



## **The significance of Luther for the crises of today: On the occasion of the 500 years of the Reformation**

*A importância de Lutero para as crises de hoje:  
Por ocasião dos 500 anos da Reforma*

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### **Abstract**

The 500 anniversary of the event that marks the beginning of the Reformation is an opportunity to revisit some of its radical claims. Among them is that liberation and salvation are related but distinct. As long as we honor the distinction, honored will be the shape Luther's *figure* is transfigured into the mold of contemporary crises. It is about *presence*, regardless of the fact whether Luther is named or not. At the break of the 21st century, the most significant social phenomenon is arguably migration. The Reformer viewed migration in two diametrically different ways. This difference pertains to the two perspectives that inform Luther's theology. One pertains to our relationship to God and detachment from the entrapments of the world. The other refers to our life in the world, particularly as it concerns the economy. About a century and a half ago,

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in the high of industrial capitalism, Karl Marx found in Luther the basic clue to analyze the emergence of capital. This article presents thus an analysis of a treatise of Luther on usury that Marx discusses at length in the first volume of *Das Kapital*. As it was for Marx, Luther's transfiguration happens in the voices of protest and resistance today.

**Keywords:** Luther. Reformation. Migration. Oeconomia. Capitalism. *Coram deo/mundo*.

## **Resumo**

*O aniversário de 500 anos que marca o início da Reforma é uma oportunidade de revisar alguns de seus pontos principais. Entre estes está que libertação e salvação estão relacionados, mas são distintos. Porquanto honramos esta distinção, honrada será a forma que a figura de Lutero assumirá em meio as crises contemporâneas, como ele é transfigurado. Trata-se de sua presença, quer seu nome seja mencionado ou não. Nos primórdios do século 21 o fenômeno social mais significativo é provavelmente a migração. O reformador vê a migração de duas maneiras diametralmente opostas. Estas se referem a duas perspectivas que informam a teologia de Lutero. Uma se aplica à relação com Deus e desprendimento do mundo. A outra se refere à vida neste mundo, em especial o que se refere à economia. Há um século e meio, no auge do capitalismo industrial, Karl Marx encontrou em Lutero a chave para analisar a emergência do capital. Este artigo apresenta uma análise do tratado de Lutero sobre a usura que Marx discute em detalhe no primeiro volume de *Das Kapital*. Assim como foi para Marx a transfiguração de Lutero acontece nas vozes de protesto e resistência nos dias de hoje.*

**Palavras-chave:** Lutero. Reforma. Migração. Oeconomia. Capitalismo. *Coram deo/mundo*.

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## **Introduction**

The 500 anniversary of the symbolic event that marks the inception of the Reformation is an opportunity to revisit some of its radical claims. Among those radical claims is that liberation and salvation are related

but distinct. The distinction is what we can know *a priori*, the relation between them, only *a posteriori* as he argues in thesis 10 of the *Disputatio de homine* (LW 34: 137=WA 39/I, 175, 22f.). In other words, this means that the struggle for liberation has its own merit regardless of its final and efficient causes, despite its implications for human salvation (LW 34: 138=WA 39/I, 175, 28f.). Salvation is the work of God alone. Liberation is our business when we let God to be God among us in the flesh. It entails both liberation *from* the gods we create in our image, and liberation *for* the sake of the world alone, for the achievement of peace on earth (LW 34: 138=WA 39/I 175, 30f.). Luther taught us to distinguish between being *saved*, and being *safe* and free, between eternal blessing and earthly peace (LW 37: 365=WA 26, 505, 18ff.). As long as we honor the distinction between salvation and liberation, honored will be the shape Luther's figure will take in the midst of the crises of today. However, the reason why Luther remains relevant is that he took the world in its sheer materiality seriously for God entered the entrails of the world and joined us in our finitude.

Why should we go to Luther? We may just let Luther rest in peace, and be suspicious of any attempt to appeal to him as a remnant of Eurocentric colonialism with an overload of helpless ideological baggage. Many a response to the 500 commemoration of the Reformation go in this direction, which entails a form of theological "Jacobinism." The problem with this "Jacobinism" (as with any form of Jacobinism) is that it ignores the effective history (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) of the Reformation. Its merit is that it rebels against the ideological and idolatrous forms of representation.

