

Ignacio Ellacuría and the Self-Reflection of Critical Theory

José Manuel Romero Cuevas

Universidad de Alcalá de Henares

Madrid, Spain

Abstract

This paper pretends to explain a central argument in Ellacuría's theoretical work: To him, the theorist has to opt for "the place-that-gives-truth". I will analyze the theoretical, moral and political meaning of this thesis and its implications for the status of Ellacuría's own work. Moreover I want to put this approach in dialogue with reflections from Hermeneutics and Critical Theory on the necessity of a theoretical-philosophical activity, basic for self-reflection. The dialogue with these contemporary philosophical traditions will make it possible to situate Ellacuría's intellectual work in the theoretical debates of the 20th century.

Resumen

Este artículo pretende explicar un argumento central en el trabajo teórico de Ellacuría: para él, el teórico debe optar por "el lugar que da la verdad". Analizaré el significado teórico, moral y político de esta tesis y sus implicaciones para el estado del propio trabajo de Ellacuría. Además, quiero poner este enfoque en diálogo con las reflexiones de la hermenéutica y la teoría crítica sobre la necesidad de una actividad teórico-filosófica, básica para la autorreflexión. El diálogo con estas tradiciones filosóficas contemporáneas permitirá situar el trabajo intelectual de Ellacuría en los debates teóricos del siglo XX.

1. A critical theory of historical reality?

It may seem surprising that the title of this paper links the theologian and philosopher Ignacio Ellacuría with the idea of critical theory¹. As well as being a follower of the Spanish philosopher Xavier Zubiri in his philosophical work, he was also influenced by Hegel, which he read from a materialist perspective, and Marx, who he saw not only as a philosopher but also as a social critic, with significant points in common with an author like E. Bloch.² Indeed, his unfinished work *Filosofía de la realidad histórica* [*Philosophy of Historical Reality*], which was written in the mid-1970s and published after his death,³ is

specifically designed as a type of intramundane metaphysics, which takes what Ellacuría called *historical reality* as its subject. Ellacuría defines it as "the radical reality (...) in which all other realities lie".⁴ For Ellacuría the historical reality is the *reality mediated by the historical praxis* and it is therefore the "supreme manifestation of reality"⁵, in that "it is reality showing its richest potentialities and possibilities".⁶ In short, "*historical reality* means the totality of reality, as it exists unitarily in its highest qualitative form, and that specific form of reality that is history, which gives us not only the highest form of reality, but also the open field of the maximum possibilities of the real."⁷

Ellacuría indeed raises speculative considerations on the nature of reality, by describing the mobility characteristic of historical reality, as mentioned above, as *praxis*: “The entire dynamic of historical reality is what has to be understood as *praxis*. This *praxis* is an immanent active totality, because its action and its result are all within the same totality in a process, which it configures and directs in its process. Seen in this light, the *praxis* has many forms, for both the part and the whole, which is its closest subject in each case, and for the mode of action and the outcome it creates. However, the activity of historical reality is ultimately the *praxis*, understood as a dynamic whole.”⁸ This metaphysics of historical reality, with all its speculative ambition, is clearly convergent with Bloch’s ontological considerations, as reflected in his works including *Subject-Object* and *The Principle of Hope* - works which Ellacuría had read.⁹ It is also clear that speculation of this nature has no discernible links with the tradition of critical theory from Max Horkheimer to Jürgen Habermas.

2. The need of a self-reflection of philosophy

However, in the light of his philosophical articles of the 1970s and 1980s, Ellacuría engages in a clear process of theoretical self-clarification, which in my opinion converges at important points with the reflections of Horkheimer in the 1930s on the status of critical theory, and enables us to reconsider the meaning of Ellacuría’s ideas about the metaphysics of historical reality.

