

The Empire and after. Keeping biblical hope in the midst of oppression.

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Abstract:

We find in the biblical text a critique of empires (and of the “ empire” as a human political reality, mostly in a view “from below”) as well as the certainty of their doom. This assures us that there will be an “after” the Empire. Yet the question remains, what kind of social relations will that “ after” bring? And something even more poignant: what kind of human being will the Empire leave us with? Therefore the need to reconstruct human subjectivity free of imperial hegemony, to reconstruct human relationships based on love, after times of hatred prejudice and violence. That is the Gospel of the Reign of God. There coincide the apocalyptic thrust and Pauline theology. But that “evangelizing” task is not only for the “after”, but an urgent challenge for the present.

The Subject and the Empire: Where is the Problem?

The Empire can only exist if there are subjects: subjects to the Empire. The postmodern proposal that there is a disseminate, fragmented, transient or evanescent subject, or, more dramatically, the death of the subject, that is, finally, that there is no subject at all, might give way to the idea that there is no Empire. Yet, many of us, out of sensations, experiences, emotions, differences, and the way our life is handled by others, realize that we are subjects: subjects of an Empire, but subjects after all.

I start with this intended confusion at the level and range of meanings of the word “subject”, because, in a certain way, it is politically (and theologically) revealing. In a theological interpretation, we are human subjects since God has created us as free creatures (beyond the different possible ways of enouncing, understanding and explaining these concepts). But in another sense, we are established as subjects by the existence of the Empire, that is, of a controlling and oppressive power that knows no law but its own will and imposes it over others. Continuing with this pun we can express: our subjectivity is manifested because of (by, through, since, within) the existence of the Imperial power that subjects us. So, in this article, my subject will be the subjectivity of subjected subject.

Now, beyond the apparent confusion that comes up in the puzzle, what I am saying is that Empires create a certain kind of subjectivity by means of their power. The mechanisms by which the different kinds of Empires do this vary according to their means of production, to their cultural background and to the political bend of their power structure. Because in the same way a system has its forms of production and reproduction it also produces and reproduces human subjects. I am not anticipating a determinist theory of Empires, as you will see, I intend exactly the opposite. But we can neither ignore nor separate the economic and military construction of an empire (its materialistic base), its cultural and political projection, from its opposite relationship with the (spiritual, subjective) experience of Christian hope. If we are going to talk about hope, we have to overcome the hopeless view that empires want to create in their subjects (“This is the end of history”, “there is no future but the present”, “Roma aeterna”). If freedom is a theological condition of the human subject, and therefore of hope, then imperial bondage (including its economical dimension) cannot be ignored as a fundamental factor in the captivity or destruction of human subjectivity. Yet, in the midst of the imperial babilonic exile the voice of the prophet resounds: “Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope” (Zec 9:12), or Paul’s letter to the church in the Imperial Capital of Rome recalls: “For in

hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen?" (Rom 8:24).

So here is the problem: being subjects of an empire puts in risk the possibility of being subjects of hope, that is, human subjects. But, at the same time, being subjects of an Empire brings up a particular understanding of the dimension of hope, of the meaning of faith. I will try to look at this problem following a certain path. First, we will briefly consider the power of the imperial ideological domination in the experience of oppressed people in the biblical narrative. Then, we will point to the colonization of the subject by the present empire. Thirdly, the biblical critique of the imperialized mentality, taking as center Paul's eschatology and his struggle to overcome subjective imperial captivity, and finally, the practical challenges brought about by this understanding in confrontation with imperial ideology.

Imperial domination and the building of hegemonic ideology.

Continuous oppression, through a long period of time, tends to create in the submitted people a certain perception of "invulnerability" of the dominant power. So, through what has been called the "function of hegemony", in the dominated subject arises the conviction that such dominance is in some way legitimate, it is politically necessary, or convenient, or at least, unavoidable. True, these ideas are induced by the ideological industries of the dominant power, through complex cultural and symbolic effects (not always "intentional"). The way power is conquered and exerted is already in itself part of this message.

It is not my intention to repeat here the outcome of studies that, from Marx and Engels, and authors like A. Gramsci, M. Foucault, P. Bourdieu or Edward Said have helped to illuminate the variety of ways and consequences of this hegemonic effect. But I find it possible to portray, through some biblical texts that witnessed this struggle long before such theories came to light, how imperial impositions works in creating a certain mentality and the possible overcoming of them through an alternative subjectivity.

