THE UNIFYING MESSAGE OF POPE FRANCIS

"WORKING FOR A JUST DISTRIBUTION OF THE FRUITS OF THE EARTH AND HUMAN LABOR IS NOT MERE PHILANTHROPY. IT IS A MORAL OBLIGATION."

IT IS ABOUT GIVING TO THE POOR AND TO PEOPLES WHAT IS THEIRS BY RIGHT."

POPE FRANCIS
JULY 9, 2015, SANTA CRUZ, BOLIVIA

THIS ISSUE EXPLORES THE PROPHETIC MESSAGE OF THE FIRST LATIN AMERICAN POPE, WHO HAS JOINED SOCIAL MOVEMENTS CALLING FOR LAND, LABOR AND LODGING
Francis and the hour for action

by Jordan Cowell and Tim Shenk

On April 15, three CUSLAR student interns presented initial reflections from a semester-long study on Pope Francis at the Kairos Center for Religion, Rights and Social Justice at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. This edition of the CUSLAR Newsletter is a compilation of some of the findings emerging from this ongoing collaboration with the Kairos Center.

Pope Francis’s message resonates deeply with the missions of CUSLAR and the Kairos Center. Our research was born from questions about how his prophetic and pastoral language could unite people across partisan lines.

Francis has called for the Catholic Church to be “a church of the poor and for the poor.” He has echoed social movements’ calls for land, labor and lodging. He has spoken clearly against structural inequality, called poverty and hunger “social sins” and denounced those contributing to climate change.

He encourages Christian clergy and lay leaders to dirty their feet in the shantytowns of the world and struggle shoulder to shoulder with the poorest of God’s children:

“niejs,” he says, “must smell of sheep.”

In looking at Francis’s focus on global solidarity, human rights for marginalized populations, and the role religion can play in social movements, we’ve asked ourselves if Pope Francis is an outlying radical, or if his critiques represent a larger shift in society now underway.

Radical or not, in our current historical moment, Pope Francis’s message is both fitting and urgently necessary. Kairos is a Greek term signifying the “opportune moment” or the hour for action. Pope Francis sees this opportunity -- this need -- for a big changes in the Catholic Church and in society, and he acts upon it. He seizes the kairos.

Shailly Gupta Barnes of the Kairos Center visited CUSLAR last September, and she spoke about kairos moments and the struggle against poverty.

She said, “we see the moment that we are in in the United States but also in the world as one of these kairos moments. And there have been kairos moments in all of human history, and because they are moments, they come and they pass. We feel that if there is an opportunity that if we understand this moment, the potential for a real transformational movement exists. Because of the unique place that the United States plays within the world, economically, militarily, and culturally, we see a particular need to catalyze this movement here in the United States.”

May Pope Francis’s words inspire and embolden us in our efforts for global justice and mutual understanding.

May this edition of the CUSLAR Newsletter contribute to a better understanding of this kairos moment and the opportunities at hand to make possible a decent life for all.

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Image based on a stained-glass window in Cornell University’s Sage Chapel. Cover design by Tim Shenk.

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CUSLAR is a Cornell University-based organization, founded in 1965, which seeks to promote a greater understanding of Latin America and the Caribbean. CUSLAR members are a diverse group of people united in our concern about the role of the United States in the social, political and economic affairs of the region. CUSLAR supports the right of the people of Latin America to self-determination and control over decisions that affect their lives and communities.

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The Pope’s message resonates with the missions of CUSLAR and the Kairos Center. Our semester-long research project was born from questions about how Francis could unite people across partisan lines.
ho is Pope Francis? The large number of publications trying to answer this question suggests a great global curiosity about the 266th leader of the world’s 1.2 billion Catholics.

Known in Argentina as the “bishop of the slums,” Jorge Mario Bergoglio became the first Latin American Pope in 2013 at age 76. Bergoglio grew up in Buenos Aires, one of the wealthiest and fastest growing cities in the world at that time. His grandparents, who were coffee merchants, migrated to Argentina from Italy during the Argentine economic boom in the early 1900s. It is likely they were fleeing the Benito Mussolini dictatorship, as Bergoglio’s grandmother, Rosa, was a fierce activist and a regular speaker against Mussolini. Rosa was little Jorge’s caretaker and his single greatest influence.

An intense spiritual experience caused young Bergoglio to leave the study of medicine and train to be a Jesuit priest. Jesuits belong to a Catholic order known for their connection with the poor, the current Pope has shown radical stances on economic and social issues. He also personally escorted those in hiding to safe places where they connected with others who would help them flee the country.

In recent years he has taken much criticism for not doing enough to protect two young priests, Orlando Yorio and Francisco Jalics, who spent six months in prison in 1976 undergoing torture for their “subversive activities” in the Bajo Flores slum of Buenos Aires. Some allege that Bergoglio, then provincial superior, withdrew his protection of the priests, which opened the door for military kidnapping. Bergoglio has since sworn that he did everything in his power, including meeting with dictator Jorge Rafael Videla, to free Yorio and Jalics. He was finally able to secure passports and visas for the two to leave Argentina.

Bergoglio was named bishop in 1992, Archbishop in 1998 and Cardinal in 2001. He was seriously considered for Pope in 2005, but German theologian Joseph Ratzinger, who took the name Benedict XVI, was selected instead. Many have incorrectly attempted to suggest that Benedict and Francis were at odds, that Benedict was a conservative committed to antiquated doctrine and Francis is a radical concerned with social justice.

Italian journalist Marco Politi paints a different picture in his 2015 book, *Pope Francis Among the Wolves*. He argues that Benedict was severely limited by the corrupt and entrenched officers below him at the Vatican. Seeing no way forward for reforming a Catholic church repeatedly rocked by embezzlement and pedophilia scandals, he became the first Pope to abdicate the post in over 700 years.