This process of self-clarification reached its zenith in his article “The liberating function of philosophy,” in 1985, in which Ellacuría sought to make his own personal contribution to the foundations of Latin American liberation philosophy. In this article, Ellacuría considers the question of the conditions that must be met by the philosophy that takes the liberation of “the popular masses who live in a secular state of oppression-repression” as the

“basic horizon” of its “philosophical work”.¹⁰ The prerequisite for this philosophy, which is driven by an interest in liberation, is that this type of philosophy consciously and reflectively recovers “its role as the appropriate theoretical moment of the appropriate historical *praxis*”,¹¹ i.e. it “has to ask itself what it represents within the social *praxis* as a whole”.¹²

This does not entail a violation of the purely theoretical nature of philosophy, because despite the “relative autonomy of philosophical thought”¹³, which Ellacuría acknowledges and which prevents philosophy from allowing itself to be channelled by the existing political praxis without any mediation, the fact of the matter is that philosophy is a *situated* activity: “The philosopher (...) philosophizes based on his own situation, and now more than ever, this situation is a public and political situation.”¹⁴ It is this situated character that defines “the intrinsic political character of any attempt at philosophy.”¹⁵ Indeed, “philosophy, because it is situated historically, is politicized, whether we like it or not.”¹⁶ In other words, “the due politicization of philosophy would at its root consist of making philosophizing an effective thought based on the most concrete situation on top of the most complete and concrete situation.”¹⁷ Philosophy should therefore be based on the most concrete real situation. However, what is that situation?

At this point, Ellacuría introduces the thesis that the situation or *place* where philosophizing starts is a reflexive act of choice by each thinker in each case: the thinker is doomed to *choose* the place that appears to be the most appropriate starting point for philosophical work (I will discuss why I think this characterization is in principle problematic later, and propose an alternative formulation for it). According to Ellacuría, this choice of the place for philosophizing will indeed be decisive for the type of philosophy to be undertaken: “This situating oneself in one place or another when philosophizing is one of the acts that contributes most to the differentiation of philosophies, from both an ethi-

cal standpoint and also from a theoretical point of view.”¹⁸

As regards a philosophy driven by interest in liberation, Ellacuría says that it is reasonable to situate oneself in the field of “principal contradiction” regarding the existing order of domination and oppression.¹⁹ This placing oneself in the place in the central contradiction *vis-a-vis* the existing order has ethical and political implications as well as basic theoretical and epistemological implications: “We must be in the place of historical truth and in the place of true liberation, not only to be effective in the task of liberation, but also to be true in it, and even in philosophy itself.”²⁰ When determining the place of philosophy itself, theoretical and ethical considerations are therefore involved: “The determination of the place-that-gives-truth has a moment of theoretical insight in each case, but also has a moment of enlightened choice. (...) The optional moment, which seeks that place-that-gives-truth and makes truth, (...) must be (...) enlightened (...) in a first step, by an ethical evaluation that makes (...) the injustice and unfreedom that occur in our situation [Latin America, JMR] as primary facts, a basic point of reference, and are illuminated in a second step by the theoretical assessment that sees injustice and unfreedom as one of the fundamental replications of the truth.”²¹

The philosopher must choose what Ellacuría significantly called the place-that-gives-truth as a place from which to philosophize. In that choice, the theoretical movement has to “return to present history in a critical way” to determine its place there.²² In this regard, history appears here as the “teacher of truth.”²³ History is the teacher of truth in two ways: first, according to the metaphysics of Ellacuría’s historical reality, because reality in its fullest, highest and in this sense, truest form, is shown in history. Second, because it is by referring to real history, i.e., by historicizing it, namely, by referring “to what really happens”²⁴, that theoretical

formulations show “their degree of truth and reality.”²⁵

So what does Ellacuría believe that this place-that-gives-truth is, that place that embodies the utmost contradiction of the existing order? This place consists of “the dispossessed, the wronged and the suffering”,²⁶ whom he calls “the crucified of the earth, who are the vast majority of humanity, stripped of all human dignity (...) because of the deprivation and oppression to which they are subjected.”²⁷ In short, it is the “place of the oppressed.”²⁸ According to Ellacuría, the choice of this place as a place to philosophize may be based on ethical and theological foundations. It may also have a theoretical basis: “The theoretical foundation of this choice is based on who the majority are and its objective reality is the appropriate place to appreciate the truth or falsity of the system in question.”²⁹