I will not go into the philosophical discussion about the "subject", but initiate my journey looking at some experiences of subjection. For that, the Bible offers abundant witnesses of different situations of imperial domination and diverse reactions in face of them. The first reference, that will become paradigmatic through the whole biblical narrative from Genesis to Revelation, is the story of Babel. The construction of a city and the tower has economic and military meaning¹, and the whole issue of language and name is of political and cultural gravity². They depict the shaping of an imperial project. Babel at Shinar represents, not the "titanism of humanity", as most western commentaries suggest, but a retrospective reading of the imperial thrust of world powers, namely Babylon, read as a foundational narrative. Genesis 10, the preceding chapter, has already affirmed the variety of human projects through the descendants of Noah (diverse families, nations, lands, languages, and even economic exploits). But in that genealogy, two heirs of Cam, Mizraim and Nimrod, are signaled as fathers of aggressive nations. Nimrod was the first on earth to become a mighty warrior and strong in the face of God, he is the founder of imperial capitals, like Babel at Shinar and Nineveh in Assyria, prototypes of imperial

¹ See: Milton Schwantes, "La ciudad y la torre. Un estudio de Génesis 11.1-9" in *Cristianismo y sociedad*, ns. 69-70, 1981, pp.95-101.

² See "Comparative Bible Study. Genesis 10-11: An Approach from Argentine." in *Scripture, Community and Mission: A Festschrift in Honor of D. Preman Niles*. P. Wickeri (ed.), (Hong Kong: The Christian Conference of Asia and the Council for World Mission, 2002, pp. 152-165.

powers in the ancient Semitic world. The Babel narrative is not, then, the project of the whole humanity, but of those of the Nimrod clan, that bring together different elements of imperial domination: the development of a new technology (bricks and bitumen), the walled city as an economic center, the tower, sign of military power, and “one name and one language”, the ideological and cultural imposition. God opposes that project by allowing the diversity of languages and of different peoples in their own land. The Babel narrative is a first instance when God appears opposing an imperial drive, and thus approving and promoting a plurality of identities. It is not punishment, but a liberating act of God. And, even if through the biblical narrative, time and again Empires reappear, enslave, oppress and kill, finally, at the end, in Revelation, this paradigmatic Babel is finally destroyed completely, constituting a great inclusion of the entire biblical narrative.

This does not happen by chance, since Israel has lived, throughout its history, under the threat of these Empires. The occasional coalition with some of them in order to avoid the others was denounced by prophets and psalmists as infidelity to God, and related to the ruin of Israel. A lesson modern Israel has not learned. Those experiences of living under imperial subjection molded also the religion of Israel, or, better, some of the trajectories within Israelite faith. These trajectories show the various ways and reactions, thence, the diverse subjectivities formed under the power of imperial domination.

Without trying to make a whole catalog of the ways of dealing with imperial subjection, the most usual reactions can be established. There is the possibility of total adaptation, an alliance without scruples, not only to the presence but even to the ways of life of Imperial power. This tendency can be seen mostly in the upper classes (but not only) and even in the official religion (see, for instance, Maccabees 1:15 [They] “removed the marks of circumcision, and abandoned the holy covenant. They joined with the Gentiles and sold themselves to do evil”). A variant to this is a qualified adaptation, in sight of the particular political time, accepting the impositions (and even the aid) of the dominant power as a transition time in the hope of a better chance. Nehemiah is a classical exponent of this attitude, but we can find the same in the letter of Jeremiah to the exiles and some other texts. Sometimes, not the case of Nehemiah, but in the case of Daniel, this is associated with can be called “passive resistance”, a combination of political acquiescence with an inward rejection.

On the opposite side we can see open and violent reaction. In some cases it can succeed (perhaps temporarily) if there is a breach in the imperial power. The case of the first stage of the Maccabean revolt can exemplify this attitude (though later, with Jonathan, they enter in quite dubious dealings with the dominant powers). In New Testament times this is the case of the Zealots; but usually this kind of movements, confronted with superior military forces, face total disaster. Other groups with this mentality search for a more sophisticated strategy and are able to survive as a testimony of dissent and opposition, but history tends to show that, in the long run, Empires fall by other reasons. This is probably the motive for other trends: sectarian enclosure or apocalyptic hope. These two sometimes coincide, but not necessarily. I will develop this later. Certainly we can find some passages in the Old and New Testament to illustrate all of these variants (and even more), but in the limited time of this lecture I will point out only to some of these reactions, which might be more meaningful to our theme.

The presence of the empire in the Israelite religion.

The first experience of Israel confronting an Empire is already in its roots, in the formation of the people during the Egyptian captivity and the experience of liberation in Exodus. When one reads those passages, even if narrated centuries after (that, in the

occasion, was also a time of imperial oppression and captivity), it is possible to see the kind of subjectivity created by the long years of enslavement. Moses himself becomes distrustful of the possibility of liberation, and recoils to the idea of facing the Pharaoh. “Who am I to go to the Pharaoh?”. The imposition of the power message is at work: you can not face the dominant power with a claim to freedom and identity. “He is all, I am nothing.”

