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Multitudes and Methodism  
(Ambiguities and possibilities)

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At the times in which John Wesley lived, Empire was just growing as an embryo. Since its early years, however, it was easy to figure out its completed shape through the shadows of its shell. Those were the stages of the primitive accumulation of capital and England was the nest where the embryo was being brooded. Wesley was sunk in his time. For that reason his perspective of Empire was limited, biased and distant to the postcolonial present meaning. We could hardly listen to Wesley speaking in systemic terms. And of course, Empire is a system. But fortunately, thanks Theodore Jennings's working paper, we can hear Wesley opposing Empire in the only words he could do it assuming his actual limits. As Jennings said: "*the important ways in which Wesley comes into opposition to the emerging Empire of his own day. But to be sure, this opposition has very real limits*". That is truth, it would be ridicule intending to bring an antiimperialist Wesley's image out. But of course we are able to find many bread crumbs on the way, like those pointed by Jennings, leading us to discovering manifold signs of a powerful liberating and antiimperialist message.

Other of these bread crumbs we can trace is the way that methodism dare with the other face of the Empire, its counterface, the opposing force which also belongs to the Empire but at the same time will be the cause of its self destruction, sooner or later. That is the biopolitical force that Antonio Negri calls "Multitude". Multitudes was also present such in Wesley days as in ours. How does methodism dared with multitudes? Especially those rolling waves of uprooted and marginalized population moving through the ways of the empire? We know that Wesley did not like mobs, he distrusted them. Nevertheless methodism has configured in some way and in different historical situations, an appropriated room for empowering the trends of multitudes.

What I want to share is the way in which three historical methodisms dared with moving multitudes. And through these examples I would suggest that a zone for successful interchange of symbolical goods is constructed between some methodisms and some moving migratory populations marked by the social instability.

I also suggest that the big impact provoked by those three different methodisms -in its foundational days- it is related to the dialectic interchange between: methodist message and the subjective needs of those segments of population characterized by their uprooted existence , their anomia and their social mobility expectation.

### England, 18 century

Wesley lived in the midst of one of the biggest civilizatorial crisis of humanity. It was a shift of an economic, technological, demographic and political ethos, but also a process of new subjectivities construction in the sphere of the existential conscience.

It were also the quick multidisciplinary changes in such a short time , what made that huge historical shock possible, said Doug Peacock in his *Understanding the Industrial Revolution: "The global way in which it happened and its vertiginous and sweeping speed has been the clues that made the industrial revolution a watershed for our history"* <sup>1</sup>

The quick growth of the population in the cities was a very complex phenomena which -like a mirror - reflected what that primitive accumulation was provoking: the marginal line between the owners and the outsiders of the system. The national church of that time was "watching another tv channel", she had been conceived by and for the upper classes.

So Wesley conceived a practical Christianity. The launching questions for that experience could have been . "How been a Christian in this context?" That was an ethical question. How to conciliate the redeemed life of humans beings in that every day dehumanizing context? How resisting that crisis?

The first answer of methodism was to take the rolling multitude out of their fatalist isolation by giving them an organizational structure, a room for a face to face relationship.

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<sup>1</sup> *Dough Peacock, [www.cottontimes.co.uk](http://www.cottontimes.co.uk) -Understanding the Industrial Revolution.*

The multitudes are a *trend of singularities*, said, Negri and not a undifferentiated mass. The massive church of England only stressed their isolation.

The communitarian organization of methodism, the small groups and the personal interchange promoted by Wesley himself was the accurate room's design to resist crisis and recover humanity. In terms of Negri the associative modality of methodism could be called a *biospace* where reconstructing the *biopower* of multitudes.

The second answer was the personal wesleyan moral. . Eric Hobsbawm in his *The Revolution Era*, said: "Three possibilities were open to the poor in bourgeois revolution, for those who were at the margin: they may become demoralized, they may rebel themselves or they may push to be bourgeois" .<sup>2</sup> Wesley never pushed methodists to demoralization nor to open rebellion.

The exit was to tend to the bourgeois horizon. That does not necessarily meant becoming an individualist, but recovering a life with dignity. Social mobility and progress was a licit yearning. Making themselves *bourgeois* was a goal aimed in order to give sense to their social lives. Being a *bourgeois* was more an expectation than a realization, it was a cultural impulse fed by the mobilizing utopia of resisting the marginalization. It was through the axiological scale taught at the methodist societies that the modern subjectivity was constructed, the goal of overcoming the situation through personal strength and a powerful will.

