Faith in Civil Society
Religious Actors as Drivers of Change

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Capacity infrastructure in Brazil: 
Legacies of participation in Christian base communities

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Soon after it was launched within Catholic ranks, as an historic necessity in the light of prevalent inequalities around the world, liberation theology reached faraway corners of the planet in the form of Christian Base Communities (CEBs, after their Portuguese name). These prayer groups were set up in churches to follow guidelines that centred on three basic principles: individual faith, awareness of injustice and oppressive situations, and action to revert such oppression. The discussions that ensued within each of these groups helped thousands of people grow aware of their historical circumstances, and become active agents to change them. In Latin America, however, these groups have not altered a regional configuration that is still one of the most unequal in the world. The CEB development in each nation-state differed due to a variety of reasons, among them the support from bishops and the Catholic hierarchy. Brazil has been recognised as one of the countries where CEBs flourished. It is suggested here that among their legacies in the South American giant, a ‘capacity infrastructure’ has been of instrumental importance to numerous leaders, who moved on to work in civil society organisations. The implication of this legacy is an enhancement of Brazil’s democratisation, through the professionalisation of civil society organisations that has taken place since the 1980s (Smith 1994; Cavendish 1994).

The term ‘capacity infrastructure’ is used here to designate the relational character (‘infrastructure’) of acquired skills (‘capacities’), which makes them easy to apply in political engagements. CEBs are religious organisations, but their design includes an enhancement of conscientisation (Freire 1993). “What begins as a spiritual insight can easily have conse-
quences intentional and unintentional in the world of public discourse and collective decision-making” (Smith 1994, p 122). By instilling a call to principled action in participants, CEBs tend to stimulate the ethical imagination (Moore 2011, p 15). The ‘capacity infrastructure’ may not have been intended, but in hindsight appears to have been crucial for the burgeoning of civil society organisations. There is widespread agreement about the positive influence of CEBs to Brazil’s democratisation.

Liberation theology and social change

As a theological project, liberation theology sought “an interpretation of Christian faith through the poor’s suffering” (Berryman 1987, p 4), as many previous movements within the Catholic Church have done throughout history. With the establishment of CEBs, the proponents of liberation theology strove for a practical arrangement to engage believers.

Each CEB consists of between 20 and 70 members, and meets at a local parish church or community centre. The group dedicates its time to prayer, reading of the Bible, discussing the reality around them, and debating in which ways they can make a difference to their community. The boom of CEBs in Brazil took place in the 70s. Perhaps the dictatorship that lasted from 1964 to 1985 helped make its message more relevant than it would otherwise have been. Civic life was stifled, as all independent associations were banned. CEBs, which would be officially described as prayer groups, offered an opportunity for people to come together. The number of CEBs in the country grew from 40,000 in 1974 to 80,000 in the early 1980s, and it reached 100,000 by 1984 (Burdick 1993, p 2; Dawson 2007, pp 150, 152). The number is still today in the tens of thousands, despite the Vatican’s discouragement and criticisms since the 1980s.

The aim of CEBs can be seen as an effort to encourage individuals to think critically about the circumstances that make their lives difficult, and to promote their engagement with their community. It is similar to the development industry’s concept of ‘empowerment’. Its support in theological debates meant a high degree of legitimisation.1

The analysis that follows builds on reflections about affectivity in socio-cultural changes through the use of the ethical imagination (Moore
Liberation theology relied on a combination of renewal in Catholic spirituality and engagement with a widespread aspiration for social change. This linked their epistemology of praxis to a sense of agency and empowerment (Bennett 2007; Boff 1987; Graham 2002). Its pedagogical character is geared to a progressive agenda in the promotion of: critical thought (through the analysis of social circumstances); reflexivity (through a process of locating their own lives within a wider set of circumstances); and agency (through the encouragement to do something to stop injustice or exploitation). The fact that this takes place within a community prayer group offers the opportunity to learn through affective relations. The combination of faith and personal relations with a critical outlook on shared situations of injustice or exploitation may lead to a stronger sense of urgency to act.

The CEB model of ‘capacity infrastructure’

The ‘capacity infrastructure’ referred to in this paper allows to gear the set of skills learned through participation in CEBs into a wider field of ideas and action. The activists I met who had taken part in CEBs had a peculiar outlook on processes to follow in order to tackle problems. Thus, the ‘capacity infrastructure’ comprises: 1) a networking horizon, 2) a processual approach, and 3) a pedagogical cycle. These characteristics make it different to ‘social capital’, which refers more to the value of existing networks (Portes 1998, p 2).