Afterwards, when the God of the forefathers brings to his memory the possibility of confronting that power, Moses challenges the Empire. The result is the reinforcement of the hegemonic power: more labor in the same time. The message was clear: “No fooling around with ideas of an alternative God, of a distinctive identity, of another way. The elders of Israel quickly learned that lesson: when Moses told the Israelites to insist on their freedom “they would not listen to Moses, because of their broken spirit and their cruel slavery” (Ex 6:9). The narrative goes on, and Moses and Aaron have to struggle, not only with the Pharaoh and Egyptian power, but with the distrust of their own people: much of that distrust is the consequence of the impact of centuries of submission to the imperial control. As James Cone puts it, “It is easier to take the people out of Egypt than Egypt out of the people.”³

This is the case of an anti-imperialist elite that has to struggle with the imperialized customs of the enslaved people, in order to call them to freedom, to build a fairer way of life. In other instances we will find the opposite, a national elite that supports foreign dominion for its class convenience, and makes use of dominant ideology as a tool over or against the claim of the lower classes and sectors.

The constraints of hegemonic ideology stretch beyond the time of slavery. Through the Exodus narrative we find once and again the sequels of the subjective accommodation to domination and the idealization of Egypt, including the longing for Egyptian food and the imaging of the God of Israel in the shape of the Egyptian gods. Imperialized subjectivity persists after the Empire has lost its political or military power of coercion.

The question is how the experience of subservience has influenced the formation of the basic personality of a people, how the common sense has been affected, to what degree the cultural standards are marked in such a way as to arouse enslaved reactions in “free” people. This is a twofold mechanism: reproducing and prolonging the ways of imperial domination in time or acting out a destructive opposition (complaining as a way of life) instead of proposing new forms of human solidarity.

This is a basic question in our query, because here we find an experience of the “Empire and after”. We can see how the subjection of the Empire reaches forth, beyond its real power, through its persistence in the collective memory, crystallized in a common imperialized subjectivity. The “it is convenient” of hegemonic mentality imposes itself over the venture to be free, and the routine established by enduring mastership challenges creativity in the construction of the new. The dimming of the people’s identity and the “programmed death” by the empires is preferred as an assured horizon, or the continuous and futile grumbling appears in some reactions of the wandering Israelites dodging the opportunity to elaborate a new life pattern for the Promised Land.

The subsistence of the “imperialized conscience” does not only appear in the passive attitude of resignation and idealization of the imperial situation, but also in a more active manner: in the will to imitate the imperial behavior. Already in the extension of the commandments there is a warning against this. Several times in the book of Deuteronomy

³ Exact quote wanting.

the warning is given: remember, you were slaves in Egypt, do not do likewise with the people who work for you. But the imperial ideology persists in the political realm, and there is a will (against which the prophets declare) to become a dominant power itself, if the chance is given. The adaptation to an imperial mentality appears in the will to become Empire, or to pact with Empires. The oppressive power becomes the paradigm of power. In this way the mentality of adapting to the imperial way becomes internal to the dominated people. Yet, those who have a clearer awareness of the consequences react to it. This is the case of some prophets of the Old Testament, and many passages in the New Testament.

The Empire mentality in the colonized elite: Hosea's reading.

Of the many passages I could use to represent this struggle, I chose a text in Hosea which has not been much explored in this sense. We will look at Chapters 12-13 of the prophet. In this case, it is the political and economic elite of Israel that holds the imperial mentality, causing grief to the people and prompting the reaction of the prophet, bearer of the condemnation of God.

Through the use of historic material, in a self-critical way, Hosea shows the way in which the imperial conception of power has informed the Israelite mentality. From the beginning of these verses (Hos 12:1) the prophet admonishes "Ephraim" for "pursuing the winds", that is, for running behind vanities. But these vanities are not innocent, they are falsehood and violence. One more step: this falsehood and violence are related to commerce with imperial powers, Assyria and Egypt. This calls for God's anger, which involves both kingdoms (Judah and Israel) alike. It is astonishing how the prophet draws back to the Jacob-Esau relationship in Rebecca's womb. Jacob was a deceiver from the beginning, but God teaches him an alternative way: "But as for you, return to your God, hold fast to love and justice, and wait continually for your God" (Hos 12:6). Yet, this advice is forgotten, and Israel behaves as "a trader, in whose hands are false balances; he loves to oppress", becoming contemptuous in its wealth, though it was acquired in guilt (Hos 12:7-8).