According to Politi, “by resigning, he triggered the automatic resignation, as stipulated by canon law, of the other principal office holders of the church’s central government. De facto, his decision to abdicate amounted to a sort of coup d’état, a virtual ‘reboot’ of the Vatican.” When Francis was elected by the conclave of Cardinals in March 2013, he had much more maneuverability to reflect the will of its global body to “clean house” and restore authority, respectability and an open, modern flavor to the Catholic faith.

While some see Pope Francis’s pastoral style and humility as populist imagery and rhetoric, those close to him say the name Francis fits him well. He has always trusted the insight of the poor in struggling for their basic rights and dignity.

In being the first Pope to take the namesake of Francis of Assisi, he signaled that he meant to follow through on his desire for “a church of the poor, for the poor.” Viva il Papa Francesco.
Rhetoric of reform:

by Jordan Cowell

He advocates for a “culture of care” and the universal necessity to care for our “common home.”

Some perceive his message as a radical shift, although it is not the first time the Catholic Church has espoused social justice-oriented discourse. Others see his language as deeply embedded within the Bible, and therefore view it as a reminder of Christianity’s core message.

Pope Francis’s address to the U.S. Congress in September 2015 is exemplary of his reformed rhetoric. He thoughtfully constructs the speech to bring the United States into his mission of global solidarity.

The most salient features of this work are his inclusive dialogue, his humble treatment of global issues, and the careful way in which he makes his address identifiable towards his U.S. audience.

As an Argentinian man, residing in the Vatican, speaking to Congress in the United States, his very presence was an act of permeating borders — geographically, linguistically, politically and ideologically.

How fitting, then, that he calls for a reconceptualization of how we work together across such borders.

Pope Francis begins his address by breaking down geopolitical north-south divides. He says, “I too am a son of this great continent, from which we have all received so much and toward which we share a common responsibility.”

By including himself within the singular continent of America, distinguishing between North and South America, he links his experience with that of the U.S. Americans in the room. Not only have they been reared within a common land, they also share a common responsibility to that land. He presses for collective solutions to shared problems.

He then reminds Congress of their responsibility, asserting, “You are the face of its people, their representatives” and calling for the defense of “those in situations of greater vulnerability or risk.” Francis’s exhortation to defend the poor, therefore, exposes everyone’s shared complacency in perpetuating poverty in the U.S. and abroad.

As an Argentinian man, residing in the Vatican, speaking in the United States, his very presence was an act of permeating borders — geographically, linguistically, politically and ideologically.
Francis speaks to U.S. Congress

Pope Francis maintained a unifying tone in his September 2015 speech to Congress, appealing to U.S. professed values of equality and inclusion.

One of the most salient features of this speech and Pope Francis’s general discourse is his inclusive dialogue. He appeals directly towards his audience, saying, “I would like not only to address you, but through you the entire people of the United States.”

The constant repetition of “the common good” and “common needs” connects the audience and speaker, thus fostering a relationship of identification. It serves the rhetorical purpose of familiarizing himself with the audience and breaking down audience suspicion. Identification is the formation of rhetorical communities.

Another essential facet of any rhetorical dialogue is the creation of a second person, which is another means of strengthening the speaker-listener bond. Communications scholar Edwin Black studied the concept of the ‘second persona,’ or the implied audience. As an orator gives an address, he or she speaks to what he or she perceives to be the values of the audience.

In his address to Congress, Pope Francis creates the second persona of the common, decent, working-class individual and speaks to it, appealing to what he perceives as their values.

He creates this second persona imagery by detailing a touching portrait of working-class families, saying, “Many thousands of men and women who strive each day to do an honest day’s work, to bring home their daily bread, to save money and — one step at a time — to build a better life for their families.” These values are admired in U.S. society, and by giving a nod of acknowledgment to these qualities, Pope Francis makes his audience feel recognized and appreciated.

He then invites different demographics into his rhetorical community, thus making his speech almost entirely universal. Whereas he just gave a nod to everyday, working-class U.S. Americans, he now salutes the old and the young.

He says, “I would also like to enter into dialogue with the many elderly persons.” He highlights the benefits elderly people can provide in the global unity work he emphasizes, through their “wisdom forged by experience” and sharing “their stories and insights.”

He then directs his attention towards youths, saying, “I also want to dialogue with all those young people” and notes their “great and noble aspirations” as well as their adversity in the face of “difficult situations, often as a result of immaturity on the part of many adults.” Sociological theorists Sykes and Matza describe how young people and old people are the least valued members of society.

In their theory, young people are viewed as “social dynamite” because they are unstable, wavering and ready to explode. Conversely, old people are considered “social junk” — used up, useless members of society. Pope Francis gives these demographics merit through his recognition of their positive attributes.

Pope Francis recognizes the role religion plays in a global political and economic framework. He says our job is to “combat violence perpetrated in the name of a religion, an ideology or an economic system, while also safeguarding religious freedom, intellectual freedom and individual freedom.”

However, he warns of the temptation to fall into “the simplistic reductionism which sees only good or evil; or, if you will, the righteous and sinners.”

In his address to Congress, Pope Francis creates a persona of the common, decent, working-class individual and speaks to it, appealing to what he perceives as the values of such an audience.

He condemns a simplistic way of viewing the world, as it only causes tunnel vision to real world complexities.

He seeks to fight against polarizing the world by recognizing the complexities of humanity and human-made institutions. He takes the opportunity to highlight everyone’s personal responsibility. He says, “We know that in the attempt to be freed of the enemy without, we can be tempted to feed the enemy within. To imitate the hatred and violence of tyrants and murderers is the best way to take their place.” He does not exclude himself from this statement. It is a humble warning against the human weaknesses that handicap us as a global unit.

