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Theological Mirrors: Crickets and the Chirping of Historical Projects

Graham McGeoch^{*}

Mirrors are filled with people.
The invisible see us.
The forgotten recall us.
When we see ourselves, we see them.
When we turn away, do they?¹

Crickets speak to us of God as well as the stars.²

A bunk bed and a dormitory

If you were to lie on the bunk bed in the dormitory at the foot of the slope, just beside the banana trees and the football pitch at the MST's³ Florestan Fernandes School,⁴ you would hear a sound. By day, the words wafting carry dreams of *companheiras* and *companheiros*: resistance, struggle, utopia. There will be giggles and shouts; songs, too, with improvised instruments. If the signal is working, and the intelligence services allow it, a phone might ring or a computer drive whir as it downloads information from the internet.

If you were to lie on the bunk bed in the dormitory at the foot of the slope, just beside the banana trees and the football pitch at the MST's Florestan Fernandes School, you would hear a sound. By night, the chirping of crickets. The starlight, the moonlight and the lamplight do not disturb the slumbering humans and busy crickets. If you were to move, to raise yourself, you might disturb the slumber (and the snoring) of *companheiros* and *companheiras*. You would definitely halt the chirping of the crickets. So lie still, slumber even, and let the crickets chirp.

But not forever. For this is not the Tale of the Ever Never.⁵ There might well be a He of the night and a She of the day. But the dawn will come. Always, forever... and *companheiras* and *companheiros* will resist, struggle and dream. And crickets will chirp.

Dictatorship and theology

The Via Dutra is the highway that links Brazil's two largest cities: São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. It exits (if one can ever really exit) São Paulo northwest, cutting through Guarulhos and skirting the international airport. The Via Dutra not only links Brazil's two largest cities, it is named after President Eurico Gaspar Dutra (1946–51). President Dutra was a military leader and an integral part of President Getúlio Vargas's team that implemented the *Estado Novo* and the civilian dictatorship in the 1930s. The Via Dutra – a homage to an elected dictator – provides access to the MST's Florestan Fernandes School and to an International Meeting on Faith and Territory which is inspired by the pastoral action of the theology of liberation.

That a highway dedicated to the memory of an elected military dictator should provide access to the theology of liberation is, in Latin America, unsurprising. José Miguez Bonino, an Argentine church leader and theologian, traces the beginnings of the theology of liberation to gatherings of militant people from shanty towns, rural areas and industrial towns. The gatherings included peasants, workers and students, 'clearly committed to a purpose – the transformation of Latin American society'.⁶ In such gatherings, in the 1960s and 1970s, against a backdrop of developmentalism and dictatorship, Bonino reports the following exchange: "Who, then, is Jesus Christ?" "For us [the congregation immediately and spontaneously responded] Jesus Christ is Che Guevara".⁷

If you were to move from the bunk bed in the dormitory at the foot of the slope, just beside the banana trees and the football pitch at the MST's Florestan Fernandes School, by day, you would see Che Guevara. You would need to climb the slope, past the colourful mural of Frida Kahlo on the side of a house. You would make your way past the library, and the MST flag pole, and the refectory. You would turn right at the top of the driveway, not left, as you would do to exit the school, and you would find on the top of the hill a memorial stone to Che Guevara. It was erected in 2008, to mark the eightieth anniversary of his birth. On the stone, some words are painted: 'When the extraordinary becomes routine; that is the revolution'.

If you were to move from the bunk bed in the dormitory at the foot of the slope, just beside the banana trees and the football pitch at the MST's Florestan Fernandes School, by night, you would hear songs about Che Guevara. You would need to climb the slope, past the colourful mural of Frida Kahlo on the side of a house – which is no longer colourful in the darkness. You would make your way past the library, and you would stop at the MST flag pole. There would be a gathering of militant people. Can you see the starlight, the moonlight, the candlelight? The candles light and a circle of militant people gathers around the raised MST flag. Welcome to the MST *mística*! A red t-shirt chants, not chirps, above a candlelight: *o povo unido, jamais será vencido!* Other red t-shirts and red caps begin to chant, not chirp, under the moonlight: *Hasta siempre, Comandante*.⁸

*Vienes quemando la brisa
con soles de primavera
para plantar la bandera
con la luz de tu sonrisa.
Aquí se queda la clara,
la entrañable transparencia,
de tu querida presencia
Comandante Che Guevara.*

The candlelights move under the moonlight, flowing from the MST flag pole, past the library and down the slope. You will pass the colourful mural of Frida Kahlo on the side of the house – which is no longer colourful in the darkness. The red t-shirts and the red caps are not chanting, nor chirping, but singing. The candlelights move under the moonlight to an open field beneath the starlight. The gathering of militant people sings:

*Here, everything is clear,
the intimate transparency
of your precious presence,
Comandante Che Guevara.*⁹

The gathering of militant people sings. Frida Kahlo, on her colourful wall, looks on through the flickering candlelight, under the moonlight, beneath the starlight. The gathering of militant people hushes. They are not singing, or chanting, or chirping in the field under the starlight.