The text then recalls the opposition between God and Egypt. The reading between the lines spells out: you have learned the ways of Egypt instead of fulfilling the commandments and will of the liberating God. They gave more credit to the ways learned in Egypt than to the prophetic voice, through which God spoke and acted. Then the more customary critique of the parallel of imperial mentality and idolatry is used. The gods, sacrifices and rituals mentioned are proper to the Egyptian religion. Israel learned from the Egyptians, but they did not learn the lesson from God, though they were fed in the desert. But that caused pride instead of justice, and they forgot Yawe. A threefold figure of lion, leopard and bear is used to picture God's anger towards this people. God will treat them this way, for they have forsaken God's memory and advice. It is curious how, afterwards, in the Book of Daniel and in Revelation, these three beasts, on the contrary, will represent not God but the empire. How can we consider this inversion in the apocalyptic texts? When men act setting up the forces of the Empire, and behaving in imperial ways, they attract the wrath of God. In their denial of the oppressed, they ignore the will of the liberator God, and they replace the God of liberation by themselves as Gods. The inversion takes place: The Empire becomes God, and so God exhibits for them the face of imperial bestiality. God is manifested with the wrath of Empires against Empires. So, when the apocalyptic texts restate the liberator God in its due place, the Empire once again is Empire and shows its bestial form. In reading the prophetic text in a situation of total oppression, the apocalyptic sees in the Empire the bestial nature of power, not now in the hands of the God of Justice, but in the doings of the unjust.

Finally, a more poignant critique is offered: in Hos 13:9-12. There the prophet recalls the incidents described in 1 Sam 8. The Israelites, against Samuel's advice, decided to install a monarchy, in the manner of other nations, adopting a political pattern learned from other world powers. In doing so, they rejected the liberating God. In Hosea's evaluation that imitation of foreign powers brought about internal disaster, more oppression. Because of this, the possibility of Israel/Ephraim existence as an independent nation is in danger. Israel was created to be something else. But if it is the same as other nations, it failed as an alternative, it is not a blessing for other nations, but a ridiculous parody of them, and its future is death. Yet the prophet ends with a word of hope, which clearly opposes, once again, justice with Empire. He calls to the people: "return to Yawe; say to him, "Take away all guilt; accept that which is good, and we will offer the fruit of our lips. Assyria shall not save us; we will not ride upon horses; we will say no more, 'Our God,' to the work of our hands. In you the orphan finds mercy. I will heal their disloyalty; I will love them freely" (Hos 14:2c-4b).

I have marked this to show how the imperialized mentality does not depend only on physical subjection, but it creates forms of subjection that destroy a nation's existence "from within." The assimilation to imperial power creates subjection but destroys subjectivity, that is, it conjures the power of death, and destroys hope. I find it quite a paradox that some of those who seemingly oppose imperial politics, when they deal with the issues of culture they question the possibility of a historic subject. If they do not find a subject it is probably because the imperial subjection has annihilated the free subject. It is true that there is a certain kind of imperial subject that only exists by subjecting others. But then the question is how to overcome imperial subjection, and not how to do away with subjectivity. From their subjection, the subjects of hope still claim and demand.

The Empire as a colonizer of desire.

The empires of ancient times imposed their dominion through physical enslavement (slave system). Modern imperialism used economic mechanisms to dominate (industrial capitalism). But the "postmodern" Empire works through the colonization of desire. It works, as never before, through the colonization of subjectivity. My claim is that they go beyond what has been regularly called "ideology". It is complex construction of a given subjectivity. But in order to make my point I would like to signal some marks of the present Empire. By the way, in relation to gender issues, which I will not directly address in the present lecture, let me say that many of the things I say about the Empire can be said, with due details and differences, about patriarchalism. In many instances in my discourse the word Empire can be replaced by "Patriarchy". As a matter of fact, patriarchy is at the roots of the Empire, and the Empire is the utmost expression of patriarchy.

I know it is a matter of contention within the academic and political circles in this country and some other powers with political affinity, if the USA is an Empire. Some deny it emphatically, still holding the view that the USA is the champion of democracy. I will refrain from commenting on how that championship was obtained. Others accept and celebrate the "challenge to become an Empire." They do not regret the fact that in the "new world order" there is only one superpower, and, because of that "it is called to become the guardian of order", the patron of the civilized world. Yet, in so doing, they might need, sometimes, here and there (which means, almost all the time and anywhere), to infringe the law they are called to obey. As Robert Cooper, advisor of Foreign Policy to Mr. Blair has put it, a soft Empire is necessary to enforce the postmodern civilization, of which, obviously, England and the USA are the better examples, in those nations and sectors that still resist its benefits. The core of postmodern civilization is, also obviously, the total free

market. Late financial capitalism is the utmost expression of human economic achievement (as can be easily seen when one looks at the growth of the stock market, shares, bonds and financial commodities, that clearly surpasses the material production in the world, together with a truly more astonishing growth of uneven accumulation of poverty and exclusion, and the endangering of the natural world). To ensure the continuity and extension of that total market –and that devastating poverty, as well as the conscienceless spoliation of resources and ecology– a benevolent imperial power is needed. Anyone who has seen the images and pictures of the war in Iraq, or the state of the civil population in southern Africa, or the increase of extreme poverty and crime in South America, can easily understand what benevolent means. And the desertification of the Amazon, the greenhouse effect of the energy waste, to say the less, show how beneficial the extension of the global capitalist civilization is.