These representations of Luther that "Jacobinism" react against are of two sorts. Both are popular in theological and ecclesial circles. One of these is to use the character of the Reformer to be a *proxy* for us (*Stellvertreter*). When one calls upon Luther to serve as an argument from authority to settle a case as if he could be transposed intact from his time and space to contemporary contexts. Orthodoxies work in this way. The other form of representing Luther is to turn him into an *icon* to be revered. He may not be relevant for us today, but honor and veneration is due to his character, to his image. Liberals, aware that Luther belongs to

his context, are attracted to this option. While theological “Jacobinism” with its iconoclasm avoids all representations, those who use Luther as a proxy or as an icon stay captive to forms of *representation*. Transfiguration is different; it is to recognize in the tasks elicited by the crises of today the presence of the liberating gestures of the Reformer at their roots. A Luther transfigured is the one whose figure morphs into (*mete-morphōthe*, Mk 9: 2) the mold of contemporary crises. Transfiguration is about *presence*, regardless of the fact whether Luther is named or not, regardless his representations (see WESTHELLE, 2016). How do we name these crises?

### **The Uses of Migration**

Migration is, arguably, the most significant social phenomenon at the break of the 21st century. It is not the crisis itself, but a symptom. As a phenomenon known to humankind ever since the inset of civilization, it does not index a new sociological fact, and yet has reached proportions unheard of before. Migration has become itself a defining factor for the understanding of geopolitics.

The Reformer viewed migration in two diametrically different ways. This difference pertains to the two perspectives that inform Luther’s theology. Seen in the *coram Deo* perspective, in the faith-based relationship to God, migration expresses trust in God and freedom from the entrapments of the world. However, *coram mundo/hominibus*, in our dealing with the world, it is a symptom of captivity or alienation. Ignoring either aspect, confusing or separating them corresponds dogmatically to the confusion or separation of natures of Christ in the *unio hypostatica*.

In the first way, in the *coram deo* perspective (migration as expression of trust), all that belongs to the earthly relationships are dealt by the reformer under the Pauline *hōs mē* (“as though not” of 1 Corinthians 7: 29-31). Luther makes this clear in his commentary on Genesis 12: 1: “Now the Lord said to Abram: Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.” Using 1 Corinthians 7: 31 in his *Commentary on Genesis*: “They make use of this world as an inn from which they must emigrate” (WA 42, 442, cf. LW 2: 253). Being a migrant expresses the genuine posture of faith of being in this world but

belonging not to this world (John 17). In this respect, Luther can speak of *migratio* as *peregrinatio*. Migration is the expression of freedom granted by grace through faith. Arguably the most ancient confession of faith believed to be in the Abrahamic tradition attests to precisely this, as we read in Deuteronomy 26:5: “And you shall speak and say before the Lord your God: ‘A wandering Syrian was my father; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien.’”

In this perspective, migration defines the search of a space for the freedom of worship of belonging to God and not a chattel, an item of property. Classical examples are: the Israelites in search of a place to hold a feast to their God (Ex 5:1); the Hegira Migration of Muhammad; the puritan migration to New England; the migration to Quilombos for Afro-Brazilians; the “Underground Railroad” of Harriet Tubman, the African American transfiguration of Moses.

In the *coram mundo* perspective, however, the Reformer sees in migration a symptom of captivity or alienation that expresses itself differently in the three dimensions of human earthly existence: religion, politics, and household/economy. These constitute the spheres that encompass the human relation toward earthly realities (including instituted religions as a socio-anthropological phenomenon) in which migration expresses earthly maladies. In this sense, *migratio* corresponds to *captivitate* and *alienatio*. This sense of migration is the one I would like to explore offering a canvas into which Luther’s figure may be distinctively drawn. Migration as captivity or alienation, for Luther, manifest itself distinctively in the three different public spheres that Luther used to locate the public and rational demands of love (not of faith): *ecclesia*, *oeconomia*, and *politia*.

## Defining the Crises

Different are the crises of today. Migration is the most visible symptom to reveal the intersection of them. A radical approach is not to fight the symptom but its causes.

The new world-configuration in which migration plays a decisive role is a result of the latest phase of capitalism, imperial capitalism. Luther

at its inception, when financial capitalism was growing rampant, offered then an insight to the crisis. A transfigured Luther would impart the same insight: The discrete character and responsibilities of the economic and of political orders and their relationship. These “orders” are two of the three publics he acknowledged as being operative in the world. The *ecclesia* (that should be translated as organized religion), the *oeconomia*, and the *politia*. The recognition that *ecclesia* has to be discerned as an order of creation, as a public, not a spiritual reality, not a community (Luther distinguishes *ecclesia/Kirche* from *gemeine/Gemeinde*) is largely acknowledged. Though the importance of religion (*ecclesia*) is also significant in this context, here I will be dealing with the other two public spheres, *oeconomia* and *politia*.