Pope Francis then centers the rest of his speech around the social justice work of four U.S. American figures: Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr., Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton.

Admiring the lives of these four people, two very well known and two perhaps less known, is a means of honoring the history of the United States, again connecting speaker and audience.

Maintaining a dialogue grounded in both the Bible and the lived experience, Pope Francis shifts gears to speak to modern-day global issues from poverty, the death penalty, environmental crisis, war, immigration, and the refugee crisis.

He presses for the defense of every life, at every stage of life — spinning the rhetoric commonly seen in pro-life debates in a different direction. He emphasizes the sanctity of all human life by bringing to light all of the political implications of protecting a life.

Pope Francis uses his address to Congress as a tool to break down north-south divides and generate unity. He promotes a “culture of care,” initiating dialogue, building bridges and ultimately moving toward mutual understanding on a large scale.

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Land, Labor and Lodging: Pope Francis supports the call of popular movements

by Julia Smith

Pope Francis has been consistent in this viewpoint in his writing and teaching, and it is perhaps clearest in his July 2015 speech to popular movements in Bolivia.

In this speech, Francis was not standing before an explicitly Catholic audience. He was addressing popular movement leaders, with diverse backgrounds and spiritual traditions. Although the audience was largely from Latin American countries, there was representation from other regions as well. Francis acknowledges his audience for their daily struggles, saying, “What can be done by those students, those young people, those activists, those missionaries who come to my neighborhood with their hearts full of hopes and dreams, but without any real solution for my problems? A lot! They can do a lot. You, the lowly, the exploited, the poor and underprivileged, can do, and are doing, a lot. I would even say that the future of humanity is in great measure in your hands. Through your ability to organize and carry out creative alternatives, through your daily efforts to ensure the three ‘L’s’ (labor, lodging, land) and through your proactive participation in the great processes of change on the national, regional, and global levels. Don’t lose heart!”

One of the highlights of Francis’s speech is his repetition of the demands for land, lodging, and labor, which he asserts are sacred rights. Throughout this speech in Bolivia these three words become his slogan. He maintains that every person should have access to these very basic rights. Francis’s speech is accessible to the common person just as he has made himself accessible through his humble manner. His speeches do not hide his message in the frills of Papal language. In this clarity, his words are extremely powerful. Through this strength and simplicity, they have the capacity to bring people together.

He aims to unite humanity to accomplish three great tasks. The first task is to make the global economy serve people. He maintains there must be an end to an economy that places profit over people, saying, “Human beings and nature must not be at the service of money. Let us say NO to an economy of exclusion and inequality, where money rules rather than service. That economy kills. That economy excludes. That economy destroys Mother Earth.”

The second great task is to “unite peoples on the path of peace and justice.” In Francis’s mind, this means finding unity in Latin America but also ensuring sovereignty within countries. It is also in this section that Francis powerfully denounces the forms of colonialism old and new, and even more notably apologizes and expresses regret at the actions that the Church has played in the exploitation of peoples. Remembering that he is speaking to a largely indigenous audience, the significance of these words must not be overlooked.

The third great task, according to Francis, is to defend Mother Earth. The Pope asserts that despite the gravity of all three tasks, this is the most important and urgent one of all.

Francis comments on the ties between capitalism, the exploitation of peoples, and the exploitation of the planet, and he urges his global audience to continue their efforts in these three interrelated tasks.

When Francis said, ‘How I would love a church that is poor and for the poor,’ he was speaking about a new world order that would liberate the poor from oppression.

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To accomplish these tasks, Francis knows there must be an upheaval of the status quo. He says, “So let’s not be afraid to say it: we need change; we want change.” Because the Catholic Church hierarchy has tended to resist change, it is not hard to understand why many see Francis as a radical.

Yet Pope Francis falls short of truly leading a revolution. He understands his role as crying out against injustice, but he does not want to be the commander in a global uprising. He clarifies that even though these injustices are heard felt acutely around the world today, it would be better if this imminent change is slow. He explains:

“Here in Bolivia I have heard of phrase I like: ‘process of change.’ Change seen as something which will one day result from any one political decision or change in social structure. We know from painful experience that changes of structure which are not accompanied by a sincere conversion of mind and heart sooner or later end up in bureaucratization, corruption and failure. That is why I like the image of a process, where the drive to sow, to water seeds which others will see sprout, replaces the ambition to occupy every available position of power and to see immediate results.”

Although Francis cannot be the true leader in a global movement, his words are inspiring.

He may not lead the poor to overthrow their oppressive governments and exploitive economic systems, but his words might inspire them to do so on their own. Although his words fill his audience with passion and inspiration, he clarifies that it will not be the Pope who will provide the recipe for change.

But, if Pope Francis is not going to give us a recipe to solve these global problems then where might we find one? If Francis’s audience can agree that these urgent global problems exist, where might a global solution lie? Although Pope Francis won’t provide an explicit solution it seems that he thinks this answer lies in local efforts:

“I am pleased to see that you are working at close hand to care for those seedlings, but at the same time, with a broader perspective, to protect the entire forest. Your work is carried out against a horizon which, while concentrating on your own specific area, also aims to resolve at their root the more general problems of poverty, inequality and exclusion.”

This speech in Bolivia was directed to leaders of popular movements from all around the globe. These are leaders who inspire people to come together to fight a common cause. Does it not sound like Pope Francis himself is a leader of a popular movement? In reading his speech in Bolivia this sense of revolution is palpable. Simply reading his words on paper alone is powerful, perhaps only reflecting a fraction of the energy that emanates in his live address.

I doubt his clarification that this imminent change must be slow would have subdued the fire in the hearts of his listeners.