But beyond this irony, we need to pay serious attention to what this means in terms of the construction (and/or destruction) of humanity. The debate, unleashed by the important work by M. Hardt and A. Negri, *Empire*, over the nature and scope of the present Empire, and whether we are in an empire or under an imperialist power, has helped to point out certain important facts. They portrait the Empire, among other images, as a network, with many knots and no center. Yet one must recognize that, notwithstanding the fluidity of capital and culture, that network has an iron collar: the international financial system, with its private and public institutions. Late financial capitalism is a net, but a fishing net that captures and destroys the resources of the world. Power is not evenly distributed through the net; goods and money circulate through it in only one sense. But the use of military violence, besides being useless except for the political ambitions of some and the demerital haughtiness of the same, has shown the persistence of the old imperial forms as the last support of the new.

But before passing to the subjective dimension of the postmodern Empire, I want to ponder a little more over this issue of the military force, of the use of violence, because it is probably the most salient issue today in understanding the imperial mentality. As never before the use of military power -together with the inexplicably called “intelligence” agencies- has demonstrated its futility for solving issues of human relationships. The military interventions have not reached any plausible goal, but, on the contrary, it has only set them further away. While billions of dollars have gone to military equipment, movement and actions, with an equivalent amount of losses in goods and services, of waste of resources and material commodities of the civil population, of building infrastructure of schools, hospitals and housing, not to mention the invaluable loss of human lives, any feasible outcome in terms of end of terrorism seems even further away. Because, beyond technical definitions, this terror created by the state is the worst terrorism. Those of us who had the misfortune to live under the so called regimes of “national security”, which were really of state terrorism, during the late ‘70s in Latin America, can have a say about that, and, to our distress, we see it coming again, and to the most powerful nation in the world. The combat against terrorism in the way it has been planned is in itself an act of terrorism, oblivious of international law, of human rights –the Guantanamo prisoners—, murdering civil population at a higher rate that any of the acts of the terrorism it claims to oppose. With the worst human cynicism of calling it “collateral damage”.

But I will go even further: the use of all this sophisticated military equipment, which costs far more than any investment in developing health or educational services, water supplies or any major need in the same or other subaltern countries, is but a spurious outcome of speculative business corporations. The two more significant acts of counterimperialist terrorism in the West, the attack to the World Trade Center and

Pentagon, as well as the bombing at the Atocha train terminal in Madrid, did use almost no military equipment. Probably a few pistols, or perhaps some small pocket knives was all the conventional weaponry used for the barbaric destruction of the New York Twin Towers, with its thousands of innocent victims. At Atocha, some man carrying explosives in a backpack, activated by conventional cell phones, were enough to produce the disaster. What is that compared to the thousand tons of bombs, sophisticated planes, last generation tanks carried to Afghanistan and Iraq, or used against the Palestinian rebels? Yet, with all that, the capacity for damage of the terrorist groups has not diminished. On the contrary, the more measures taken in terms of security, the more insecure the civil population is throughout the world. Because of its arrogance and disproportionate violence, of its bet on distrust, and the unbound eagerness to control everything and everyone, the Empire can only generate more precariousness, more insecurity. Stability, emotional centerness, the thoughtful steadiness needed for better security comes not from distrust and control, but from responsibility, affectionate care for others, and disposition to understand. And this takes us back to our theme, for the imperial mentality can never be aware of that, since it can only think in terms of imposition, violent coercion, overpowering, control, selfcenterness and excess. The asymmetrical cost of military weaponry on one side and the other is but a token of how the imperial mentality works.

And in that sense imperial mentality (which I have hereto used almost as a synonym to imperial subjectivity, though at certain level a distinction should be made) is more than imperial ideology. Ideology acts as a theoretical and political explanation (some would say justification) of reality, thus providing the rationale for action. Traditionally, especially in orthodox Marxism, ideology was used to imply a false conscience and a discourse of the powerful concealing injustice and exploitation. Power made it possible to indoctrinate this false conscience in the masses, thus producing the alienation of the lower classes. So, the ideology of the dominant class became the dominant ideology in society. Yet this classical understanding is unsatisfactory to explain the complex situation of cultural construction and the building of subjectivities today. The dominant ideology is today the ideology of the imperialized classes, sections and groups of society, however placed in the social and economic scale, and thus, whoever promises to provide them with the kind of goods and power of the empire, becomes dominant. Dominated people intend to be and have according to what the Empire shows as human accomplishment. What is wrong is not the ideology that provides a false explanation of society; what is wrong is society, however explained. The fact that such an unjust and unsustainable global system is ordering global human society is the real false conscience of humanity, the absence of truth. In Paul's words, "the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who conceal the truth in injustice" (Rom 1:18, my translation). Everything has dissolved in front of the only remaining universal: the capital. When philosophers of postmodernity tell us about the evanescence or disappearance of the human subject, they are consecrating the triumph of capitalism: humans exist no more, the capital has totally replaced them. It is the only remaining subject. The old nightmare of robots replacing and displacing humans has already occurred, only that it is not the consequence of technology. The real "Matrix" of today is financial capital. It absorbs and lives on human energy. The total market knows not human beings, human needs or human desires. It creates the desires, it ignores the needs of those who have no money, it replaces human beings with the fetish of money. Total market is the total destruction of human subjectivity. As Terry Eagleton says about some postmodernists, "though politically in opposition, they

