CHAPTER 3

Class, Sin, and the Displaced

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Introduction

The reflection that follows was first conceived some decades ago when I was working with displaced peasants in the southwest of Brazil. The peasants were once small-scale farmers who could fend for themselves in the little parcels of land they had for family farming. During the radical change in the agrarian policies of the military regime in the country (1964–1985), with subsidies diverted to and incentives created for large monoculture export-oriented farming, they ended up in debt and were driven off their land due to fiscal obligations to money lenders, becoming landless peasants, moving from region to region in search of seasonable work when available. Among the displaced peasants were also those who were forcefully relocated to other places due to the construction of a mega-dam (Itaipú at the border of Brazil and Paraguay). Relocated, they were often not able to make ends meet and were finally also displaced to join the millions of peasants without land of their own to cultivate.

This issue intersects with class theory in sociology as it was developed in the past century and displays a complex relationship to main streams of class analysis. In the case of the peasants that I am presenting, there are distinct factors to be considered in the making up of “class,” different from what has been analyzed in normative literature. Class has not only to do with the political realm of intersubjective relations or with human relationship to nature in shaping and transforming it. To use Marxist lingo, it is not only about relations and forces of production, politics and economy, but about other factors as well. These other—and complicating—factors have to do with displacement, with migration, both domestic and international, and the correlation between class consciousness and spatial issues, places, and geographies.

My main concern is to find a way to frame this social and spatial problem in theological terms instead of remitting it to morality and ethics, which may only give it a theological hue. Even the language of such a framing of these displaced
people is of a theological and religious nature. For them a sociopolitical and economic analysis bears a deficit that religious language alone can approach. Class struggles, and indeed at times violent and brutal ones, were part of the everyday life, of the everyday existence of these people whose lives were hanging by a thread that often broke. This thread and the trial it represents cannot be accounted for in the language of the secular sciences for which, methodologically, God is a superfluous hypothesis. The language that employs God-talk must at best be decoded and reinscribed anew in the secular order of things. But there is a resilience of God-talk when the experience of class location is not only of sociopolitical and economic relevance but also of the sense of an organic relation and interdependence with place and all the factors that determine one’s belonging. There is, after all, something puzzling about one’s attachment to a place one belongs to in the immeasurable vastness of the universe, and being acknowledged in this place, not by others alone, but by the place itself, as Job’s lament attests: “those who go down to Sheol do not come up; they return no more to their houses, nor do their places know them any more” (Job 7:9f.). Such experience is one of being condemned due to some transgression.

**Capital and Sin**

At the beginning of chapter 24 of the first volume of *Capital*, Karl Marx offers the following comparison: “The original accumulation [of capital] plays in political economy about the same role as original sin in theology.”¹ In fact, as Marx further suggests, this is more than an approximate or rough (ungefähr) analogy. The doctrine of original sin is a religious and mythological rendition of the origin of inequality in human society. Civilization after civilization, all that has changed is the mode of distribution and classification of inequalities. The formation of classes is a particular way in which social inequality is configured in modern societies, and indeed there are other forms of social inequalities. Inequalities can be what is sometimes considered as “natural,” as in gender differences or mental and physical abilities, even though these can and normally do play a significant social role in a class society, becoming thus a factor in its organization and regimentation. Class society is also to be distinguished from other forms of inequality that are socially endowed by birth, as we have it in the corpus christianum² (in medieval Europe’s doctrine of the “estates”), in the Hindu caste system, and also differences created by ethnic and racial factors. Within the feudal “estates,” the caste system, or ethnic profiling, one is born into a given position in the social order. In medieval times a son of a peasant would as certainly be a peasant as one who is born into nobility would be a noble by birthright. Class society, theoretically demarcated, implies the possibility of socioeconomic mobility. In this stricter sense class society, in the classic Marxist definition, comes into existence only with the emergence of the bourgeoisie in the modern Western world that broke the spine of the entitlement system as the guarantor of the social order. The novelty in this is the introduction of social mobility as a defining characteristic of modernity.