*Oeconomia*, encompasses the production and reproduction of life, which in pre-Industrial Revolution times belonged both to the sphere of the household. It is different from *politia*, practical life of the polis. This distinction allows us a qualified look into Luther’s anthropology and, thereby, his view of power. The economic mandate has primacy over the political one. “Luther was definitely aware that politics is grounded in economy” (BAYER, 1998, 128). In his comments on Cain building a city, because of his “lust for ruling,” Cain, exiled to the land of Nod (which means “homelessness” or “wandering”), was sent off from his father’s house, his *oeconomia*. Luther explains the difference (in his commentary on Genesis 4:14) between being driven from the face of the ground (*adamah*) where he had his dwelling and home, and being a wanderer on earth (*aretz*) (LW 1: 298=WA 42, 220, 4-14). Thus, the curse on Cain was threefold according to the three mandates humans are entitled to:

Thus one sin is punished by a threefold punishment. In the first place, Cain is deprived of spiritual or ecclesiastical glory. [...] In the second place, the earth is cursed, and this is a punishment that affects his domestic establishment (*poena oeconomica*). The third punishment—that he is to be a wanderer and is to find a permanent dwelling place nowhere—involves civil government (*poena politica*). (LW 1: 294=WA 42, 217, 13-17)

The *oeconomia* has been affected by sin. *Politia* comes into existence when *oeconomia* is corrupted. The latter requires the former for the defense of its own damaged integrity as he argues in the Small Catechism

(BoC 2000, 349). Cain himself constituted a household, an *oeconomia*. However, being affected by sin it already entered into the realm of *politia* and indeed required it. In the political sphere, migrant captivity takes the form of distortions in human intersubjective affairs; one is not allowed to express an authentic word in the human participation in the public order of things. Luther was witnessing the beginning of a period of history in which the economic order began to exercise hegemony over *politia* and *ecclesia*, and confused them. That was not the case when *politia* was dominant in classical antiquity or the *ecclesia* during the Middle Ages. Those periods of history had their own distortions, but now we entered a phase in which *oeconomia* has hegemony. This stage is called capitalism and lasts to this day.

About a century and a half ago, in the high of industrial capitalism, Karl Marx found in Luther the basic clue to analyze the emergence of capital. In this he transfigured Luther. In *Grundrisse* (1958), he called Luther “the oldest German economist” (MARX, 1953, 891). What Marx meant was that at the inception of capitalism, in its financial phase, Luther discovered the basic formula for the emergence and formation of capital. In Marx’s rendition, the formula is the following: C—M—C’ (commodity-money-commodity+) turns into M—C—M’ (money-commodity-money=capital). That which is a means (money) for the exchange of things becomes an end. Money becomes capital. In the first volume of *Das Kapital*, insightfully and wittily, Marx observes that this transformation of money into capital plays in political economy the role that original sin plays in theology (MARX, 1951, 741).

Better than many theologians, without intending to be one, Marx read Luther *von unten*, from the *finitum*, from the roots of his own thought. What he found was a fundamental operational principle at work, a critique that made an incision in the crisis of a particular mode of production, namely, capitalism at its inception. In fact, if we read the criticism implied in any of the *solae*, *sola scriptura*, *sola gratia*, *sola fide*, and *solus Christus*, this is what we find. In all and any of these, the criticism was the same. What is a means becomes an end. Grace becomes “grace +” when work becomes a mediation, faith becomes “faith+” when negotiated by a system of penance, and Christ becomes “Christ+” when the church is

the end. These pluses are what was not sufficient in faith alone, in grace alone, in Christ alone, and the church functions as the broker of salvation. Luther's happy exchange cancels the negotiation between earth and heaven, between human emancipatory acts and salvation. Heaven cannot be bought; it is free, gratis. The criticism of transformation of good works into salvation, Marx uses to explain the transformation of money into capital.