are economically accomplices.”⁴ Or in the words of Alain Badiou, “All sacralizing representations that predicate essential and intrinsic relationships between humans and nature, of the human beings among themselves, between the groups and the city, between mortal and eternal life has been dissolved by the capital.”⁵ Once again Paul: “for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope” (Rom 8:20).

Therefore, we are dealing with something more profound than imperial ideology. We are facing imperial subjectivity, which ends in the suicidal annihilation of the human being, of human freedom, of human judgment and, in a terrifying ecological perspective, of human and natural life on Earth as a whole. Human decision has been replaced by the arbitrariness of the market, the bondage of vanity. The Argentinean philosopher José Pablo Feinmann puts it in these terms: “This is the essential: Power, in subjecting my subjectivity, eliminates my projects, my most personal future, what I would have liked to do with my own life. My possibilities –under the dominance of the ‘other’—are those of the Other, those of Power of the Other, that are brought to me from without. It is not me who decides: I am decided.”⁶ Feinmann relates this absorption of the personal subjectivity in the subjectiveness of the system to the industries of communication.

This “being decided” by the great Other, the Empire, turns human mentality marketwise. Sociologist Zygmunt Baumann, in his book *Liquid Modernity*, has portrayed this attitude as “to go shopping”⁷. All human relations are also included in this shopping attitude: human lives, affections, hopes, grieves and cries are merchandized. And as in the consumers market, they become ephemeral, disposable. The so called “deterritorialization” produced by late capitalism, elucidated by G. Deleuze, is fundamentally the deterritorialization of human life. In a non surprising paradox, the material being of the human being is thrown to the center, only to disappear. Political power, the cult of the body and sexuality become the main objects of desire, only to transform them into the shape of market commodities. Global capitalism dominates the scene, and there is no place for human dreams, for art and love. We are what the capital says we are: a number in the account of goods, if we are lucky enough to be counted. For many more are among the excluded, those who do not count and cannot be counted. But Paul reminds us: “God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are” (1Co 1:28).

What is now captive in this threat of nothingness and death is the human conscience. The formal construct of subjectivity is given content by the impositions of the Empire. The Empire is not, like in ancient times, an imposition from without, but a constraint that has forced itself into us, like the “Alien”, that lives in me to destroy me. Individualism, the confusion of the private and the public, and consumerism, are the most visible features of this captivity. On a deeper level, the needs of the empire are “subjectivized” through cultural mechanisms, and disguised as my own needs. We long to be Empire; imperial power presents itself as ensuring life, providing security, fulfilling desires. Yet, as we have seen, it causes terror, insecurity turns everything precarious. Terrorists have worked, from the opposite corner, on the same logic: in that sense,

⁴ Verify English quotation.

⁵ Verify English quotation in the “Manifiesto para la filosofía”, (pg 38 in the Spanish translation)

⁶ José Pablo Feinmann: “La colonización de la subjetividad”, en *Página/12*, Buenos Aires, February 1, 2004, p. 13.

⁷ Zygmunt Baumann, *Liquid Modernity*, English quotation wanting.

terrorists have also indulged in imperial subjectivity. The Empire, as well as terrorism, can only offer death, never hope. There are not two opposite demons; they are two masks of the same demon. They claim to offer dignity when, in deeper analysis, they are the roots of human destruction. Eros becomes Thanatos. Or again Paul: "When they say, 'There is peace and security,' then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape!" (1Thess 5:3).

Eschatological hope as subjective freedom.

Is there any escape from this logic of death? Realistically speaking... Sorry, no! Not the slightest chance! So the challenge is to become unrealistic. That is, to untangle ourselves from this perverted reality in order to see if another reality is possible, if there is life after the Empire. That is possible when truth is not the development of a discursive logic, but an event that alters the syllogism of reality⁸. Truth is not an explanation, but the founding act that is able to create a new reality. This is why, from a Christian point of view (that is, for *my* Christian point of view), the Resurrection of Christ is the great event of humanity. The Resurrection, as an event, as an experience, as a symbol, as a myth, and as all of these together, has a founding dimension that we call eschatology. We do so because it points beyond the present reality, and announces that this reality is really not such, but a phantom of itself, a devilish masquerade of death, that will be replaced by the reality of truth, which is underlying concealed in injustice, bound in vanity awaiting to explode in the glorious freedom of God's children: "the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Rom 8:21).