3. The appropriation of the hermeneutical situation

The centrality of the place where the philosophy is located is reflected in Ellacuría’s statement that “the place from where one philosophizes (...) determines the main questions, the appropriate categories and ultimately, the horizon of all philosophical work.”³⁰ Indeed, this description of the place for philosophizing has some significant similarities with the concept of the hermeneutic situation. As we know, this concept was central to the hermeneutics of existence of Heidegger’s early work: “The real content of any interpretation, i.e. the thematic object in the way it has been interpreted, can only be achieved directly and properly displayed when the corresponding hermeneutic position on which all interpretation depends is accessible in a sufficiently clear way. Any interpretation is deployed, depending on its area of reality and its claim to cognition, within the following coordinates: 1) a *perspective* that more or less explicitly appropriate and fixed; 2) a subsequent

gaze direction, in which the “like-something” is determining according to which the object of interpretation is previously understood and the “to-where” should be interpreted by this same object; 3) a *horizon gaze* defined by the focus and the direction of gaze, within which the corresponding claim to objectivity of any interpretation moves.”³¹

The early work of H. Marcuse, influenced by Heidegger’s concept, also considered what he called “the fundamental situation of Marxism” and conceived of the basic situation of an investigation as “the point from which the methodology of investigation and its conceptualisation take their origin and their meaning.”³² With reflections on the place of philosophizing, Ellacuría is posing a problem that had already been formulated and resolved in a certain way by the hermeneutic tradition. Ellacuría in fact aims to make philosophy undertake a peculiar form of self-reflection on where it is located in each case, and on the location that it adopts as a starting point for philosophizing.

In the 1973 epilogue to *Knowledge and Human Interests*, J. Habermas made a distinction between two concepts of self-reflection: “on the one hand, the reflexion on the conditions of the potential abilities of a knowing, speaking and acting subject as such; on the other hand, the reflexion upon unconsciously produced constraints to which a determinate subject (...) succumbs in its process of self-formation.”³³ If this first type of reflection “has also taken the shape of a rational reconstruction of generative rules and cognitive schemata,” in the second sense it has taken the form of “a critical dissolution of subjectively constituted pseudo-objectivity.”³⁴ In short, Habermas conceives of self-reflection based on two different models: the rational reconstruction model and the (self-) criticism model. However, in Ellacuría we find that a different type of self-reflection is required - a self-reflection that was relevant to the early work of Habermas, as will be discussed below, before his shift towards the granting of theoretical centrality

to rational reconstructions in the 1970s. Ellacuría in fact demands what has been termed *hermeneutic self-reflection* for philosophy.³⁵

In Heidegger’s work, hermeneutic self-reflection can be considered “the clarification of the hermeneutic situation”: “The possible realization of interpretation and understanding, and the subsequent appropriation of the object, becomes evident as from the perspective of the three coordinates mentioned above, the situation in which and for which an interpretation is made is clarified. The corresponding hermeneutics of the situation must make the situation transparent and keep it in mind, as a hermeneutic situation, from the beginning of the interpretation.”³⁶

However, also in Horkheimer, during the 1930s, and without a trace of any influence or direct link to Heideggerian thought, critical theory is defined by its self-reflection on what might be called its own initial hermeneutic situation. In “Remarks on philosophical anthropology” (1935), he claims that materialist theory should be described as a true hermeneutic reflection, namely, a reflection on what could strictly be called its initial hermeneutic: “materialism understands the structure of any theory, especially its own, as dependent on certain interests and values. (...) Reflection on the following is part of the self-understanding of a doctrine: even in the acts of generalization that led to its fundamental concepts (...) the situation of life, that is, certain interests, are expressed and these determine the direction of thoughts.”³⁷ At this point, Horkheimer is referring to what he calls the “dialectical requirement”, namely the requirement that “awareness of one’s social role has its place in thoughts,” i.e. “the awareness of historicity itself”, which translates to “becoming conscious in detail of the respective nexus of theory and practice.”³⁸ In 1937, this subject was successfully formulated synthetically: “critical theory pursues in a fully conscious manner, in the formation of its categories and at all stages of its development, interest in