Let us take the example the other *sola, sola scriptura*. Embarrassed by this scriptural principle, the children of the European and American Enlightenments avoid it like a plague. The *sola scriptura* is such a good example because it is tangible and does not require much abstraction. Luther's objection was that the formula R—S—R' (reader-scripture-reader transformed), has become through the magisterium into S—R—S' (scripture-reader as magisterium-scripture interpreted). At the end, one has the magisterial interpretation that plays in the church the same role as capital in political economy. Needless to say that what Luther saw as the transformation of the scripture into a magisterial reading of it, applies equally today to all forms of fundamentalism with its version of a magisterium, as well as foundationalism with its philosophical or psychological authoritative rendition of the "meaning" of the scriptures.

## Luther on Emerging Capitalism

To see Luther transfigured as an "economist" we may look at the last of his writings against usury (the sermons of 1519/20, the sermon of 1524, and this last from 1540), a treatise that Marx discusses at length in the first volume of *Das Kapital*. The treatise is entitled "An Admonition to Pastors to Preach against Usury" ("*An die Pfarrherrn, wider den Wucher zu predigen, Vermahnung*": WA 51, 331-424). Luther does not abandon the concrete ground in addressing a socioeconomic problem; he is adamant in not allowing a "spiritualization" of the issue. He keeps his focus on the *coram mundo* perspective. He is tackling what he regards as a superlative manifestation of evil at the time — the practice of usury which was the main tool in the implementation of the emerging financial capitalism. The usurer is the primate of the *homo pecuniosus*, our contemporary



capitalist. The choice of this text is not due to its moral implications as if it could provide us with anachronistic criteria to pass judgment on late-modern capitalism. Rather it is an attempt of finding a gesture in the analysis of his society that makes Luther a figure who intervenes into the situation today.

Luther starts by exposing misconceptions regarding the practice of usury, namely, the presumption that by lending money the usurer is actually providing a service to the people. By buying a promissory bill, an entitlement (M—C) seems to be a favor until its amortization is due with extraordinary rates of interest (C—M') and capital comes into being. Foreshadowing the modern criticism of ideology, he writes:

Whoever takes more or better than he gives is doing usury and this is no service at all, but wrong done to his neighbor as when one steals and robs. All is not service and benefit to a neighbor that is called service and benefit. For an adulteress and adulterer do one another a great service and pleasure. [...] The devil himself does his servant inestimable service (WA 51, 338, 32–339, 25).

To make his case, the Reformer does not appeal to dogmatic or ecclesial authority. He draws on classical philosophy (Seneca, Aristotle, among others) to demonstrate his point: “We must spare our theology hereupon” (WA 51, 344, 30f.). At the court of reason and for the sake of equity (WA, 344, 25f.), he pleads his case that usury is an unnatural (*wider die Natur*, i.e., not part of the relationship of humans with the rest of nature) mode of producing value as Aristotle argues in Book I (chapter 10) of his *Treatise of Government*. This would not be a problem in itself if it were not for the fact that usury cannot create value without (mis-)appropriating “alien labor” (WA 51, 351, 21–27). This is how surplus-value is created. The verdict is peremptory: “Even if we were not Christian reason alone would tell us all the same that a usurer is a murderer” (WA 51, 361, 34–361, 17).

After having argued so far without appealing to theology, he starts to address Christian folk: “The heathen were able by the light of reason, to conclude that the usurer is a double-dyed thief and murderer.

We Christians, however, hold them in such honor, that we fairly worship them for the sake of their money” (WA 51, 261, 30–32). The attack goes on with apocalyptic zest:

Therefore there is on this earth, no greater enemy of human being (after the devil) than a gripe-money, and usurer for he wants to be God over all people [...] a usurer and money-glutton [...] he may have the whole world to himself, and every one may receive from him as from God and be his serf forever. [...] [T]he usurer wants to condemn the whole world to hunger, suffering and misery (WA 51, 396, 28–397, 19).