The third answer was the hard discipline. Only a virtuous life can make progress, it was said.. Vices were interpreted as the main destroyer of the person and their goal of progress. The hard discipline of the methodist societies, bands and classes was a solid limit for those who had suffered anomia years before. The former outsiders' anomia groaned now for meaningful existential limits. That was the task of that rigid organizing moral. It organized work, time and progress.

So, this interchange's zone was filled up with all those operative meaningful significants and with symbolical goods all which interacted between methodism and that moving population.

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<sup>2</sup> Eric Hobsbawm La Era de la Revolución 1789-1848 , (Biblioteca de Historia Contemporánea Buenos Aires: Crítica-Grijalbo, 1997) 205

### Methodism and the West Border

The other historical example is the methodist experience at the west border of the United States. Going to west had been the new mobilizing utopia for thousands of families who escaped from shortage of lands at the East. It happened that Empire had grown up a little and reached the north American coasts. After independence war the best lands of the East had been kept in few hands, and again the multitude resisted poverty and globalization looking for new horizons. Again, the population in movement. And, again, methodism walked with them. It was amazing, according to the stories of the epoch, to watch the overcrowded waves of migratory caravans driving to west, in the second decade of nineteenth century. *“The old America seems to break and moving toward west...while journeying this wide road to the Ohio there is not a single moment in which not seen big families groups marching ahead and behind of us.”*<sup>3</sup>

These roads to West had also been driven by the methodist itinerant preachers, walking together with that moving population eager of stabilization and future. Peter Cartwright, one of the pillars of the methodist awakening at the South-East, once said: *“Only methodism has been such organized as to be capable to follow step by step to this moving population and to spread the gospel even to the more distant cabin. It was only methodism that has been present there where a grave had been dug or where a baby would lay at his crib.”*<sup>4</sup>

The early methodism in America had in this context a unique role in understanding what the evangelization task at the border should be. The organization and the message that those people needed to survive was adapted to that context. The marks which conformed that zone of interchange has been, basically:

Order to Chaos: *“No other religious force could do more in order to bring order to the border’s chaos as the methodist itinerant preachers did.”* Asserts William Warren Sweet in his *Religion on the American Frontier.*<sup>5</sup> The same way in which Wesley had it done to his methodists at the British’s slums, now the American Methodism had to build a Christians-citizens up from the chaos and their uprooted lives. A hard battle against indecency, dirtiness and chaos was fought.

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<sup>3</sup> *Notes on a Journey in America (London, 1818)p, 31 citado por William Warren Sweet Revivalism in America, Its Origins, Growth and Decline. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1945) 112 ss y Sweet, Religion On the American Frontier, IV The Methodists. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1946) 640*

<sup>4</sup> *Methodist review, LIV, 556-77; LV, 69-88*

<sup>5</sup> *William Warren Sweet, (1946) 3*

That values were now cleanness, decency and ordered lives. A redeemed life at the frontier had to show new values that allowed people feel at home after generations of wandering destiny. . Rigid moral was taught and law trespasses were severely punished. Unbreakable rules had the function of establishing a social covenant and the limits between the legal and forbidden. It is interesting to note that morality and not money was the sign of belonging, of being in or out of the system (this was so, at least on the early times)

Education was a central aim of the frontier methodism. The new society needed its own leaders so they had to be educated. This was related to the Jeffersonian ideal that democracy rest on educated citizens. This was necessary to be disciplined good citizens.

The other symbolical good offered in this zone was the message for empowering the dignity of the poor rural migrants families. People on the frontier used to oppose to the riches, deists and speculators of the East. Liturgically, for example, itinerants preachers helped to the creation of their own patterns of worships, hymns and also theology. This sense of belonging was important for the integration and the generation of new paradigms of socialization (However we have to admit that much of this symbolical universe built it up at the frontier, was the base of what we can call the Southern conservative ideology, but that is another pair of shoes)

The other important component of frontier methodism was given by the influence of the broad phenomena brought by the “second awakening”. Specially the emotional component and the postmillennialist emphasis of their theology, what it was useful for given them an open future expectation and an utopist horizon of mobilization.