the rational organization of human activity.”³⁹

This problem is also discernible in the work of Habermas in the early 1960s, in which he explicitly appropriated elements of the philosophical approach of *Truth and Method*, such as categories of interpretation and the hermeneutic circle. Habermas even described critical theory as a “dialectical interpretation,” which would define Gadamer’s notion of hermeneutic reflection in materialistic terms, as the appropriation of the interpreter’s initial hermeneutic situation: “The dialectical interpretation comprehends the knowing subject in terms of the relations of social praxis, in terms of its position, both within the process of social labour and the process of enlightening the political forces about their own goals”. According to Horkheimer, this double reflection characterizes “critical” as opposed to ‘traditional’ theory.”⁴⁰ In other words, it defines critical theory by performing a hermeneutic reflection on its initial socio-political situation, which constitutes its perspective and interested means of access to social reality. This completely sets it apart from traditional critical theory, which maintains an attitude free of reflection regarding the perspective from which it considers reality, and consequently how it is a part of the social praxis.

4. Theoretical implications of a radicalized hermeneutical self-reflection

The hermeneutic self-reflection invoked by Ellacuría for philosophy interested in liberation naturally has clear implications for his own philosophical work. Based on the level of self-clarification achieved in the mid-1980s, Ellacuría may well have had to revise the meaning and status of his work on the metaphysics of historical reality written in the previous decade. In order to avoid any objectivist misunderstanding, this work should have made clear that it intended to address reality from a particular hermeneutic situ-

ation, in which concern for the liberation of the world’s oppressed peoples plays a central role. It is from this hermeneutic starting point, which can clearly be characterized in political-moral terms, that the metaphysics of historical reality gains access to its object and establishes its fundamental concepts.

However, this does not only have implications for a review of the status of the Ellacuría’s theoretical output. From my point of view, it also has implications for the representatives of critical theory. It has been contended—rightly—that members of the first generation of critical theory, and Horkheimer and Adorno in particular, remained within the framework defined by Western Europe and the United States in their intellectual work (unlike Marcuse, who especially from the 1960s onwards, consistently began a careful consideration of the reality of the world that was colonized, subjugated and exploited by the metropolis). This limitation of Horkheimer and Adorno has no methodological or theoretical source (indeed, it could be argued that this limitation is the result of an inconsistency regarding the claim of self-reflexive critical theory as formulated by Horkheimer). Instead, it is a Eurocentric cultural prejudice; namely, a traditional view of culture and history that prioritizes the place represented in this troubled imagination as “the West”.⁴¹

For Habermas, the situation is perhaps more complex. From the 1970s, Habermas shifted toward a post-hermeneutic conception of the theory, and understood it in terms of rational reconstruction, which would have the status of “pure knowledge.”⁴² As a result, in his later theoretical work, as reflected in his crowning volume *The Theory of Communicative Action*, he distanced himself from the relevance and importance of a consistent reflection on the place where theorizing takes place, which had problematic for the formulation of his theory of modernity. This was explicitly developed based on the course of the Western European countries,

aimed to use them to define the standard of modernization for other countries.⁴³ This same problem is apparent in the work of A. Honneth, and especially in his recent *Das Recht der Freiheit*, which has no difficulty in using Western European societies as the object of its immanent social analysis, and aims to explain the institutionalized policy parameters that underpin the concept of justice which applies to us.⁴⁴ Ellacuría's demand that theoretical work should reflect its place at the global level therefore seems more relevant than ever. This is clearly an outstanding task for the representatives that currently have the highest profile from an institutional perspective of critical theory.

It is due to this call for the theory's self-reflection as regards its main interest, its place within current conflicts and its socio-political role and effectiveness, that the figure of Ellacuría deserves to be part of critical thinking, not only of the twentieth century or even of Western Marxism, but indeed within the tradition that characterizes that self-reflection as the defining core of critical theory.