Pope Francis’s address to popular movements speaks to a global audience. He calls for swift action in the defense of Mother Earth, the realization of peace among peoples and liberation from poverty. Although many of his words appear secular and universal, he also calls upon Christian obligation as being the highest order of moral duty for this global change. As the voice of more than a billion Catholics, the range of his message is unparalleled.

His global audience could not be bigger or more diverse in tradition, culture or lived experience.

There are few voices as strong as his in terms of breadth of audience and depth of critique of inequality. Not only does Francis have the potential to unite people of the Christian faith, but he also has the potential to unite people across many traditional lines of division.

This makes his message even more powerful. There are many sections of this speech that contain no religious imagery at all. His religious imagery gives strength to his words, but perhaps his consistent universality makes them even stronger. In this speech, Francis cries out against the global economy of exclusion and his message is truly inclusive.

**LEARN MORE!**

Read Pope Francis’s full speech to popular movements in Bolivia here: tinyurl.com/francis-bolivia
Francis cites other Popes and religious leaders who have spoken about the environment. Pope John Paul II called for a global ecological conversion, warning that human beings “frequently seem to see no other meaning in their natural environment than what serves for immediate use and consumption.” Pope Benedict XVI proposed “eliminating the structural causes of the dysfunctions of the world economy and correcting models of growth which have proved incapable of ensuring respect for the environment.”

With *Laudato si’*, Pope Francis strives to contribute to dialogue on the imminence of the ecological crisis. He states, “I urgently appeal, then, for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet. We need a conversation which includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all.”

A key theme of the encyclical is the effects of environmental degradation on the world’s poor.

Francis writes: “Whether believers or not, we are agreed today that the earth is essentially a shared inheritance, whose fruits are meant to benefit everyone.

“For believers, this becomes a question of fidelity to the Creator, since God created the world for everyone. Hence every ecological approach needs to incorporate a social perspective which takes into account the fundamental rights of the poor and the underprivileged.”

He reprimands global decision-makers for the ways they have disregarded the environment and failed to see how that negligence endangers the world’s most vulnerable. He provides the scientific consensus on global warming and explores the ways environmental degradation has affected the quality of human life and societal interaction.

“It needs to be said,” he writes, “that, generally speaking, there is little in the way of clear awareness of problems which especially affect the excluded. Yet they are the majority of the planet’s population, billions of people. These days, they are mentioned in international political and economic discussions, but one often has the impression that their problems are brought up as an afterthought, a question which gets added almost out of duty or in a tangential way, if not treated merely as collateral damage.”

Francis follows the scientific consensus by exploring the human roots of the ecological crisis.

The Pontiff acknowledges that technology, when well directed, can improve human life. However, he finds it risky that a small percentage of humanity holds ownership of the globe’s productive capacity and is thus allowed such vast control and influence over the distribution of goods and services. These few, he warns, demonstrate “no interest in more balanced levels of production, a better distribution of wealth, concern for the environment and the rights of future generations. Their behavior shows that for them maximizing profits is enough.”

Pope Francis ends his letter with a chapter titled Ecological Education and Spirituality. He starts the section, “Many things have to change course, but it is we human beings above all who need to change. We lack an awareness of our common origin, of our mutual belonging, and of a future to be shared with everyone.

Rendering of “St. Francis Preaching to the Birds.” Original painting by Giotto di Bondone, c.1298.
“This basic awareness would enable the development of new convictions, attitudes and forms of life. A great cultural, spiritual and educational challenge stands before us, and it will demand that we set out on the long path of renewal.”

He calls for a new lifestyle away from consumerism, which he calls “a seedbed for collective selfishness.” Secondly, the Pontiff, a firm believer in education, appeals for the creation of an “ecological citizenship,” which he believes has not been achieved due to the failure of instilling good habits. He believes that only through good virtues will people be able to act and make selfless commitments to the environment.

Responses from around the world

Laudato si describes the perilous conditions of our natural environment, the dehumanization of development and our disregard for those who suffer the most, the poor and dispossessed. Many church leaders like Brother Dominic Mary Verner have called this encyclical revolutionary, as it points out the culprits of environmental destruction.

The Catholic community in Bangladesh came together to support Pope Francis’s call for all human beings to take care of the planet as mother and sister. The Archbishop Patrick D’Rozario of Dhaka, President of the Catholic Bishops Conference of Bangladesh, issued a pastoral letter in the Bengali language to be distributed in every parish that explains the main points of Laudato si.

He also called for priests to spread the papal teachings among their communities and to follow the Pope’s guidelines. Other world leaders like current United Nations secretary general Ban Ki-moon have also expressed their support for the “moral leadership on climate change Pope Francis has brought through his environmental and revolutionary encyclical.”

Ban believes that people from all faiths and sectors of the world share Pope Francis’s urgency to care for our common home. For those unable to see the interdependence of the natural world, spirituality and science, Ban addresses that the issue of climate change is beyond just an issue for environmentalists: “It is an issue of social justice, human rights and fundamental ethics.”

Many environmentalists and activists, including author Naomi Klein, support the encyclical. Klein notes that she was surprised by the boldness of Pope Francis. “When politicians are not showing much courage, the text contains a powerful truth,” she said. “I was shocked by this and also by its poeticism and lyricism.”

While a wide range of religious and secular leaders praise Laudato si, some have expressed their uncertainties. It may be instructive to note that those whose interests are tied to the current exploitative model tend to be critical of the encyclical. Some religious leaders believe that the social damage should not solely be attributed to the market economies. Rather, sin should be named one of the culprits. In addition, many secular leaders embrace economic development and fail to see its detrimental effects on the poor.

Pope Francis’s goal is encourage dialogue about the responsibility that all human beings face today regarding care for our common home, and especially to understand that “a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.”

