodging-Labor or in Spanish: *Tierra-Techo-Trabajo*. For this reason, Pope Francis does not speak merely about homelessness but also about work and property, because the three are united as consequence, one of the other. This border space is a third reality that is constructed from two spaces: that of the included and that of the excluded. The borderland has been expelled from one group and is rejected by the other (Banga & Biaggini, 2017, Introduction).

Consider the following examples, common in Latin America to better understand the complexity of those who are excluded. A migrant worker expelled from their country of origin by an economic system that fails to include her arrives in another country with the hope of a promised land where everything will be different. But she encounters the same reality and the same oppressor, because the system is global. Consider a gay man who has been expelled by his family and is ‘welcomed’ by a group that forces him to prostitute himself in exchange for a roof. Imagine an indigenous person who is told the possibility of social advancement is for everyone, but in reality, they cannot access education, health, or decent work. In this border space also, we find the drug addict; the criminal forced to commit a crime to be accepted in a group of belonging and to survive.

Their lives are marked by exclusion, vulnerability, and a lack of true social belonging in the social and economic system.

When thinking of a homelessness from the perspective of social exclusion, by seeing the face of a worker, an indigenous person, a transsexual or a single mother, and by listening to their concrete reality, more questions are generated than answers. Offering answers is the task of politics or public policy. Raising key questions is the task of philosophy, and in this particular case of political philosophy. But identifying the cultural foundations that perpetuate this system often assumed as if it were natural and necessary, is the task of theology. Moreover, denouncing these contingent foundations of exclusion is the task of theological ethics, that is, of the theologian as a prophet.

When the homeless constitutes its identity by affirming its being “the other” (Cuda, 2016, Part. III), with its attitude with interpellates to the “economy that kills”, as Pope Francis says (2013, 53). The border territory that inhabits is internal to the metropolis and its culture, says Banga. All classification implies a distinction first, and then an exclusion. The one included is defined by the other excluded. The one is defined by the negation: I am not homeless. The other, the homeless, is defined by the one for all the worst: they are the *Ugly, Filthy*. Homelessness is, first of all, an aesthetic construction, since it has been constructed discursively putting in this word all the negative evaluation, and then concluding that it deserves its condition because it is the worst of the system, as noted by Charles Tilly (2000).

But the homeless, just for being human, is the manifestation of the being, whose splendor has been revealed once and for all, according to Christian belief, by Jesus Christ, living icon, threshold of beauty, as described by Von Balthasar and Bruno Forte (Von Balthasar, 1985; Forte,

2004). However, how difficult it is to see the three transcendentals in the homeless; How difficult to perceive them as Beautiful-Good-True -in the sense of Von Balthasar. But, in Christian anthropology, man and woman are in the image of God. This is the truth revealed in the incarnation, the Son of God was also from the border, position of which Fabian Banga speaks. Jesus was born without a roof in a manger and a migrant in Egypt. He was poor and hardworking, accused of committing a crime, was convicted even before being tried, and executed as a common criminal on the cross.

The complex canon of cultural practices help explain the connection between the border area, culture, and the structural system of homelessness.

Body structures, gestures, physical features, skin color, styles of gastronomy, ways of eating and moving, ways of standing, talking and dressing, having fun and suffering, are all cultural practices with aesthetic foundation in books, educational programs, paintings, sculptures, architectural designs, films, newspapers, television programs and music, that maintain the social and economic status quo. The canonical cultural consumption

is hegemonic, paradigmatic. It produces and reinforces the exclusive and legitimate practices, without any guilt for those who practice them. Not having a roof then becomes naturalized and justified as: they must have done something to deserve this or as simply an almost metaphysical condition: it is poor—as if poverty were essential and not relational.

These cultural canons are required to the canons does not enter the symbolic world. They are treated as natural like the weather. Naturalize your condition. The excluded person feels at fault, directly responsible for his own misery. He is ashamed. Apologizes. He condemns himself. He wants to be like the other. Terrible human condition, that of the homeless. Symbolic language can enslave, but it can also liberate. Besides the

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economy that kills, there is also an academy that kills when it reproduces only texts that are accepted and rejects all that is revolutionary and critical.

III. ACT: ETHICS AND THEOLOGICAL AESTHETICS.

How to see the crucified Christ in the homeless? It is an ethical-aesthetic-theological question; it is the result of symbolic, not scientific, wisdom of the being-there, situated, concrete, the singular that is the whole in the part; it is to see that God is there. How to see the ugly, dirty and bad, as beautiful, good and true? How to see them and not dodge them, avoid them, hide them? This directs our attention towards action.

Those who become sensitized with the homeless go on to practice “contraband,” says Banga. They make the border between one and the other permeable. This permeabilization can only be possible from a language not yet canonized. That is the symbolic language spoken by Theology of the Pueblo or People. The homeless person has been excluded from the language that structures culture. This culture qualifies, excludes and kills. It is about penetrating that cultural paradigm that justifies the homeless condition, and turning culture into a new paradigm that makes visible the beauty, goodness and truth that exists in each man, so that he can be recognized as an image of God. We need a theological ethic, as promoted by the American theologian James Keenan, which does not condemn from the manualist abstract canons, but discerns evangelically from the situated (Keenan, 2004). The Theology of the Pueblo, as Scannone points out, speaks of a historical ethic, that is, one constructed *a posteriori* of reality (Scannone, 2004). This public theology help create public policy expertise. However, laws and decrees alone often provide cosmetic solutions, and the transformations required are in the foundations of cultural practices. These can only be accessed through the language of the symbol, which is union in difference, which is the theology of which Pope Francis speaks (2013, 228).