#### Methodism and immigration in Buenos Aires (1890-1925)

The Economic depression of 1846-1849 was spread throughout Europe. It was marked by rising food prices after a poor harvest and the recession that followed the industrial expansion in the early 1840s. The agrarian-economical depression together with a high rate of demographic explosion, where the factors that gave impulse to the most significant population movements in modern history. Argentina was a receptive country for immigrants who cross the Atlantic Ocean searching for a better and meaningful life. Since 1830 immigrants had dropped to Argentina

but the year 1880 worked as a turning point. Big waves of European immigrants, Italians and Spaniards mostly, crowded Buenos Aires' harbor. It was called the "aluvional immigration stage".

<u>Year</u>	<u>Total population</u>	<u>Inmigrants</u>
1810	55.000	-----
1852	76.000	-----
1869	177.787	88.126
1887	433.375	228.651
1895	663.854	345.493
1904	850.891	427.850
1909	1.231.698	544.185
1914	1.576.597	964.961

The following picture shows the country where the immigrants came from and the number that arrived to Buenos Aires port in the years 1900 and 1901 .<sup>6</sup>

<u>Nationality</u>	<u>1900</u>	<u>1901</u>
Italians	52.142	60.331
Spaniards	20.383	19.010
French	3.160	2.832
Russians	2.119	2.047
Austrian	2.024	2.633
Syrians	1.583	2.036
Germans	760	865
British	421	452
Swiss	355	344
Portuguese	205	159
Moroccans	142	159
Danishes	121	184
Belgium's	117	122
Rumanians	106	472
North Americans	89	138
Brazilians	82	196
Uruguayos	62	74
Chileans	36	48
Bolivians	10	99
Paraguayans	7	8
Peruvians	7	2

<sup>6</sup> Fuente: Cuadro publicado en La Prensa del 1 enero de 1902, citado por Marta Costa, *Los inmigrantes*, (Buenos Aires: CEAL) 15

The migratory balance between 1880 and 1930 is 3.378.000, of which 65% were men and 35% women, aprox..

All the immigrant itineraries were almost the same. After spending a week at the big Immigrants' Hotel placed at the harbor area, they usually take two destinies. Going to some province to work, together with some relatives already established, in rural duties; or staying at the city to get some dependence employment, and trying their luck. Buenos Aires city grew in a chaotic and vertiginous way in those years.

Methodism arrived to Buenos Aires in 1836 but it was not until 1880 that it had to face the reality of the new changes, specially the increasing population which was sweepingly growing pushed up by the aluvional waves of South European immigrants.

It is significant that this stage of aluvional immigration matches with the rising number of membership in Buenos Aires' Methodism. This indicates the big impact and the high level of empathy that methodism provoked among immigrants.

It is a remarkable data that Methodism's membership was composed 90% by immigrants or immigrant's children at the end of the greater immigrant wave, in 1930. The "native" pastors who followed the American missionaries were -in really great number- Spaniards or Italian in first or second generation, most of them without citizenship cards.

In 1912, when inmigratory wave had reached the top Methodism had 48 pastoral charges and 3619 members. In 1932, at the end of the stage of big demographical explosion, pastoral charges had increased to 56 and membership to 5878 members, this is 79% of what will be the top level of membership in 1963 with 7377 members. This numbers reveals that it was the initial impulse of membership growth sustained by the inmigratory wave which marked the higher membership growth tendency ever seen in Argentina Methodism up to day.

So, we can say that in those times Argentine's methodism had been already been constituted as an European poor urban immigrant based movement.

Which were the factors that have provoked this zone of active and successful interchange,?

Practical solutions: Active Social Service. Sundays school taught how to read in Spanish (those were actual “melting pots”) and also prepared meals during the week for more than four hundred kids each. Methodism fed the foreigners workers gathered in large harbor depots and also visited to their families living in the *Conventillos*. Those were a two or three floors of wooded tined rooms that surrounds a common bathroom placed at the center of a common yard. *Conventillos* also used to have the so called “ warm beds” (those were beds rented three times a day eight hours each rent. They could never get cold) There has been also the place where the first generation of immigrants socialize themselves among immigrants of different countries. When methodism still had few chapels erected it was in the dark room of a *Conventillo* where the worships and prayer meetings were held.