Klein believes that this encyclical has enabled a new kind of awareness to emerge in various communities, linking the climate question to social equity issues and allowing surprising alliances to arise.
On theology and liberation

A reflection on justice-oriented church traditions Latin America after CUSLAR’s Spring 2016 study of Pope Francis and his context

by David Johnson

The focus of my research has been the intersection between the phenomenon of Pope Francis and the tradition of liberation theology, both of which are products of Latin American cultures and religious traditions of the twentieth century.

Liberation theology as an historical phenomenon emerged in the early 1970’s as the religious aspect of a wider social movement in Latin America, characterized by a growing consciousness of the global economic injustices that constitute the Global South.

Many social critics and activists began to see and critique the ways in which the economic development of the wealthiest countries in the world and the deep poverty and underdevelopment of the Global South are intimately connected – that they are in fact two strikingly different aspects of one global political-economic system.

Liberation theology was born out of the friction between religious inspiration and this ongoing political tragedy. It is a movement that originates not merely as religious faith, nor yet as a form of social criticism, but as a convergence of these two: as faith’s confrontation with oppression and injustice. The central question of liberation theology, then, according to Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff, is: “How are we to be Christians in a world of destitution and injustice?” The answer liberation theology provides is: to be Christian in a world of oppression is to make “common cause” with the oppressed and to fight by their side for liberation.

According to liberation theology, to follow the teachings of Jesus – the vocation of all who call themselves Christian – is to condemn and to struggle against oppression in all its forms, to secure a livelihood and dignity for all.

Liberation theology thus combines religious faith with rigorous social criticism and action. These critical theologians observe that poverty is a structural component of global capitalism, and that therefore “economic aid” and “economic reform” are two solutions to poverty which deflect its deeper causes, and are therefore unacceptable and dishonest.

“Aid” – or charity – is condescending and further dehumanizes the poor, while failing to acknowledge that the poor are not simply poor but are made poor through particular power relations of oppression and exclusion. “Reform” attempts to salvage or ameliorate a system which is corrupt at its foundation – a tactic which goes further than aid in its acknowledgement of the reality of injustice, but falls short in its refusal to entertain new models of social organization.

Liberation theology calls for just such a radical social restructuring, which makes it a radical form of social criticism in its own right. It is a form of social criticism that takes its inspiration, content and method not from Marx or Lenin but from the Gospels. The tradition of liberation theology offers a way of reading the Bible which privileges its solidarity with the poor, and urges practitioners of the Christian faith to see that their own dignity as human beings is connected to, indeed is dependent on, the status of the lowest ranks of society. The state of the poor – indeed, the very existence of stratified economic classes with vastly different material means – is a kind of litmus test for the integrity of a society. Liberation theology accuses global society of a political scandal which disgraces us all, and calls on the faithful to recognize their religious responsibilities to fight for equality and justice. The Bible is read as a prophetic discourse on the liberation of the poor and the redemption of human purpose in history and eternity.

It is in this emphasis on a basic economic right to livelihood, and an insistence that economic rights are also sacred rights, that we can locate the intersections of this Latin American tradition and the rhetoric of the first Latin American Pope. In his speeches all over the world, Pope Francis champions many of the fundamental principles of liberation theology: in his solidarity with the poor, in his explicit criticism of capitalism’s excesses, in his condemnation of “a globalization of exclusion and indifference,” and in his affirmation that a more equal distribution of wealth throughout global society is both possible from a political perspective and necessary from the perspective of the Christian faith.

While at the beginning of my study I was interested in direct links between Pope Francis and liberation theology, that inquiry now seems relatively unimportant. Regardless of the historical connections – and these connections doubtless exist, even if they are not so explicit –

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there are profound overlaps in the content and form of the two movements. It does not matter what the Pope’s history and formal ties with this particular tradition happen to be. What matters is the work being done and the principles underlying that work.

To study these two phenomena is to find that the key link in principle is a radical solidarity with the poor, a critique of structures of economic inequality and exclusion, and the liberation of the poor from economic injustice.

Liberation theology privileges the everyday human being above the sophisticated theologian, and is in this way decidedly anti-elitist. Taking its cues from the needs and desires of the poor, liberation theology’s ideal is collaborative, dialogical, collective, and above all, social. Without the millions of lay faithful, liberation theology would be just another ivory tower theology. And this marks another important overlap between this grassroots tradition and today’s Pope. Francis has an openness which is felt by all of us, faithful and secular alike, as a breathe of fresh air, yet nevertheless grounds itself in tradition and faith. Pope Francis’s public addresses are written to all human beings, not as a prescription for living rightly, but as an invitation to participate in a global conversation – across cultures, across faiths, and, we cannot omit, across classes.

Ultimately, the question of who Pope Francis is, or who he will be as Pope, is inseparable from the question of who we want him to be. This reflects something special about who Pope Francis is. The political contents of the Pope’s preachings are as profound as the dialogical style and form with which he delivers them, and we have a responsibility to seize this moment in history as the special political opportunity that it is. We all have a responsibility – as political beings, as religious beings, or simply as citizens of the world – to continue pushing the international conversation to address economic injustice and to secure for all people across the globe the dignity and livelihood that is rightfully theirs.

Images, above and on facing page: Sage Chapel, Cornell University.

Francis is no radical

by David Johnson

For progressive Christians and non-Christians alike, the ascendency of the first Latin American Pope presents us with an occasion both for excitement and contemplation.

How did the present Pope rise from his origins in the Catholic culture of Argentina to his position of power and leadership in Rome? What is the significance of the first Pope from the Global South for the Catholic church and for world politics? Is Pope Francis a radical, or do his progressive positions on social and economic issues find their home in Christian tradition? What is the place of the Catholic church in shaping the global political discourse and the conditions of the global political order?