The symbolic language from the margins appears

-as an expression of a multifaceted and polyphonic identity-, in front of language of an absolute that does not allow multiple possibilities. The absolute speaks in the first person from his desire “I do not want...” confronting the marginal reality of others, in the third person plural -Banga explains-: “That piquetero [the marginal person] has no face, we have to clone him, deprive him of identity. ‘They are all thieves’. ‘They should go away’” (Banga & Biaggini, 2017, 25). This is a sample of the way of perception that justifies, normalizes, and naturalizes the situation of those without roofs, that distorts the reality that should be perceived as a consequence of the system and not as a punishment for something badly done.

The fetish in which being homeless impedes the identity of the human being itself, must be unmasked. Man must appear and in him the beautiful-good-true that allows to contemplate God manifesting in all his creation. Martin Biaggini, in *Alto Guiso*, asks himself: “From what moment do we go from individual artistic practices to a collective and representative expression of regional collective identity? (Banga & Biaggini, 2017, 24). It is a good question, because one mode to make visible the poverty, unmasked it, is thru the art, but the art must be an collective expression that allow the been be manifested. Attentive to understanding reality, it is about “seeing” what is the cause of current homeless in Latin America. In addition to *Laudato Si'* (Francis, 2015, 101-136), we must go back in history. In the 1990s, the implementation of neoliberal economic reforms, dismantled the State, privatized public companies, de-found universities and hospitals, and cut social planes. These economic policies had devastating effects on local industries, on unemployment, a precarious labor market, and led to the growth of the informal economy, including the market for drugs and prostitution. The poverty that is generated consequently places a sector of the middle class in poverty and the lower sectors in what in the region is understood as “homeless” (Banga & Biaggini, 2017, p.65). Biaggini says that it is at that moment where the homeless artists emerge, they live in “taperas” (precarious homes)

from these taperas they produce art and in those taperas they represent their works.

What action should be taken? We must stimulate a popular culture in its symbolic language, which is aesthetic-ethical-theological. A language where moral and aesthetic principles are identified is needed -both in the lower sectors and in the upper sectors of society-, because in the 21st century, popular culture reaches everywhere. Francis calls to “pay attention to popular cultures [...] put into dialogue the scientific-technical language with popular language” (2015, 143), starting from the “local actors from their own culture” (2015, 144), because that language “It grants cultural identity and a meaning to its existence [and adds that language disappears by] the imposition of a hegemonic style of life linked to a mode of production” (2015, 145).

IV. LAND-LODGING-LABOR: SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AS A STRUCTURAL SOLUTION TO THE ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL CRISIS

According to the theological foundations presented here, work and the common good “are issues that should structure all economic policy, but sometimes they seem only appendices added from outside to complete a political discourse without prospects or programs of true integral development” (Francis, 2013, 203). Neither can we according to Francis, “trust the blind forces and the invisible hand of the market” (Francis, 2013, 204), because even though “[...] politics, so denigrated, is a very high vocation” (Francis, 2013, 205). In the face of a crisis of representation, the Pope encourages organizing Popular Movements who, according to my way of seeing, following the logic of the discursive articulation of the so-called left populisms, have articulated their demands by necessity under the signifier “Land, Lodging, and Labor for Everyone”.

In the Pope’s speech during the III Meeting of the Popular Movements in Rome, November 2016, he points out that structural change consists of a process of creative chain of actions of the Popular Movements. But those actions, according to the Pope, must be the fruit of a collective discernment

that matures in the territories with the brothers, a discernment that turns into a transforming action. The Pope is not talking about a party position instituted as the conscience of a working class, but a discernment of each working person, now unemployed together, constituting as a movement outside of a mediation that, if infected with corruption, can no longer represent their demands.

Pope Francis appeals to the constitution of popular identities that are at the same time concrete and universal. Popular identity is concrete because it is local, and universal because the poor people’s needs are most important needs for all the humanity, it es: life itself. Popular identities act as a nucleus of resistance against colonialism strategies. There is no need to fear the union in the difference, says Francis, but to the uniformity that the global control of money means as “true base terrorism” on which all the rest are fed. Do not fear, Francis says, to the discursive articulation of collective demands for needs. This appears in the pontifical discourse under the metaphor of bridge construction, inviting build bridges between peoples.

If many political institutions of the workers have been infected with corruption, the Pope encourages the Social Movements to defend work as a guarantee of a dignified life among the poorest: “How many atrophied hands, how many people deprived of the dignity of the work [...] when you, the organized poor, invent their own work [...] are imitating Jesus because they seek to heal, even a little, even precariously, that atrophy of the prevailing socio-economic system, which is unemployment” (Francis, 2015a). Those of people organized in Social Movement’s provide an alternative to the failure of the party and union representation that has been sold to the idolatry of money.

The Popular Movements are for the Pope “A project-bridge of the peoples in front of the project-wall of money” because, as Francis had expressed a year earlier in his speech of the II World Meeting of the Popular Movements in Santa Cruz de la Sierra July 9, 2015, “the future

of humanity is not solely in the hands of the great leaders, the great powers and the elites. It is fundamentally in the hands of the peoples, in their ability to organize themselves and also in their hands that irrigate with humility and conviction this process of change “ (Francis, 2015a).

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Emilce Cuda is Dr. in Moral Theology focusing in social ethics and politics at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Argentina, Argentina.