They are still. But with Frida Kahlo looking on, and Che Guevara present, everything is clear: by night, the crickets chirp.

Mirrors and theology I

Mirrors are filled with people. The invisible see us.¹⁰

Marcella Althaus-Reid, an indecent theologian¹¹ from Rosario, Argentina – the town of Che Guevara – writes that, ‘many years ago, Liberation Theologies started to become suspicious of ideologically determined definitions such as what theology is, or who is a theologian. It was the time when liberationists would say that the theologian was a factory worker, or a miner trying to discern the presence of God in a politically and economically oppressed community’.¹² The theology of liberation enabled the mirrors filled with people to reflect what had previously been invisible.

The theologians on the bunk bed in the dormitory at the foot of the slope, just beside the banana trees and the football pitch at the MST’s Florestan Fernandes School, that is reached by the Via Dutra – a homage to an elected dictator – is a reflection of the commitment of the theology of liberation. It is a gathering of invisible people, at least until the intelligence services sweep into life and allow a phone to ring or a computer drive to whir as it downloads information from the internet. The invisible people try to discern the presence of God – not the presence of the intelligence services – in a politically and economically oppressed community. For the structures of Latin America make people invisible. The mirrors filled with people, including the theology of liberation, reflect those invisible people who resist, struggle and speak of utopia. For the invisible see structural injustice and contest the space in the reflections of theology and mirrors. In Latin America, we might call the invisible *companheira* or *companheiro*. They will probably be called *militantes* by the visible people. But visible people do not always look for the invisible in the mirrors or in theology. For the invisible is the beginning of another possible world.

Developmentalism (at least in its ‘Alliance for Progress’ bent) and dictatorship have been replaced with discourses about sustainable development and democracy in Latin America. However, militant people still gather, clearly committed to a purpose. Faith and Territory used the MST’s 1990s theme: ‘occupy – resist – produce’. It told stories of direct action where militant people occupied territories (including

unused territories of others). It shared examples of resistance to mining companies, agro-industrial processes and large-scale infrastructure projects. It unveiled some of the complicity between big business and national and local governments in violating the human rights of militant people resisting the economic model that exploits and destroys the environment. And it offered examples of how militant people try to live justly with their neighbours and their environment.

This perspective, shared by invisible people – the theologians on the bunk beds in the dormitories at the foot of the slope, just beside the banana trees and the football pitch at the MST's Florestan Fernandes School, that is reached by the Via Dutra (a homage to an elected dictator) – reflects the praxis of liberation (the first moment of the theology of liberation). 'Commitment is the first step, theology is the second step.'¹³ The novelty with the theology of liberation is not that theology reflects on invisible people – some of the problematics around the 'option for the poor' and the ongoing difficulties in certain versions of so-called theology of liberation – but rather that the invisible reflection in the mirror, the invisible reflection of another possible world, is the theologians. The invisible theologians and invisible theology begin with experiences of God in invisible history.

Mirrors and theology II

Mirrors are filled with people... The forgotten recall us.¹⁴

Jung Mo Sung, a Brazilian theologian who works in Angela's Garden in São Paulo – a garden that is more dangerous than Iraq's Eden – writes:

...a difficult challenge: to give an account of one's theological path, showing the connection between our human trajectory and theological work. Giving an account of this path has to do with memory. And, in my opinion, theology also has very much to do with memory. It is in the name of the memory of the biblical people and the women and men who followed Jesus that we practice our theology. Memory is not a simple recounting of the facts, but always a reinterpretation and reorganization of the facts of the past from the perspective of the present in which we are living. It is always a creative exercise, yet, at the same time, we try to be faithful to the past.¹⁵

The capoeira master sat with his berimbau. He was barefooted, with his left trouser leg rolled up to just below the knee. 'I am received by my ancestors in this land. I feel their spirits in the earth. They speak to me.' He began to play:

*Zumbi Zumbi olha Zumbi
Zumbi Zumbi olha Zumbi
Palmares cresce sem parar
Palmares cresce sem parar*

*Lavoura movambo cobrem a região
Herdeiro de Ganga Zumba nasceu
Com destino traçado na suas maos
Bravo e forte guerrero
Deus da guerra, se fez na terra
A lenda de um heroi*

Zumbi Zumbi...