The networking horizon refers to an awareness of the advantages of interconnected action. Such appreciation may lead individuals to think of potential webs that were previously non-existent. Although in our ‘information society’, networks have become the “new organisational logic” (Castells 2010, p 164), the capacity referred to here was innovative, when it happened in the ’70s. Since 1975, there have been meetings among representatives from local CEBs from all over Brazil (Dawson 2007, p 150). These gatherings have formed networks that aid the flow of information about achievements and struggles. As a trend of clustering progressive organisations, it preceded the massive wave of networking among NGOs and social movements that started in the ’80s throughout the world (Boli and Thomas 1999). Furthermore, the features of these webs ensured a
long-lasting commitment and engagement with social issues. First of all, they had as a legitimating principle a shared sense of the transcendental. Secondly, the extended faith community encouraged ideological bonds and the idea of action as a response to perceived injustice and exploitation.

The *processual approach* refers to an awareness of time scales needed to exert changes in difficult situations. The collective reading of the Bible, and dialogues on the history of Christianity and of Brazil provide for reflection over long cycles in social conditions and changes. The political scope of liberation theology enhances the idea of individual agency or ‘empowerment’ through both prayer and debate. Several authors have emphasised how CEB participants acquire organisational, communication and leadership skills (Smith 1994, p 123). Such skills are best used with a sense of timing and an awareness of time scales.

The *pedagogical cycle* refers to an embedded character of CEBs to help the oppressed acquire skills and knowledge that would help them escape injustice or exploitation (Gutiérrez 1973). The regular meetings, debates and dialogues were to become a habit that helped individuals to appropriate reflections and capacities in order for them to incorporate them into their practice. This in turn would mark how to frame new strategies. All three aspects of the ‘capacity infrastructure’ are interrelated and allow for a long-term transformation of attitudes and thus of situations.

**Empowering social change**

This CEB legacy appears to have permeated Brazilian civil society organisations, aiding in their strengthening over the last few decades. The assertion is based on a number of observations, interviews, and an analysis of the literature, but was not at the centre of our project and needs to be explored in further research. If it did occur, however, it took place at a crucial time for Brazil. Resistance to the dictatorship gained strength through CEBs, which also spurred many different associations and other groups, including the Workers’ Party.

It is impossible to overstate the importance of the Catholic church’s role in providing space for interaction and organization, a communications
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Liberation theology network, and human rights advocacy during the most difficult years of the authoritarian period (Keck 1992, p 47).

Once the dictatorship fell and the transition to democratic governance started, the dense web of civil society organisations advocated for a thorough process in drafting the new constitution (Abers 2000). The resulting constitution, approved in 1988, has been called the ‘citizen constitution’ because of its strong support for citizen and civil society organisations involvement in government or public issues (Holston 2008, p 107).

The political moment in which CEBs started was marked by progressive ideas within the Catholic Church. “Clearly, during the ’60s, the movement within the Roman Catholic Church was evident in addressing human-rights violations and economic injustice” (Kirylo 2001, p 61). There was increasing public debate about the oppression of the poorest populations in Latin America and other continents. Liberation theology’s precedents are to be found among those who from within the Catholic Church defended indigenous populations from exploitation and slavery (Dussel 1981). In 1968, Gustavo Gutiérrez, a Peruvian priest, gave a presentation called ‘A Theology of Liberation’, and spearheaded the movement that was to influence the Bishop’s Conference held in Medellín later that same year. From then on, thousands of CEBs were created.

‘Capacity infrastructure’ – a CEB legacy to social movements

I witnessed activists and advocates in their quotidian campaigns and efforts to improve social situations and the protection of the forest in the Brazilian Amazon. One of the scenes where what I would later call the ‘capacity infrastructure’ became evident to me, was at a meeting in Alter do Chão, in the state of Pará. In that meeting, two NGOs convened representatives of small farmers, social movements, local residents, environmentalists, and others. Their aim was to form a network of leaders of communities located along the BR-163, a road scheduled to be paved by the federal government of Brazil. Some of those taking part in the meeting had been part of a CEB in their area, and showed a similar outlook on the diagnosis of the problems they confronted. The three elements were present in a significant way: 1) the networking horizon marked
the main objective of the initiative: to form a web that would have the legitimacy and capacity to address concerns of all stakeholders involved; 2) the processual approach marked the clarity over time-scales required, as one NGO participant mentioned during one of the workshops about a controversial issue: “That will take at least a year of talks with locals; we will need to visit them regularly;” 3) the pedagogical cycle included many talks by scientists and workshops in which all stakeholders would put forward their assessments and discuss potential outcomes of different scenarios.