I would like to make a final comment on the Ellacuría's description of the phi-

losopher's determination of the place-that-gives-truth as possessing a "moment of choice". From my point of view, we must start from the assumption that the critical thinker is part of a certain emancipatory tradition. His self-reflection on his work does not as a result consist of choosing the place from which to philosophize; that is an abstract representation of how a thinker or a subject in general assumes a position. Instead, I believe that this self-reflection consists of making the link to reflective emancipatory tradition of which his work is in fact a part, which implies a relationship that is critical of tradition mediated by reflection. Based on a formulation by Habermas, the *critical recollection of the tradition* of efforts and struggles for emancipation can be said to be inherent in the self-reflection of the critical theorist.⁴⁵ Consideration of how his work is embedded in a discontinuous tradition, which has accumulated few successes and many failures, of efforts aimed at critical understanding and a transformation of what exists into a liberating direction therefore plays a central role in the critical theorist's hermeneutic self-reflection.

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Notes

- ¹ But see, for example, the interesting work of Juan A. Nicolás "Liberation Philosophy as Critique: Ellacuría", in *The Xavier Zubiri Review*, Vol. 11, 2009, pp. 107-118. See also my article "Humanism, History and Criticism in Ignacio Ellacuría", in *The Xavier Zubiri Review*, Vol. 10, 2008, pp. 5-15.
- ² See the references to E. Bloch in I. Ellacuría, *Cursos universitarios*, San Salvador, UCA Editores, 2009, pp. 283, 309, 311 and 313. See also J.J. Tamayo and L. Alvarenga, "Hacia una lectura pluridimensional de Ignacio Ellacuría", en J.J. Tamayo and L. Alvarenga, *Ignacio Ellacuría. Utopía y teoría crítica*, Valencia, Tirant Humanidades, 2014, pp. 12-17.
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- ⁴ I. Ellacuría, *Veinte años de historia en El Salvador (1969-1989). Escritos políticos*, San Salvador, UCA Editores, 1993, vol. I, p. 119.
- ⁵ Ellacuría, *Veinte años de historia en El Salvador (1969-1989). Escritos políticos*, ed. cit., vol. I, p. 85.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 86.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 87.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 119. See also *ibid.*, p. 89. About this subject, see H. Samour, *Voluntad de liberación. La filosofía de Ignacio Ellacuría*, Granada, Comares, 2003.
- ⁹ See E. Bloch, *Subjekt-Objekt*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1985 and *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1982, 3 volumes.
- ¹⁰ Ellacuría, *Veinte años de historia en El Salvador (1969-1989). Escritos políticos*, ed. cit., vol. I, p. 94.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 112.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 113.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 110.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 49.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 52.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 60.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 53.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 115.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*
- ²¹ *Ibid.*
- ²² *Ibid.*
- ²³ *Ibid.*
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 18.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 112.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 117.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 39.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

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- ³¹ M. Heidegger, *Phänomenologische Interpretationen zu Aristoteles*, Ditzingen, Reclam, 2003.
- ³² H. Marcuse, *Schriften*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1978, vol. 1.
- ³³ J. Habermas, *Erkenntnis und Interesse*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1973.
- ³⁴ Ibid.
- ³⁵ See J. Habermas, *Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1985.
- ³⁶ Heidegger, *Phänomenologische Interpretationen zu Aristoteles*, ed. cit.
- ³⁷ M. Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Frankfurt am Main, Fischer Verlag, 1988, vol. 3.
- ³⁸ Ibid.
- ³⁹ M. Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. cit., vol. 4.
- ⁴⁰ J. Habermas, *Theorie und Praxis*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1978.
- ⁴¹ On all the above, see R. Fornet-Betancourt, *La transformación intercultural de la filosofía*, Bilbao, Desclée de Brouwer, 2001.
- ⁴² See Habermas, *Theorie und Praxis* and *Erkenntnis und Interesse*.
- ⁴³ See J. Habermas, *Theorie des Kommunikativen Handelns*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1981, especially vol. II.
- ⁴⁴ See A. Honneth, *Das Recht der Freiheit*, Berlin, Suhrkamp, 2011.
- ⁴⁵ See J. Habermas, *Zur Rekonstruktion des Historischen Materialismus*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1976.