Zumbi dos Palmares conjures the forgotten who recall us. The capoeira master, with his berimbau, his bare feet resting on the earth, and his left trouser leg rolled up to just below the knee is from Rio Grande do Sul. Rio Grande do Sul was settled by the Germans. It is the European part of Brazil. Or so the powerful tell us, to help us to forget. It does not have capoeira masters. It does not have capoeira masters with a berimbau, sat barefooted, and a trouser leg rolled up to just below the knee. It does not have ancestors who speak to us through the earth. But the berimbau plays... and Zumbi (the forgotten) recalls us.

Palmares grows relentlessly

*Movambo plantation covers the region
Heir of Ganga Zumba was born
With destiny in his hands
Brave and strong warrior
God of war has made on earth
The legend of a hero¹⁶*

And even the legend of a heroine? For remember, don't just recount the facts... reinterpret and reorganize the past from the perspective of the present in which we are living. Do you remember that you have seen

Che Guevara? You had to climb the slope, past the colourful mural of Frida Kahlo on the side of a house. You had made your way past the library, and the MST flag pole, and the refectory. You turned right at the top of the driveway, not left, as you would do to exit the school, and you found on the top of the hill not a city but a memorial stone to Che Guevara: 'When the extraordinary becomes routine; that is the revolution'.

Do you remember the candlelight and a circle of militant people gathered around the raised MST flag: the MST *mística*? Red t-shirts chanting, not chirping, above a candlelight: *o povo unido, jamais será vencido!* Other red t-shirts and red caps chanting, not chirping, under the moonlight: *Hasta siempre, Comandante*.

*Vienes quemando la brisa
con soles de primavera
para plantar la bandera
con la luz de tu sonrisa.
Aquí se queda la clara,
la entrañable transparencia,
de tu querida presencia
Comandante Che Guevara.*

The candlelights moved under the moonlight, flowing from the MST flag pole, past the library and down the slope. You passed the colourful mural of Frida Kahlo on the side of the house – which is no longer colourful in the darkness. Did you remember Frida Kahlo? Do you remember the red braid in her hair? Or the red flower on her blue dress? The red t-shirts and the red caps are not chanting, nor chirping, but singing. The candlelights move under the moonlight to an open field beneath the starlight. The gathering of militant people sings:

*Here, everything is clear,
the intimate transparency,
of your precious presence,
Comandante Che Guevara*

The gathering of militant people sings. Frida Kahlo, with her red hair braid and her red flowers on her blue dress, on her colourful wall, looks on through the flickering candlelight, under the moonlight, beneath the starlight. Frida Kahlo looks on, just as Che Guevara has always looked on. But Frida Kahlo was sometimes forgotten. But now she regards us

and recalls us. She can also pass through and into our bodies.¹⁷ Her ambiguities are a creative exercise in our memories. The forgotten recall us and penetrate our memories and bodies.

Mirrors and theology III

Mirrors are filled with people... When we see ourselves, we see them. When we turn away, do they?¹⁸

*Vienes quemando la brisa
con soles de primavera
para plantar la bandera
con la luz de tu sonrisa.
Aquí se queda la clara,
la entrañable transparencia,
de tu querida presencia
Comandante Che Guevara.*

Welcome to the MST *mística*! The candlelights move under the moonlight, flowing from the MST flag pole, past the library and down the slope. You pass the colourful mural of Frida Kahlo on the side of the house – which is no longer colourful in the darkness. The red t-shirts and the red caps are not chanting, nor chirping, but singing. The candlelights move under the moonlight to an open field beneath the starlight. The gathering of militant people and invisible theologians sings.

Can you see the starlight, the moonlight, the candlelight? Can you see the dreams of *companheiras* and *companheiros*? Can you see the resistance, struggle, utopia? You will hear the giggles and shouts; songs, too, with improvised instruments:

*Zumbi Zumbi olha Zumbi
Palmares cresce sem parar*

If the signal is working, and the intelligence services allow it, a phone might ring or a computer drive whirl as it downloads information from the internet. The capoeira master sings, with his bare feet and his left trouser leg rolled up to just below the knee. Does he sing with the He of the night or the She of the day? Red t-shirts and red caps are chanting, not chirping. Other red t-shirts and red caps are not chanting, nor chirping, but singing. They sing songs invisible and forgotten, intoning

Zumbi dos Palmares and Che Guevara. While on her colourful wall, Frida Kahlo, with her red hair braid and her red flowers on her blue dress, looks on through the flickering candlelight, under the moonlight, beneath the starlight. Frida Kahlo looks on with the He of the night and the She of the day. Starlight, daylight, she moonlights. For this is not the Tale of the Ever Never. And crickets will chirp.