Although these issues can be said to form part of the now standard action repertoire of NGOs in the area, several clues pointed to a more complicated cross-fertilisation of ideas with CEBs. For example, the role of religion in the socio-environmental movement was very present in that particular meeting – as in others I attended – as well as in other spheres. In Alter do Chão, a priest, who was the leader of a social movement to denounce illegal deforestation in a remote area in the state of Pará, participated. He had recently taken over; his predecessor had been assassinated, and all other members refused to take over the leadership, out of fear. There were other examples as well. The involvement of religious activists in various parts of the Amazon helped to inspire and mobilise support from numerous individuals, institutions and organisations. When the nun Dorothy Stang was assassinated in 2005 for her activities to stop illegal deforestation, the repercussions were wide and intense. In large part, they were due to her being an American citizen, although a naturalised Brazilian as well, but also for her vocation. She was soon labelled a ‘martyr’ (Murphy 2007; Le Breton 2008). While religiosity of any kind is performative, either in its ceremonies or in its directives concerning conduct, liberation theology involves a deliberate performance to try and change political configurations. It is a call to activism (Smith 1991).

As has been noted elsewhere, CEBs promoted a bottom-up approach to collective organisation. They “disseminated ideals of equality and citizenship” (Abers 2000, p 31). Numerous studies have shown how CEBs helped increase participation in community organisations to face
a wide range of situations (Adriance 1986, 1991; Barreiro 1982; Hewitt 1986). In São Paulo, for example, Holston has shown how dwellers in illegal housing developments organised themselves and achieved legal recognition of ownership of their houses (Holston 2008). The influence of CEBs on mobilisation and civil society organisation is noticeable, when individuals go to work as activists or advocates after having participated in CEBs. This paper suggests that among the CEBs’ potential legacies the one of ‘capacity infrastructure’ has reverberated further than just among CEB participants because of its adaptability to different situations. In this sense, it is similar to what Weber claims occurred with the cultural changes brought about by Protestantism; changes in theological principles and their derived religious practices may have unforeseen consequences (Weber 2002, p 48).

The organisation of the World Social Forum (WSF) has inherited several traits and lessons learnt from CEBs. The WSF is an umbrella organisation that brings together thousands of social movements, NGOs, activists, and other civil society groups in order to encourage collective actions and mutual learning. As a progressive assembly of individuals and organisations, it follows the Marxist principle of a bottom-up structure, while remaining open to large NGOs and foundations. During my research at several meetings of the WSF, I have noticed various elements reminiscent of CEBs. For starters, the message of hope is evident in its slogan: ‘Another world is possible.’ Also, its Charter of Principles includes a strong emphasis on the value of diversity and a search for alternative paths to human development (Acosta 2009). These elements are similar to many documents produced by liberation theologians and activists, who learned their trade in CEBs. Whitaker, one of the early WSF conveners and visible leaders, had been close to the Catholic Church and liberation theology. In his texts and presentations, he insistently refers to the WSF as a network based on a process rather than an event, emphasising its pedagogical nature (Whitaker 2005). Leonardo Boff, another of the initiators of the WSF, was one of the key liberation theologians from its inception in the ‘60s (Boff and Boff 1984). He has spoken frequently at the WSF in front of thousands of eager followers. Had this been solely a Marxist or leftist gathering, most of the very visibly religion-based
organisations would presumably not be as prominent in every meeting as they are. The inception of the WSF is, of course, not solely due to CEBs, but CEBs were of crucial importance, and it is probably no coincidence that the WSF started in Brazil.

Conclusion
Among the various legacies of CEBs, the most important for civil society organisations may be what is here called ‘capacity infrastructure’. By using a Marxist framework to analyse reality, while offering a reappraisal of theological principles, CEBs openly promoted a radical change in people’s religiosity and its practice. This led to an awareness of collective organisation with special characteristics pertinent to the current historical moment. What is suggested here is an interpretation of facts observed and literature reviewed, and future investigations with direct focus on this topic may yet prove or refute the assertion.

The concept of ‘network’ has become extremely influential in various academic fields. As it has grown in popularity in organisational architecture, its influence has reached far and wide. Its consideration here, however, is not limited to practical arrangements. The theological foundation of CEBs provides them with a sense of transcendence, which in turn helps participants incorporate teachings and practices at a deeper level than simply the practical. In referring to ‘capacity infrastructure,’ therefore, I allude to an appropriation of actions that are linked to the improvement of the self and the community. As a legacy, its influence may be secularised, but its religious roots help understand the depth of its reach.

Note
1. This article is based on ethnographic research for a project that did not originally concern liberation theology. Fieldwork was carried out among activists and advocates of socio-environmental development in the Brazilian Amazon between 2004 and 2005. It was complemented by research carried out in five meetings of the World Social Forum (2003, 2004, 2005, 2006 and 2009).
References


Liberation theology


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