This trust (*pistis*) is what we find in the biblical authors, but markedly in the writings of John of Patmos and Paul. As I have already gone beyond my mark in time, I will refer to a few passages in Paul, since we have been using some quotations from his letters to illustrate how, in his language, he depicts some of the same topics that we have analyzed before. I will use two texts which put in sharp contrast the "imperial desire", of imperial subjectivity, and the trust in Resurrection as the possibility of another reality.

My first reading is in Phlp 3:17-21 "Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself."

De-imperialized interpretation of this text runs on a very different path from that of the usual historic-critical exegesis. We will not be concerned by the self-sufficiency of Paul. Paul affirms a way of behaving that expresses a differentiated subjectivity. And he can point to no other example, known to his readers, of this kind of behavior, than that of those that have joined him in this attitude. He signals the opposition with those who, instead, are "enemies of the cross of Christ". But since the cross of Christ is the symbol of opposition to imperial power, being an enemy of the cross amounts to being a friend of the Empire, of imperial powers and behavior, those that crucified Christ. For Paul it is a matter of tears to know that some who, apparently, have joined the community, now act as allies to the imperial reality. In that sense, their end, as we have seen, is destruction. But "end"

⁸ Alain Badiou: *L'etre et l'eventment*. Search for English translation.

(*telos*) here can mean that they are headed towards definitive death, but also that their aim, the goal of their work, is destruction. Their ways bring about, not only personal destruction, but also the destruction of the community of the faithful. They reintroduce in the newly formed church the practices of the imperial ideology.

Paul depicts how this imperial ideology works in a fashion that reminds us of present times: "their god is the belly, their pride is their shame, they care about earthly things". It is, of course, as V. Wimbush has noticed, the ethics of a worldly ascetic. But this asceticism has a rationale distinct from moral perfection: it is the opposition to the Empire, it is to detach oneself from the "habitus" of imperial expectations. If banquets, sexual lust, and the greed for possessions were characteristic of the Roman elite, and, as a model, were exhibited as the goods in life through the collegia, and other "mass communication media" of the time, then those who led their lives accordingly became, whether aware of it or not, the enemies of the cross of Christ, the head of the invasion of the empire in what was expected to become the alternative to imperial mores.

In what has been understood, in my opinion wrongly understood, as a spiritualistic detachment from reality, Paul claims that they do not pertain to the imperial realm. This is why, over against Luke's narrative, it is dubious that Paul held a Roman citizenship, and if he did, he would never lean on it. Our citizenship, he claims, (or also it can be translated, "our neighborhood") is another reality, a reality characterized, not by the appearance of this world, which is to pass (the close resemblance with 1Co 7 has been noted), but of the true world that is to be revealed in Jesus' glory. This body, which is now the body of our humiliation, will then become the body of his glory. So it is not a detachment from the body, but a detachment from the body as conceived by the imperial subjectivity, against a body that expresses the power of the coming reality, of the "after" the Empire.

My next text is quite similar: 1Co 15:28–35 "When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all. Otherwise, what will those people do who receive baptism on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized on their behalf? And why are we putting ourselves in danger every hour? I die every day! That is as certain, brothers and sisters, as my boasting of you-- a boast that I make in Christ Jesus our Lord. If with merely human hopes I fought with wild animals at Ephesus, what would I have gained by it? If the dead are not raised, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die." Do not be deceived: "Bad company ruins good morals." Come to a sober and right mind, and sin no more; for some people have no knowledge of God. I say this to your shame. But someone will ask, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?"

We will not go into the details of this text. I only want to mention the fact that two different kinds of subjection are at stake. The subjection to the reality of the Resurrected Christ, or the subjection to the reality of the Empire that has no future. If there is no resurrection, then we can just go on with the imperial motto: "Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we will die". It is the logic of death. Such logic of death makes the circus metaphor: If there is no resurrection, if the only possible reality is this that we are living in now, why did I have to resist the imperial thrust, to the risk of my own life? Probably Paul is not only talking of a metaphor but of a lively experience at Ephesus. The circus was part of the imperial subjectivity. It is death as a show, and the lives and deaths of the participants at the circus arena are in the hands of the Emperor or his delegates. It is the "circus-world", where the beasts dominate (Revelation 13). To confront this imperial demand, Paul puts his life at risk every hour. But the true risk of losing his life is to fall into this worldly subjectivity of death.