Next steps

If you were to leave the bunk bed in the dormitory at the foot of the slope, just beside the banana trees and the football pitch at the MST's Florestan Fernandes School, you would hear a sound. By night, the chirping of crickets. The starlight, the moonlight and the lamplight do not disturb the slumbering humans and busy crickets. If you were to move, to raise yourself, you might begin to chant, not chirp. If you were to leave the bunk bed, you might begin to sing, not chant nor chirp.

If you were to leave the bunk bed in the dormitory at the foot of the slope, just beside the banana trees and the football pitch at the MST's Florestan Fernandes School, you would hear a sound. By day, the words wafting carry dreams of *companheiras* and *companheiros*: resistance, struggle, utopia. There will be giggles and shouts; songs, too, with improvised instruments intoning Zumbi dos Palmares and Che Guevara. If the signal is working, and the intelligence services allow it, a phone might ring or a computer drive whir as it downloads information from the internet. And Frida Kahlo will look on.

There is no if: you will leave the bunk bed in the dormitory at the foot of the slope, just beside the banana trees and the football pitch at the MST's Florestan Fernandes School. You will climb the slope, past the colourful mural of Frida Kahlo on the side of a house. You will make your way past the library, and the MST flag pole, and the refectory. You will turn left, not right, at the top of the driveway. You will not see a memorial stone to Che Guevara, erected in 2008, to mark the eightieth anniversary of the birth of Che. You will, however, recall the words painted on the stone: 'When the extraordinary becomes routine; that is the revolution'.

You turn left at the top of the slope, to exit the school. You turn away from the school – from *companheiras* and *companheiros*, from Che Guevara and Frida Kahlo, from militant people and invisible theologians, from chanting, singing and chirping. Or do you? The Via Dutra awaits – the homage to the elected dictator – linking Brazil's two

largest cities: São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. You enter (if one can ever really enter) São Paulo, travelling southeast, skirting the international airport and cutting through Guarulhos. You turn away towards the pastoral action of the theology of liberation. And the crickets chirp.

Notes

- * Graham McGeoch is a parish minister in the Church of Scotland. He has worked with the church in Africa, Europe and Latin America.
- 1 Eduardo Galeano, *Mirrors: Stories of Almost Everyone* (London: Portobello Books, 2010), 1.
- 2 Ernesto Cardenal, "Source," in *Love* (London: Search Press, 1988), 81.
- 3 The Landless Workers' Movement (MST) is one of the largest social movements in the world. It has been at the forefront of struggle for agrarian reform in Brazil since the 1980s.
- 4 Florestan Fernandes taught sociology at the University of São Paulo. He lived in exile during the military dictatorship in Brazil. He was a founder of the Workers' Party and a supporter of the MST.
- 5 Sub-Comandante Marcos tells 'The Tales of Many Others' in the Lacandon Jungle, Chiapas, Mexico. Juana Ponce de Leon, *Our Word is Our Weapon: Selected Writings* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2001).
- 6 Jose Miguez Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), xxii.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 2.
- 8 Carlos Puebla, *Hasta Siempre* (1965). Song and lyrics.
- 9 Author's translation.
- 10 Galeano, 2010, 1.
- 11 Marcella Althaus-Reid describes 'indecent theology' as 'a theological project that would like to challenge... in a style of theology which becomes truly *marginal*, that is, from the margins of sexual and economic exclusion, without trying to adapt (or adopt) those marginal ways of thinking, feelings and experiences to discourses of authority'. Marcella Althaus-Reid, *From Feminist Theology to Indecent Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2004), 4.
- 12 Marcella Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God* (London: Routledge, 2003), 2.
- 13 Juan-Luis Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1982), 81.
- 14 Galeano, 2010, 1.
- 15 Jung Mo Sung, *The Subject, Capitalism and Religion: Horizons of Hope in Complex Societies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2011), 12.
- 16 Author's translation.
- 17 André Sidnei Musskopf, *Via(da)gens teológicas: itinerários para uma teologia queer no Brasil* (São Paulo: Fonte Editorial, 2012), 436.
- 18 Galeano, 2010, 1.