These questions have provided the basis for our research this semester, and I would like to take this small space to reflect on where these questions have brought us. Particularly critical at the outset of my own study was the question: Is Pope Francis a radical? There is obviously something exceptional about the man, but this question led me in unexpected directions.

What is certain is that there is something strikingly divergent in the rhetorical style and political directness of Pope Francis when compared with his more recent predecessors. But does it follow that Pope Francis is a radical in relation to his own tradition, to his own history?

That is far less certain.

When we study the religious cultures and discourses from which Pope Francis emerged, it becomes apparent rather quickly that the Pope is no radical.

If foregrounding politics, economic inequality, and a cry for economic rights and standards of livelihood seems radical to us, this may be less a commentary on the character of a single individual, and more an indication of the limited scope of our own discourses concerning religion, politics and the global economic order.

It may be time to refocus our critical inquiry on the narrowness of our own discourse and ask: why do calls for economic rights, from whatever corner, seem radical to us?

What prevents us from embracing a global politics of economic rights?
Brazil in crisis: Behind the impeachment

by Eudes Prado Lopes

The impeachment proceedings that suspended the mandate of Brazil’s President Dilma Rousseff in May mark the climax of an ongoing process of the radical polarization of the political class that began in the lead-up to the October 2014 presidential elections.

Back in 2014, the Workers’ Party (PT), despite scandals and a weak economy, still maintained massive appeal as the exemplars of the consolidation of a democratic social compact in Brazil, reflected back to society in the name of social inclusion and equality.

No one knew at the time how significant would be the election cycle for the beginning of the dismantling of the then dominant “neodevelopmentalist” turn, which reasserted the protagonism of the state with and for economic development.

This opening was made possible in the wake of the financial crisis, which began in 2007 in the United States and reached global dimensions by 2009. It was received at the federal level in Brazil as a broad “national” threat, and it was articulated as such nationwide. In turn, intellectuals and the policy elites from all ends of the political spectrum showed solidarity for the seemingly inevitable new “counter-cyclical” moment.

What seemed initially to be a technical stimulus effort — a policy direction long informed by the Keynesian tradition — would result in a much more consequential political-economic reorientation inspired by the powerful “nationalist-developmentalist” legacy in Brazil, the second largest emerging market in the world.

The emergence of the “new developmentalism” was not viewed as exclusive to the Dilma Rousseff administration, which only began in 2011. However, her increased political prominence during the last two years of the Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva administration, as his chief of staff and the key architect of the federal social programs, rendered her a particularly salient icon in defense of the consolidation of the Party’s new legacy.

In this context, the renewed centrality of the state in the economy became fashionable. Even influential financial journals and magazines embraced the so-called new “state-capitalism” turn, featuring stories of Brazil “taking off” — an international euphoria that would prove short-lived.

Brazil’s President Dilma Rousseff was ousted in a ‘soft coup’ in May. The author discusses the two years leading up to this disruption of democracy in the world’s ninth largest economy

Protesters wearing yellow and green, the colors of the Brazilian flag, began calling for the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff soon after her reelection in the fall of 2014. One of the first large demonstrations took place on March 15, 2015.

In this photo, Rogério Martins, a red-clad supporter of the national movement for housing, was knocked off his bicycle and was nearly lynched by a hostile crowd, some of whom were calling for a military coup.

Though for some, the beginning of the end of the PT mandate might be traced to the mighty June 2013 protests, the politicization of the intellectual critiques accelerated swiftly during the 2014 elections.

The focal points of the new contestation ranged from questions surrounding the lack of full independence of the central bank to fierce disagreements regarding the proper role of public banks in the economy and their implications for what an adequate balance between revenue and expenditures for the national treasury should be. While these positions were stylized and simplified in accordance with the demands of the campaign trail, their effects awakened an oppositional discourse that had been largely silenced since the financial crisis.

The sharp sound of alarm rang from all directions and prompted an elaborate and coordinated response from the PT, whose base took to the streets in support of the basic tenets of the neodevelopmentalist experiment. Emotional testimonies of recipients of subsidized housing and technical training programs circulated nationwide. Those whose personal and professional lives had been improved by PT programs were accompanied by stock images of massive infrastructure projects such as interstate railroad tracks, hydroelectric dams, wind farms, ambitious inter-continental electrical transmission lines, among others.

While the campaign strategy yielded initially promising results, another change in the sea-tide was underway.

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An audio recording leaked from the Federal Police Department accused prominent PT members of participating in a massive kickback scheme that took shape around Petróleo Brasileiro, or Petrobras, the national oil company. Petrobras is the largest public company in Brazil, and social movements have long rallied around it as a perennial symbol of national sovereignty.

In just weeks, the opposition party — bolstered by the media — redefined more successfully the PT-led neodevelopmentalist turn not as an outlet for social and national emancipation, but as a deeply contradictory fantasy. With the constant prospect of new allegations surfacing, the PT was cut off from the force of its own narrative. Their images of dynamic industrial projects were challenged by the opposition, which repeatedly dumped alarming figures of debt and project delays, as well as corruption liabilities, which they vowed in figuratively very expressive terms to “clean up” if elected.

In the fall of 2014, the three weeks leading up to the final round of voting were embittered. The results, which ultimately showed a slim margin of victory to the PT, were received as underwhelming to its supporters, and enraging — if not unacceptable — to its detractors.

It was in this divided context that the calls for Rousseff’s impeachment began, the significance of which grew quickly as the PT suffered a number of politically devastating setbacks.