But there comes the question: Is Resurrection a reality, such a strong reality that it can be embodied in life? The following long elucidation that Paul attempts shows his conviction that it is so. So, the body of the other, or the body as “an other”, is not the object of desire, but of transformation. A body that is not dominated by the kind of desires that are imposed by a culture of domination. Desire “of the other”, in the mimetic or possessive sense, is opposed to desire “with the other” as the reality created by love. That is the rationale for a community that embodies the Resurrected Christ. The Reign of God is the possibility of another kind of human relationships, of an alternative subjectivity that creates free human subjects, and therefore, changes the reality that is not, though it seems to be (ideology) into the reality of truth. Eschatological faith is the possibility of living in advance a “de-imperialized subjectivity”, that is based on faith and love.

Evangelizing for the after.

But, what about hope, that is the theme for this morning? Is that possible, can we “resist” the Empire? Once again... Sorry, no. Where are we going to resist from? The Empire is already around us, in us. We are born into it and our subjectivity, from the cradle on, has been molded in its standards, under its flag. We were taught to pledge allegiance to its symbols. And probably we are doing so even beyond our comprehension. The Empire, with its capitalist market system, its military power, its cultural globalization is today the ruling power that shapes the present reality. As the Roman Empire, which was “tolerant” for religious diversity (except for the case of Christianity, which lived a citizenship which did not conform to the imperial claim of absolute right to shape reality), this new Empire accepts (and exploits) cultural diversity. As long as it does not interfere with its business. You can have whatever culture you want with your own cuisine, as long as you can have it turned into fast food for the food yard of the shopping mall. “Their god is their belly...” The Empire invented the internet, and the large quantity of sites and the most visited ones are those that offer pornography: “their glory is in their shame”. Death is a show that makes millions of dollars, even the death of Jesus. Where are we going to resist from? From the previous cultural weakness, which already showed it is unable to resist and has been coopted into the Empire? From national identities, that are, in many cases, the leftover of previous empires? Or the rationale of terrorism, which, as we have said, is the other face of the same demon? Are we going to question the Empire from religious fundamentalism, which in last analysis becomes an ally to the market? Look at those self proclaimed owners of the Christian truth supporting the imperial wars, proclaiming the benefits of free market, announcing a theology of prosperity totally jammed with the late financial capitalism.

There is no other globalization that the one that is. From a theoretical analysis we can distinguish its cultural, military, technological, politic or economic dimensions, but in reality and as a historic fact, the only globalization we have is this. Of course, it could have been in another way, but it was not. Of course, there is resistance; but as a city under siege, the dynamics and initiatives of the imperial invaders play on their side. There is no step backwards in history. Our hope is not in the past, but in the future. If we might ever have a non-imperial, a non capitalist globalization, it has to be built upon the future of humanity, not on the continuation of our present.

Biblical faith affirms the fall of all Empires, the fall of the Empire as God’s redeeming act in history. Paul, the militant of counterimperial eschatology, points that imperial reality is passing away. And even if at some points, and during some time, we have to accept the harsh impositions of Empires, there will be an “after the Empire”, for the Empire is only the appearance of this world, never its truth.

That announcement of the end of the present form of reality and the outbreak of the new is the message of the Resurrection. Over against the Empire's final word, the cross, comes God's truth: the Resurrection. It is a beyond, a beyond the power of the Empire, a beyond the ideology of the Empire, a beyond the imperialized subjects. We confront the Empire that conceals truth in injustice, not by resisting from a previous strong standpoint, but because we are able to see beyond, to announce the "after". "And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what we see? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with perseverance" (Rom 8:23-25).

Therefore, we do not have a previous non imperial subjectivity that we have to recover. As in the opening pun, we can only become subjects when we realize that we are subjected and decide to answer the call to a de-imperialized subjectivity, the call to freedom and love. It is affirming eschatological faith as a beyond the Empire. When the Empire falls, what kind of human being will be left (if the Empire does not suicide all humanity in its doom)? That depends on the possibility of beginning to build a de-imperialized subjectivity, of overcoming, from the call of the future, the way in which desire is colonized in the present globalization. It is a desire for the future, for a future with others, for a future that we yet do not see with the eyes of our flesh, but that we gaze at by the anticipation of the Spirit. That creation of a new subjectivity is the Gospel of hope seeking justice.

Do not leave the "evangelizing" to the agents of the empire, the Swaggarts, the Grahams and the Robertsons. There is a need for evangelizing (even in the ethical sense of the word), an urgent call to create the conditions for the after, for a human being that is able to conceive new kinds of human relations. The need to anticipate human desire as a desire for freedom in love (Gal 5:13) is a condition for the after. There will be an after the Empire if we are already creating that possibility by engaging in new forms of relationships, of a different way for desire. Hope is not a desire for a different tomorrow, but a conviction that the after is already present, and it is worthwhile to begin living in it now.