

**Cornel West, Review of John P. Gunnemann, *The Moral Meaning of Revolution*.  
*Journal of Religion*, 61 (2) (1981), 218-219.**

This is a highly ambitious book. Its basic aim is "to clarify the relationship between revolutionary practice and moral reasoning" (p. 2). This aim primarily involves presenting a complex argument to show that revolution cannot be justified in the usual sense of what it means to justify an act precisely because the ordinary moral courts of appeal are called into question by revolutionaries. This is so because, for Gunnemann, revolution is, fundamentally, a rejection of an existing understanding of the problem of evil and an attempt to put forward a new solution to the problem of evil. Following the pioneering work of Thomas Kuhn in philosophy of science, Gunnemann holds that ordinary moral courts of appeal are rejected by revolutionaries because such courts of appeal "imply residual confidence in the existing theodicy and the revolutionary loses his case merely by submitting to such a process" (p. 43). Hence, revolution is better understood as an apocalyptic event or as a religious conversion than as a moral act. For Gunnemann, conflicting paradigm solutions to the problem of evil—defined by Max Weber as the incongruity between destiny and merit—are at the heart of the moral meaning of revolution.

Gunnemann's argument is self-consciously limited to certain types of revolutions. He not only distinguishes between a revolt motivated by perceived violations of political principles (rebellion) and a revolt that involves transformation of consciousness (revolution); he also is concerned primarily with the consciousness of people involved in revolutions from below, for example, mid-seventeenth-century England, as opposed to revolutions from above, for example, mid-nineteenth-century Japan. This concern leads him to examine the revolutionary dualistic

explanations of evil in society put forward by millenarians (based on the classic works of N. Cohn, Y. Talmon, E. J. Hobsbawm, G. Lewy, and others) and Frantz Fanon. He rightly concludes that these dualistic explanations "simply invert the terms of a theodicy that has been imposed on them" (p. 91), and, most important, overlook the need for sanctification, the need for disciplined ordering of postrevolutionary life and society. Gunnemann briefly suggests that a more acceptable form of dualistic thinking—in the case of renovative violence—is found in Frederick Douglass's account of his famous fight with his master, Mr. Covey.

The chapter entitled "Karl Marx and the End of Theodicy" is the most provocative and controversial section of the book. He argues essentially that Marx tries to overcome the need for a theodicy by subsuming all forms of evil under the notion of negative universality which is epitomized by the proletariat in capitalist society. This negative universality is manifest in the proletariat's radical marginality, alienation, and anomie; in short, the proletariat "is not actually included in the theodicy of the larger society" (p. 135). Revolutionary activity by the proletariat can be seen as a move from negative universality to positive universality, from domination to democracy, from an evil world to an emancipated world.

Gunnemann suggests that Marx's argument is insightful yet unsuccessful owing to the incoherence of Marx's understanding of negative universality and his underestimation of the ways in which authentic revolutionary activity by the proletariat can be short-circuited. There are many claims, observations, and interpretations in this rich chapter with which one will disagree, reject, affirm, or question. To put it bluntly, it is well worth reading.

If the Marx chapter is the meat of the book, the last two chapters, though interesting and at times incisive, are the fat of the book. The chapter on Moltmann is a superb critique of Moltmann's political theology. But it is unclear how this critique contributes to the basic aim of the book since Moltmann has so little to say about revolution and, as Gunnemann admits, what Moltmann does have to say about revolution "is in many ways the least satisfactory aspect of his thought" (p. 177).

The last chapter, entitled "Evil, Ethics and Revolution," is disappointing. It is discursive, held together by a string of interesting insights. I expected a more rigorous argumentative treatment bringing together the wealth of sociological, historical, and theological material presented earlier. The major philosophical shortcoming in Gunnemann's intriguing and intricate argument is his attempt to root his argument in P. Berger's unconvincing claim that theodicy is antecedent to social legitimations, that the experience of evil is "pretheoretical," hence warranting the choice of theodicy as the starting point for understanding revolution. Gunnemann's book certainly reveals the crucial role of theodicy within social legitimations during revolutionary periods, but it does not provide any persuasive reasons as to why we should take seriously Berger's claim—a claim which Gunnemann considers foundational for his own argument.