Chapter 1

Text and Context

Like all human activity, theology is contextual. The theologian’s ideas do not fall from the sky (Casalis). The theologian, too, like all human beings, is situated in a given reality, born and raised in a specific place at a specific time – allowed to grow up or infantilised, bourgeois or labourer’s wife, white boss or black slave, hetero- or homosexual: these are all different worlds. Reality, however, is slightly more complicated still than the determinacy of the words used to express it. Some bourgeois are kept small, labourer’s wives gain influence despite their oppression, the white boss loses his balance, the heterosexual comes out as gay, the gay man is also a white boss. And so on and so forth: life, the saying goes (and it is true), is a complicated matter.

Theology, then, is contextual – this is self-evident. What, however, is the point of this observation? Is it enlightening, so that we can see more clearly what theology is all about? What does ‘enlightening’ even mean, though? Is it ever more than a simplification? Is it not the Enlightenment – man’s emergence from his immaturity (Kant) – that provides the most convincing proof that complexity is simplified into ‘survival of the fittest’? Does the primacy of reality offer anything other than the observation that ‘survival of the fittest’, the right to dominate, is as old as humanity itself? Is it not all, despite seeming extremely complicated, basically very simple: the condition humaine a constant struggle for executive control?

There is something in humans, though, that resists this. It cannot truly be the end all of historical wisdom: that the vast majority of humans live, only to have to discover that this life is no (worthy) life, that the deepest insight is the realisation that reality is terribly complex – too complex ever to be released from its ties.

2 This was Kant’s reply to the question ‘What Is Enlightenment?’: ‘Enlightenment is man’s emergence from self-incurred immaturity’ (Kant 2009, p. 1).
3 ‘The system’s principles are those of self-preservation. Immaturity amounts to the inability to survive. The bourgeois in the successive forms of the slave-owner, the free entrepreneur and the administrator is the logical subject of enlightenment’ (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, p. 65).
Reality and Resistance

This ‘something’ that resists is real, too: so long as there is a dominant order, there is also resistance, its opposite. True, thus far, this resistance has been broken again and again – by the force of the dominant order, from without us, from within us. But it is also true that resistance is raised again and again. Until it is broken once and for all? Who can know? Resistance itself is not without hope that the way things have been will not remain the same forever.

And resistance leads to recognition. This recognition offers no insight into the essence of reality, it does not enable a system in which everything is made knowable. It does, however, enable us to recognise the ‘logic’ by which capital exploits labourers, for instance. The experience of exploitation is enlightened by a ‘critique of political economy’.\(^4\) Not the reality, but certainly a determining dimension of reality, which determines the lives of masses of people, is made visible as the ‘capitalist mode of production’. Capital is produced by the labour power of those who have nothing else to sell. Resistance gains not only hands and feet, but also the possibility of sensibly moving these hands and feet.

There are, however, also other dimensions of reality that make life difficult for people, and there are also other theories that enable a person to recognise what is going on so that the game can then be played to their own benefit. There are the experiences women have with men, gays have with heterosexuals – shameful experiences that elicit resistance. Here, an analysis that reveals the dominant ‘order’ as the source (the ur-thing) of this experience is helpful. Psychoanalysis, for instance, reveals the order of sexuality, which is people’s organisation according to their sex-characteristics. This order identifies (or sexes) people as men above and women below. Such an order declares people who cannot be classified – gay men and lesbians – as ‘out of order’, or forces them to integrate themselves into this order as homo-sexually inclined.

The experience of people who are pinned down to a specific ‘race’ or a specific ethnicity or tribe, and are hence defined either as sub-human or as positively super-humanly clever and cunning, but always as an object of abjection, also leads to recognition. The depth of this abjection is made visible, as well as the depth of the victims’ tendency to put up with their own objectification.\(^5\)

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4 This is the subtitle of Marx’s *Capital*. ‘Political economy’ basically means the (bourgeois) study of political economy. Marx’s concern, hence, is to fundamentally criticise it.

5 *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), the title of a book by black psychiatrist and revolutionary Frantz Fanon, is programmatic here: ‘Willy-nilly, the Negro has to wear the livery that the white man has sewed for him’ (Fanon 1968, p. 34).