#### The search of a new identitary horizon

Not always past is a good recall. Specially for the immigrants who escaped from Europe running away from poverty, past was a bad memory. Many of them wanted to cut their past by constructing a new identity in the new land. In methodism they found an attractive proposal :

The battle against Catholicism of that time also meant the battle against the forgettable past of almost every immigrant (almost all immigrants in this stage have had a catholic past). The battle cry of methodism was “methodist has to be different” different from who? From Catholics their rites, their faith and also their social habits. But in that context being different meant to be subjects, being someone again after their dehumanizing anonymity of migrants. So, methodism gave immigrants the proper room to be subjects of a new identitary construction..

In methodist message of that time conversion and social differentiation, being a Christian and bourgeois morality, sanctification and social progress were all interchangeable concepts. This message have had great impact over those immigrants which have a high expectation of upward social mobility. The fear to resemble a Catholic (their own past) was only comparable for them to the panic to return to the anonymity, or being carried back to the misery of the past, or feeling again the terror of hunger. The active participation in methodist community made the immigrants co-workers in the construction of a new life in a new land, a new story, a new religion and a new

hope. Homesickness was not precisely the accurate tool in order to fight against uprooting, on the contrary, it was through the actual possibility of inserting themselves in the new social identity and so growing new roots .

### A new frontier's morality

The new identity needed a consolidated bourgeois family pattern. But this was being threatened by a lax moral, vices, alcohol, all “defects” so abundant at the crowded rooms and urban slums inhabited by the immigrants. Also, young men had to leave home to find a job. Families ties were broken and education was missed at early age.

Methodism in this context recovered the frontier's morality. New generations of immigrants grasped themselves so tight to the moral message and its prohibitionists rules in order to find new normative frames to orient themselves in a confusing anomic and dangerous reality.

Education-Progress-Upward mobility . A methodist had to be illustrated and morally immaculate. Those were the new methodist marks to belong. Methodism displayed a profuse work for education of both middle class expensive Colleges and free schools for grassroots immigrant's children. The central message in both cases was the construction of a responsible citizen for the new society to come. This possibility sounded very attractive to the immigrants who wanted to give to their children a better different future than theirs. Methodist Schools so have been a powerful tool of active interchange between methodist's message and society.

Congregations as associative entities. Along this stage, Methodist congregations have played a social-cultural role rather than a religious one. The controversial anti-Catholic or scientific lectures most of the times replaced the sermons, the libraries open to the city, literary clubs, benevolence societies, neighborhood mutual help, gyms for practicing volleyball and basketball, schools for practical offices and elementary arts, lectures on temperance topics, edition of poetic sheets. Multiples sporting, educating and socializing activities were held at the church buildings. The socializing role of those biospaces have had a big impact for the immigrants second young generation's life. Those activities maintained theirs days and theirs weeks full of\_projects and meaning. Besides, those methodist social activities gave the immigrant's families the

opportunity for social binds of which they were lacking in other circles. There, they used to meet friends, they used to get married, there was the school where sending their children, there were the people who will mourn in their funeral and also as a tip, there was a religious message. All life covered with social meaning.

All these items make us suppose that methodism and the first and second generation of immigrants (Italian and Spaniards) were both dialectical subjects of a common symbolical construction which had sustained the self-comprehension as a society of mutual interests. So, the limits of methodism's growth had been kept tightly bound to the limits of that socio-historical dynamical construction.

These zones of successful interchange and impact, we have been talking about, are of course limited. They have a beginning and a closure. The initial context is given by a foundational state ---such for methodism as for the different rolling multitudes we saw—. During mobility situations and foundational stages both methodism and first immigrants generation are dynamic and receptive, one to impact the society the other to overcome the resistance imposed by the new situation. While prevail the originative social circumstances this zone does progress and get strong, both subjects meet themselves and empower each other. Two overlapped realities giving each other meaningful symbolical tools.

Closure context is given when the objective originative conditions shift. In that very moment those markers which had given sense to that initial encounter of interests now will become into an obstacle for the new stages that had to be open. Further researches will be needed to deepen in these hypothesis in order to understand specially the causes of the zone's closure and the usual difficulty of our churches to create a new one.

Just to conclude, on the positive face of the zones, we may say that the three mentioned cases we have seen offers the possibility to draw what we have called the zone of successful

interchange. By doing so we can establish some continuums. This is just a tool with some explanatory power to understand the dialectic dynamics between some methodisms and some inmigratory situations. This could be a clue to understand one of the ways in which methodism has fought against the movements of the empire by empowering the multitudes (always in Negri's terms). And doing so, revising our present.

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