First, in just a matter of weeks after the elections, the Central Bank announced that the country had accumulated its first primary deficit within a 12-month interval. Second, as the price of oil and other key commodities collapsed at an unprecedented rate, Petrobras was made to formally announce that it would not be releasing its third quarter earnings as its auditors refused to sign off on the company’s financial statement without a write down of the value of key compromised assets.

Finally, amidst the general discontent, the lower-house of the Brazilian Congress elected an ultra-conservative leader, Eduardo Cunha, whose rise to the presidency of the lower-house hinged in large part on his pledge to his colleagues that a new era of relations between the executive branch and the Brazilian Congress would be forged. This laid the groundwork for divided government, in the wake of a campaign that had just been elected on a mandate for the expansion — not the dismantling — of federal power.

Ultimately, while the PT did not abandon its broader post-crisis neodevelopmentalist ambitions, by the time these successive defeats culminated in the massive anti-corruption and impeachment protests, it became clear that the political spectrum narrowed in ways so as to render that vision moot.

The shift in discourse was clear. Until then, the political economy was premised on a collaborative relationship between the treasury and the private sector. Private and public entities would work together to strengthen the labor market, increase overall wages and deepen social inclusion.

The rupture was marked in political terms by the nomination of Joaquim Levy, a technical monetarist economist to the Ministry of Finance, which made all but inevitable the highly explicit revival of a politics of austerity. While this shift did not go uncontested, in the context of substantial revenue losses resulting in part from a free-fall in commodity prices, the new PT administration was made to subscribe to a new discourse of costs. This entailed a radical defense of its own budget against the private sector, Congress and even the unions, all the while claiming not to be abandoning its mandate of federal expansion — a position that sounded to many as impossible and ironic.

The conditions were set for the hollowing out of the neodevelopmentalist experiment. Indeed, as the impeachment protests were gaining force, a presidential address was scheduled to air to communicate the reasons for the economic difficulties that were surfacing. Continued on next page
It is telling that such a pronouncement triggered a *panelaço* — that is, a coordinated social act that involves the banging of pots and pans as a form of protest.

What is striking about this particular social act — which took place mostly in upper middle class neighborhoods nationwide — was how it negated the language of developmentalism. It did not matter that the presidential announcement would go on to explain that the collapse in commodity prices had weakened the investment capacity of the largest state-enterprises, and that the exacerbation of one of the largest droughts in the country’s history had imperiled the harvest season and the public hydroelectric energy production, which in turn, put heavy pressure on public accounts. What circulated instead via the press and social media in response to that moment was not the actual words of the president but rather the videos of the loud clinking noises of the *panelaços* in neighborhoods all over the country.

It was thus deemed that the timid efforts beginning to call for austerity politics had to be more fully embraced. Yet there was resistance from within the government, which only at times would concede to the new consensus among the business elite. This led to more radical measures from the opposition, for whom the results of the elections were dismissed as illegitimate for having favored a vision of the country that would be deemed illusory soon thereafter.

Ultimately, however, it was determined that the conditions would need to be set for the legal destitution of President Dilma Rousseff. What started as a spectacular popular revolt turned into a more technical probe to legitimize her fall.

By April 17, the Brazilian lower-house of Congress approved her impeachment on the charge of the violation of a technical budget management law. Much of the elite class celebrated the decision as marking the end of the PT era. For others, however, it signaled a darker turn in Brazilian politics, one which called into question the strength of Brazil’s democratic institutions.

Reconfiguration of the opposition to the conservative turn is now underway. What is striking about the emerging new left is that they are less organized around, or even concerned with, the defense of a singular party platform. Rather, what is fomenting this grassroots resistance to the political class is its ill-reflection of the country’s broad diversity. A new politics of representation is taking hold.

In the meantime, for those who characterize the events leading up to Rousseff’s suspension as a soft coup, there is widespread anxiety with regards to the resilience of the social policies that were the hallmark of PT era. Whether or not the economic deterioration becomes the pretext for the dismantling of the key pillars of the populist governments of the last decade both in Brazil and across the region remains an open question.

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**Two months of neoliberal coup: Against the people and democracy**

_Brazilian economist and leader of the Landless Workers’ Movement João Pedro Stédile analyzes the current situation as of July, two months after Rousseff’s impeachment._

Brazil is experiencing a severe economic, political, social, and environmental crisis. We lived similar historical crises during the decade of the 1930s, 60s and 80s. All of them demanded great debates in society, huge political participation and disputes in the class struggle. Its outcome was always delayed and was only possible around a new project that could unite a social base to support it. Or the ruling classes appealed to the military.

Every day the interim government takes action against the workers and their rights. Its main goal is to restore the rates of profit and the process of accumulation of wealth in Brazil, for banks and transnational corporations. For this, they are attacking workers’ rights and social rights in general. In addition, they are increasing the unemployment rates, which is a way of lowering wages and dominate the working class.

They are robbing the public coffers, limiting social spending and thus, allocate the resources that before used to be for education, health, social security, and now for only the interests of capitalists.

We need to go about building a new popular project for Brazil, starting from a broad discussion of proposals and ideas with all sectors of Brazilian society. Although it takes time, it is the only way to get out of the crisis.

This will gain strength not by the correctness of the proposal, but rather if the masses of the working class actively participates, mobilizing in the streets. We have argued that it is necessary to organize large national mobilizations of the working class, against the coup, unemployment and the national anti-sovereignty measures. And make possible a general strike by the working class as a form of protest and change the correlation of forces.

The outcome of this crisis is still in doubt. The fight will be long and arduous.

*Read the full article at thedawn-news.org*
The global significance of America’s Heartland

CUSLAR Coordinator Tim Shenk interviewed John Wessel-McCoy, a Poor People’s Campaign Program Organizer for the Kairos Center, and Willie Baptist, Poverty Initiative Scholar-in-Residence and Co-Coordinator of Poverty Scholarship and Leadership Development for the Kairos Center, about the strategic importance of the Midwest in building a movement to end poverty.

