

A SOCIETY IN WHICH ALL PEOPLE FIT

An interview with Franz Hinkelammert

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Can you briefly describe the principal problems people complain about today in Central America?

I think that after achieving a certain kind of pacification in Central America - the conflicts and violence have, at least, been greatly reduced - one realises that this pacification has not solved the problems that were at the roots of these conflicts. Focusing again on these problems is probably more important today and ever before because it is the only way to avoid a return to violent conflict which has only recently been solved to some extent.

Obviously, a central problem is the growing exclusion of the population in societies that are experiencing economic growth, even if it is not very extensive. And I think that this leads to a progressive breakdown of social relations. That is, the pacification that was achieved has not led to pacification among humans. The real conflict among humans continues to be the same and in some cases has worsened. This, in some ways, comes from the exclusion of the majority of the population. But, on the other hand, the violence that has substituted the early form of violence is, in countries like El Salvador, worse than before. I think the number of violent deaths in El Salvador has almost doubled. But today it is a violence coming from the breakdown of social relations. And this breakdown has to do with the collapse of the commitments which a society normally has with its citizens. I think there is a complicity that allows for quick access to mafias, including the drug mafias, conflicts over drugs and new types of violence like the kidnaping industry. All of the phenomena are witnesses to a breakdown of

social relations, a breakdown that has its foundation in the inability or unwillingness of a society to integrate its excluded population, and its scant possibilities to do so because it is dominated from outside. The ability of Central American societies to determine their own economic and social policies is very limited. But they don't take advantage of what little room they have.

The other face of this problem is environmental destruction in Central America. This region may be the part of the globe that has been most destroyed in record speed. The forests, the air, the water, etc. So, the problems that were at the heart of revolutionary violence, which had not been focused upon in the pacification process, appear to be flourishing as never before. It is very difficult to predict what the future will hold.

Is it true that in Latin America we lack a model for new society, a utopia, an alternative? Or do we have one?

One has appeared precisely in Latin America. I think its most convincing proposal can be seen in the Chiapas rebellion where they started talking about "a society in which all people fit". This is something that is being repeated throughout Latin America. The proposal started with the Zapatistas in Chiapas. They started talking about a "Mexico in which there is a place for all Mexicans". Later, they improved this to a society in which all people fit. It needs to be a world in which there is room for everyone. For those, coming from an indigenous culture, the cultural problem of a space for everyone is very real. So, for there to be room for everyone there needs to be world in which there are many worlds.

I think this is the Latin American utopia today. It is a utopia that has been announced and is opening up. In many areas this is being seen as a new vision. And it truly is a new vision, different. It is not a classless society. It is not the same. It is not about a society capable of integrating all its members. This implies an answer to problems of class, of culture, etc. It is not the same structure as before that reduced everything to class struggle. I think that in many cases it includes class struggle, but is not concentrated on this. I also think that it is a utopia whose vision of liberation is quite clear. So, I would say that there is a Latin American utopia, which is expanding and is very creative.

We cannot create an alternative based on the past. We cannot and should not maintain models from the past. Many things from the past have collapsed. We need to find a proposal that corresponds to the desires of the people in the here and now. I think that this proposal needs to be elaborated and put into practice. It is a paradigmatic proposal, if you will, in the face of an exclusive society.

We have two questions related to historic socialism. In your opinion, what caused the collapse of socialism? And, in the second place, what can be taken from these "failed" models? What lessons can we learn?

I think that socialism always held the idea of a society with room for everyone. From this point a lot can be learned. There is a great deal of reflection from the socialist movements on this problem. But from here comes the difficulty of the problems with socialism: I think they were too unilaterally oriented, first on the problem of class. They identified too quickly a "society in which everyone fits" with a classless society and, furthermore, in a very hypocritical way. They presented a society with classes as a classless society! It is evident that in the socialist society there was a problem of class, but this wasn't the most profound problem. The problem of socialism cannot be reduced only to this. This is tied to the reduction of the economic problems in society, which is precisely the problem in a bourgeois society. The economic problem in a bourgeois society is always defined in these terms: "private property, not public property". In socialist societies this was inverted, "public property, not private property". I think many things, like grassroots creativity, were destroyed because of this. Private property in and of itself is not something that needs to be fought. All small-scale economies are based on private property. Small property and adequate property. It is not correct to define socialism only in terms of property, and that is what they did. That is why today when we talk about a society in which all people fit there needs to be a change. This means private property and markets in which all people have a space. It is truly a different vision.

You now have the problem of deciding where private property is better and where public property is better. But there isn't an a

priori decision. The bourgeois society created this a priori decision: we have to privatize, without thinking, without feelings. I think the problem with historic socialism was simply reversing this. Property needs to become public property, but the reasons weren't sufficient. In a pluralist vision, in a world in which there are many worlds, a process of discernment is needed. When should property be private? When should it be public? This is a question of wisdom, of policies, etc. I think the main problem was this principal.

Should there be only small companies or also large ones in view of globalisation and that we need to enter in international economy?

It depends. I think that there needs to be criteria, but a criteria cannot be short-sighted, it has to think of the future. It is also not about small or big. It depends on the function, the power exercised by the company, not if it has 10 or 1,000 workers. I don't think this is the problem. But there needs to be a new response in the face of the monster multinationals. Public property is not the answer. The problem of IBM or Mercedes Benz will not be solved if they are public. The intervention needs to be in the procedural mechanisms. We don't need a "Toyota" that is public property. It would be as bad as a private Toyota product. What we need is a world that avoids the need to have Toyotas. We are talking about massive monopolies that, if they are made public will help very much.

In your opinion, what is the contribution of Christians to the construction of a new society?

I don't believe in Christian politics. This corresponded to a past era and it turned out very badly. I think that there is an important contribution today. The left has collapsed, a collapse that is tragic. There was a defeat, but that does not explain the complete collapse of the left. It is a defeat of the soul. The external defeat has become an internal defeat. This has also occurred with Christians, but not as extensively. So, there can be a contribution on the moral front, to recreate a situation so that there can still be hope or, what was aptly called, combativeness. The secular left has been defeated in the soul much more than the other, but you can see the phenomenon on both sides. It was worse for those who had nowhere to base their hope. Here, there is a specific Christian

contribution in a time in which I think the liberation project has to be formulated within a society where there is a room for everyone. This is where the Christian focus comes in. There has always been a focus on liberation in the Christian tradition, although it has often been weak. But its orientation can be interpreted much better as "the society in which all people fit" instead of the earlier "society without classes". The classless society never convinced Christian circles because they were convinced that it had to do with limited human beings. "Total" projects never convinced Christians, but the focus of a world in which there is a room for everyone offers continuity to the Christian liberation currents. If you look for projects you are going to find among the fathers of the church, in Thomas Aquinas, that this proposal has a home while the "classless society" does not. Today, with the focus of transformation turned towards this point, the Christian finds more room. Christians can offer more because they have a tradition in this area.

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