Gerard Whelan, S.J.

Redeeming History: Social Concern in Bernard Lonergan and Robert Doran. Analecta Gregoriana 322. Rome: Gregorian & Biblical Press, 2013. Pp. ii + 254. Pb, €27.00.

The Jesuit Bernard Lonergan (1904–1984) was a philosopher, theologian, and methodologist, best known for his magisterial works *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* and *Method in Theology*. Less well known is the fact that he sketched an “Essay in Fundamental Sociology” in the mid-1930s, and spent fourteen years working out an explanatory macroeconomic theory. Even among Jesuits, Lonergan’s economic work is little known. He is often regarded as a profound but abstract thinker, whose thought is not really relevant to contemporary social and economic concerns. From a distance, at least, one can easily form an impression of Lonergan as a disengaged theorist who labored for most of his life in the remote and technical regions of cognitional theory and methodology, largely ignoring the more concrete and contemporary issues associated with the phrases “social justice” or “social concern.” Whelan seeks to put that mistaken impression firmly to rest.

Redeeming History is a welcome addition to the growing body of literature showing that, from the very beginning of his intellectual career, Lonergan was profoundly concerned with what we now call “sinful social structures,” especially in their historical and economic dimensions. (See, e.g., Michael Shute’s *Lonergan’s Discovery of the Science of Economics* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010] and Patrick Brown’s “Aiming Excessively High and Far: The Early Lonergan and the Challenge of Theory in Catholic Social Thought” in the Fall 2011 issue of *Theological Studies*.) Indeed, as its title suggests, part of *Redeeming History*’s value is its investigation of “social concern” within the structured and ultimately graced collaboration required to fulfill the conditions for “exercising a responsible control over history” (7, 12, 175).

Whelan’s reflections flow from two sources: long, thoughtful struggle with Lonergan’s writings, and fourteen years in Africa, six of them in a poor parish in Nairobi, Kenya. While it may initially take “something of a detective’s investigation” (245) to notice the powerful current of social concern in Lonergan’s writings, once one knows what to look for, Lonergan’s project appears in a quite new and different light.

The book consists of eleven chapters bracketed by an introduction and a conclusion. The first eight chapters walk the reader through stages in Lonergan’s life and thought in chronological sequence, highlighting topics relevant to Whelan’s “social concern” thesis. The last three chapters describe Robert Doran’s extension and, so to speak, implementation of Lonergan’s thought.

Whelan describes his book as “an intellectual biography” (9), or, as he also styles it, “a biographical account of Lonergan’s social concern” (11). These are two different things, and *Redeeming History* is in fact a not-fully-unified amalgam of both—too abbreviated and strategically selective to be a full-scale intellectual biography and yet too ambitious and detailed to be a mere overview. It will be valuable to Lonergan scholars but less so, perhaps, to neophytes.

Among other themes, the book takes pains to show (a) that Lonergan’s life-work was animated by a profound social concern, and (b) how we conceive what we now call “the option for the poor” can be enlarged and deepened by reference to Lonergan’s work. The first point may seem obscure or implausible to those exposed only to survey-level treatments of *Insight* and *Method in Theology*. But to those who have struggled with Lonergan’s manuscripts on history and sociology from the 1930s, or his two volumes on macroeconomics from the early 1940s, or his theory of history in *Insight*, it becomes luminously clear that Lonergan’s efforts and achievements in the realm of theory were for the sake of a deepened and ever-more refined return to Christian praxis.

As for the second point, what is specific to Lonergan’s driving social concern is not just the normal Christian concern for improving the condition of one’s fellow human beings, especially those suffering in poverty or under unjust social structures. It is, further, a form of concern that seeks a massive shift of Catholic social thought, out of a commonsense eclecticism appropriate to a pre-modern and pre-industrial age and into the mode of serious, rigorous, and contemporary theory. As Lonergan observed in one of his unpublished manuscripts from the 1930s, “Whether we like it or not, the world has got beyond the stage where concrete problems can be solved merely in the concrete. Economics supplies us with the most palpable example [...] ideas in the concrete will build you a shanty but not a house and still less a skyscraper.” Or as he remarked in a 1973 lecture, the basic step in helping the poor “in a notable manner is a matter of spending one’s nights and days in a deep and prolonged study of economic analysis.” Lonergan’s “option for the poor,” one might say, was the far-sighted one of working out an explanatory science of economics designed to restructure economic understanding and practice in quite determinate ways with quite distinct moral implications.

Redeeming History has a narrative unity centering on Lonergan’s social concern. But its thematic unity is the broader one of Lonergan’s lifelong efforts to construct methodic structures and theoretical frameworks conducive to genuine human progress, not only in the social realm but also in the economic, cultural, political, theoretic, and religious realms as well. If I am not mistaken, Whelan’s last three chapters compactly introduce the thought of Lonergan’s

disciple, Robert Doran, precisely in order to intimate the salutary practical, social, and cultural potentialities of the methodic and theoretic frameworks Lonergan labored to construct. The book's last chapter brings the fruits of prior chapters to bear on the author's experience as the pastor of a very large parish community in Kenya.

Redeeming History possesses a few shortcomings. First, in some passages one gets the impression that Whelan is providing the reader with serial glosses on accounts of Lonergan given elsewhere by others. This is especially true in those chapters where Whelan draws heavily on William Mathews' intellectual biography, *Lonergan's Quest* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005). This occasional over-reliance on indirect discourse gives some passages a lingering tone of second-hand reporting. Second, the book's discussion of "the option for the poor" seems more diffuse or unfocused than it could be: apart from a one-page subsection devoted to it, the topic is treated mainly in passing and without precision. In addition, the book is diminished by the absence of any discussion of what Lonergan calls "the invariant structure of the human good" as simultaneously individual and social—a curious omission in a book concerned with Lonergan's social concern. Finally, the book contains an excessive number of proofing errors, especially in the footnotes.

In a letter written in July 1973, Lonergan commented on remarks he had made at a session of the Catholic Theological Society of America. "I would like to feel that they might serve to extricate me from the cocoon of abstractions in which, in the minds of some, I am supposed to dwell." *Redeeming History* continues that much-needed process of extrication.

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