Police use pepper spray on locked-out workers at the A.E. Staley corn processing plant in Decatur, Illinois in the 1990s. Companies like Staley’s often chose union-busting and automation when forced to compete across the globe against companies hiring cheaper labor. John Wessel-McCoy, a Poor People’s Campaign organizer and Decatur native, explains that the Midwest has shifted dramatically from being a center of stability to being a region of rising poverty. The Poor People’s Campaign organized a tour of the Midwest from May 16-26. Over 40 leaders of struggles from across the Gulf Coast, Mid-Atlantic and West Coast traveled to the Midwest Industrial Belt and meet with grassroots community, labor and religious leaders in Chicago, Detroit and Cleveland, as well as Elkhart, Indiana and Flint, Michigan.

CUSLAR endorses the New Poor People’s Campaign for Today. Organizations are taking up Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s call to unite the poor and dispossessed from across the U.S. and the world to fight for dignity for all. poorpeoplescampaign.org

Tim Shenk: John, you and I are Midwesterners. I’m very interested in why you’re working to bring leaders from all over the country on a Poor People’s Campaign tour to the Midwest.

John Wessel-McCoy: When I think about the Midwest, I think about these terms we use to describe the region — Middle America, the Heartland. It has been viewed historically as a center of stability. But all of that is changing now. I grew up in Central Illinois just outside of Decatur. If you drive around and look at my town, you’ll see it’s hollowing out. It reflects a lot of the same dynamics you see in Detroit and Saginaw and Erie, Pennsylvania.

Willie Baptist: The Midwest needs to be seen from a strategic point of view. The auto industry, steel, glass, rubber and assembly have been the foundation of the American economy. These contribute also to the construction industry.

Historically, these industries come out of the Midwest. Stabilizing the workforce that produces these things has been foremost in the minds of big capital. The Midwest contains a large bulk of the middle-income strata. This middle strata is the social base of the political power of big capital and its control of the country. In this sense, whoever wins Middle America, or the Midwest, wins the country and wins policy.

The Left has tended to mostly dismiss the Midwestern industrial labor force because of the perception that this labor force is mostly white, that they’re racist, that they’re Trump people and that’s who we’re told we don’t have to fight. It’s set up that way so we don’t unite the dispossessed.

TS: You insist on uniting the dispossessed across racial lines, as the backbone of the Poor People’s Campaign.

WB: Si se puede — it can be done. Our enemy is not the poor whites. When you talk about the Poor People’s Campaign, it is mistakenly understood as not having to do with race. But the Poor People’s Campaign is really the most anti-racist effort you can take on. The basis of racism is an all-white unity. But that all-white unity is being undermined by today’s worsening economic reality, because there are millions poor whites who are not benefiting from an all-white unity. Many of these poor white folks are in battle, but they’re not on TV. They’re not well connected with other sections of the dispossessed, so you don’t think they exist.

Unfortunately, the image of the poor white as the enemy prevails in a lot of the discussions around the movement for black lives, while certain elements of that movement, the more working-class elements, are being attacked and the struggles of the dispossessed are not being as supported or promoted in the same way.

If all of the people who are hurting can be brought together and raise their voices, their voices will be heard and will become a rallying point for the rest of the country. That’s what the powers that be are afraid of.
Film shows ‘invisible’ migrants’ legal fight

by Jordan Cowell

Mexican film director Manuel de Alba visited Ithaca, New York in March, hosting screenings and discussions of his award-winning documentary, The Battle of the Invisibles.

The documentary is a bilingual film in Spanish and English released in 2010 that recounts the labor exploitation of janitors from Puebla, Mexico as they work for major supermarket chains in California.

The janitorial workers find themselves in a particularly vulnerable situation, as the majority of them are undocumented immigrants and do not speak English. Over 2,300 workers organize and take their employers to court, eventually winning over $22 million in back wages and overtime.

Spanning a five-year struggle, it is the largest legal case of its type in U.S. judicial history.

Through personal interviews with immigrant workers, attorneys and other professionals involved in the case, de Alba takes the viewer through the lived experiences of the janitors. He amplifies the voices of those who have been silenced, exposing the powerful transnational networks that subject the migrant labor force to subhuman conditions.

In 2010, this film took first place in the Festival Internacional Santiago Álvarez in Santiago de Cuba. The following year it won “Best Foreign Film” in the Festival Internacional de Cine en Puebla, Mexico.

Manuel de Alba is a documentary and short film producer and director. He is a full-time film professor at the University de las Américas-Puebla.

Professor de Alba’s visit was sponsored by: Committee on U.S.-Latin American Relations (CUSLAR), Cornell University Latina/o Studies Program, Latin American Studies Program, Department of Romance Studies, Language House at Alice Cook House, Cornell Cinema, MEChA de Cornell, School of Industrial and Labor Relations, Ithaca College Latin American Studies and Ithaca College Modern Languages and Literature.

Remembering Berta Cáceres

the world-renowned indigenous leader assassinated in Honduras in March for her opposition to government-backed megaprojects.

CUSLAR held an educational event and published three articles online related to Berta’s life and legacy after her murder. Learn more about struggles in Honduras to protect sacred mountains and rivers from mining and dam construction. Leaders at COPINH, the organization Berta co-founded, continue to be murdered with impunity.

STRENGTHEN PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN LATIN AMERICA

by Andrea Reyes Blanco

LAND GRABBING IS KILLING HONDURAS’ INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

by Andrea Reyes Blanco and Tim Shenk

IN THE TRENCHES WITH BERTA CÁCERES

by Daniel Fireside

Read the articles at cuslar.org

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