What are we to do? The language becomes shocking and even appalling: “And since we break on the wheel, and behead highwaymen, murderers and housebreakers, how much more should we break on the wheel and kill [...] hunt down, curse and behead all usurers” (WA 51, 421, 24–26). The Reformer refuses to make the spiritual leap from the concrete political order to the universal condition of human sinfulness as a palliative denouncing sin, while the sinner is justified. Is this not a problem to be solved by sincere repentance alone, knowing that, after all, justification is for the sinner *qua* sinner? The response resounds clearly and coherently:

They say that the world could not be without usury. This is certainly true. For so strong and stiff can no government in the world ever be and has never been. [...] and even if a government could prevent all sin, there would still be original sin. [...] But if with this [argument] they think they are excused, let them see. (WA 51, 353, 32–354, 28)

Usury is a disorder in the economy. The political order was created to protect the poor and punish the offender. *Politia* comes into existence when *oeconomia* is corrupted. The latter requires the former for the defense of its own damaged integrity BoC, 2000, 349. But even more sharply, Luther points to a phenomenon that characterizes the transition from feudalism to capitalism: the economy takes over politics, competences are confused, check and balances are wiped out. For the peace of the world and for equity’s sake, the competences ought to be distinct,

neither separated nor confused. Keeping their competences apart is decisive: “The will of God is to differentiate the orders” (*Vult Deus esse discrimina ordinum*; WA 44, 440, 25; 49, 613, 1ff.; 31/I, 399, 26ff. Cf. ELERT, 1932, 2: 49-65).

Then Luther turns to the third of the instituted orders of society, *ecclesia*, which properly translated means institutionalized religion that has often been coopted by the economy as the hegemonic order in capitalist societies.

Preachers who fail to raise their voice from the pulpit against usury and usurers and even associate with them “make a comedy of their preaching office [...] and turn themselves against the truth. [...] Such people cannot promote the gospel” (WA 51, 409, 19–22).

A disembodied piety cannot fight sin where it appears: in the flesh, in matter because that is where the gates to oppression as well as liberation open themselves, Or Luther again: “If our gospel is the true light, then it must truly shine in the darkness. ... If we do not want suffering, if we want to transform the world [*die Welt anders haben*] then we must go out into the world [*zur Welt hinaus gehen*] or create [*schaffen*] another world which will do whatever we, or God wants. (WA 51, 409, 27–32).

He adds: “God’s marvelous power and wisdom must have its traces [*Spuren*] and must be grasped herein [*hierin*]”. What are these traces, these signs that may be grasped in here? The answer is straightforward in the same text: “earthly peace to increase and sustain [*mehren nehren*] the human race” (WA 51, 354, 29–31).

### **As a conclusion: Possibilities and Limits**

To say it differently, if we would place Luther in the twenty-first century, alas, he would be really bad in *Realpolitik* and would not be admitted to study monetarism at the School of Economics of the University of Chicago. Yet even more for this reason, his transfiguration happen in the voices of protest and resistance. In spite of having been exposed and influenced by the nominalism of the *via moderna*, his understanding of the exchange value of merchandise was that of a realist. He followed the

prevailing medieval Aristotelian theory of the sterility of money, and saw value determined and imbued in merchandise by labor. In fact, he was even less refined than the late medieval Roman moralists who, under the rule of money's sterility, could come up with a justification for a quasi-interest principle of charging a fee for a loan on account of depreciation due to currency handling.

In this respect, Luther was different from his younger reformation colleague, John Calvin, who recognized the economic validity of earning interest for lending money. However, the interest rates charged would have to be subject to strict and reasonable regulation. As Richard Tawney remarked when comparing Calvin to Luther, "The significant feature in his [Calvin's] discussion of the subject [of usury and interest] is that [contrary to Luther] he assumes credit to be a normal and inevitable incident in the life of a society." (TAWNEY, 1954, 95. Cf. zur MÜHLEN, 1978, 3: 635-639) Max Weber, begins his *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* with the importance of Luther's understanding of vocation (*Beruf*) in the development of a worldly asceticism. Yet, has hardly anything to say in favor of Luther as far as his contribution to development of capitalism is concerned. "[...] it is hardly necessary to point out that Luther cannot be claimed for the spirit of capitalism in the sense in which we have used that term above, or for that matter in any sense whatever." (WEBER, 1958, 82) If for some (like Weber's theological friend Ernst Troeltsch), he did not contribute to capitalism because he was still a medieval thinker, it seems more plausible to assume that he identified in the new emerging economic order the new logic of the old sin expressing itself. This expression takes place with the hegemonic dominance of the economic order taking over both the political order (*politia*) and institutional religion (*ecclesia*).

In sum, Cain is not a person, but the name of a system that produces exclusion and murder that since the inception of capitalism is primarily of an economic order. Being a migrant, a refugee, an exile is a symptom of being out of place, excluded from the household, from the *oeconomia*. Capitalism is the contemporary form of "Cainism."

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