**CIRRuS Conference Contributions** 



# "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain" (Ex. 20:7). Conditions of Pentecostal political agendas in Latin America

by Heinrich Wilhelm Schäfer

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### Abstract

The present contribution focuses on some central aspects of the political strategies of Protestant actors in Latin America. It is based on a study that the author prepared for the ifa Institute for international cultural relations and the German Foreign Office (Schäfer 2019), and the present text is nothing more than a keynote speech given at the 11<sup>th</sup> conference of European Research Network on Global Pentecostalism (GloPent), Basel. February 2020. First, a taxonomy of Protestant actors is developed specifically under the aspect of political engagement, which differs from the traditional confessional taxonomy. On this basis, actors on the religious right will be contrasted with those on the religious left. Then political conditions of religious practice in different countries will be discussed. It becomes clear that not just one condition – such as the Protestant population share, as is often assumed – is decisive, but the interaction of various factors such as policies of laicity, tax law, media access, habitualization, and others. However, a common feature to the religious right is "God Talk", i.e. the direct transfer of religious meaning to political conditions. In contrast, the left conveys its religious positions through ethical discourses. An important factor for social processes is the ability of Pentecostal organizations in particular to adapt to political change, which is illustrated by the example of Central America. The article ends with a reflection on post-secularism.

#### Resumen

La presente contribución enfoca algunos aspectos centrales de las estrategias políticas de los actores protestantes en América Latina. Se basa en un estudio que el autor preparó para el Instituto de Relaciones Culturales Internacionales del ifa y el Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de Alemania (Schäfer 2019), y el presente texto no es nada más que una conferencia magistral en la 11<sup>ª</sup> conferencia de European Research Network on Global Pentecostalism (GloPent), Basilea, febrero de 2020. Al principio se desarrolla una taxonomía de los actores protestantes específicamente bajo el aspecto del compromiso político, que difiere de la taxonomía confesional tradicional. En lo que sigue del artículo, los actores de la derecha religiosa se contrastarán con los de la izquierda religiosa. Como segundo paso se

examinarán las condiciones políticas de la práctica religiosa en los distintos países. Queda claro que no sólo una sola condición – como la proporción de población protestante, según se suele suponer – es decisiva, sino la interacción de diversos factores como las políticas de laicidad, la legislación fiscal, el acceso a los medios de comunicación, la habitualización y otros. Sin embargo, un rasgo común a la derecha religiosa es el "God Talk", es decir, la transposición directa de un significado religioso a condiciones políticas dadas. En cambio, la izquierda transmite sus posiciones religiosas a través de discursos éticos. Un factor importante para los procesos sociales es la capacidad de las organizaciones pentecostales en particular para adaptarse a los cambios políticos, lo que se ilustra con el ejemplo de América Central. El artículo termina con una reflexión sobre el postsecularismo.

# 1 Introduction

Doña Rosa is pastor of a small sheet metal church in a shanty town in Guatemala. Outside the shag, the name is prominently displayed: *Jesús nuestra fortaleza* (Jesus our strength). Doña Rosa explains that Jesus gives the believers strength so that they can endure the hardships of their everyday life.

In the *Luz Eterna*-church in a slum in Nicaragua the preacher emphasizes that Jesus dumped shame upon the powerful and took the side of the poor.

The very opposite is claimed by leaders of many Neopentecostal churches. The meaning and purpose of Christian existence is wealth and health; and the meaning and purpose of the praxis of Neopentecostal leaders is the exercise of political power, among other things by satanizing political opponents.

In recent decades, the political influence of Pentecostal churches in Latin America has increased significantly. The examples are well known: Brazil, Guatemala, the coup plotters in Bolivia and others. Nevertheless, we cannot speak of "the" Pentecostal movement. Rather, in Latin America there are many and very different forms of Pentecostal praxis. Furthermore, the social and political contexts in Latin American countries vary considerably. And finally, the religious message in word and deed varies according to the course of social change.

In consequence, I will address the following issues in this lecture:

- a political taxonomy of Protestant actors,
- the political conditions of religious practice,
- religious-ethical discourse versus God talk,
- and the ambivalent adaptability of Pentecostal praxis.
- I will end with a brief normative reflection.

In my previous work, I have mainly studied the practice of lay people, followers, churchmembers. In this lecture, I will concentrate exclusively on the praxis of religious experts, that is, functionaries, representatives, leaders, bishops, and so-called "apostles". Please keep this in mind!

## 2 Religious-political actors – name the game

If they are active in politics, Pentecostal experts compete or cooperate with other religious actors, and with political actors of different political orientation: that is, with churches of other denominations, indigenous religions, political parties, NGOs, and so on. This means that the logic of their praxis is not simply religious anymore. In consequence, we are in trouble with the classical denominational typologies, such as: historical or Mainline Protestants, Evangelicals, Pentecostals, Charismatics, and Neopentecostals; then also: first, second and third "Wave", Independent Network Charismatics, and so on.<sup>1</sup> With regard to religious-political strategies, these categories are more confusing than helpful. For example, the Asambleas de Dios—a classical Pentecostal denomination par excellence—can be found in politics from the left through to the extreme right.

However, close observation of course reveals regular patterns of religious-political behavior. We can recognize them—akin with habitus formations—as clusters of actors with similar religious-political strategies. The denominational types are represented in different proportions "within" each of these politically relevant formations of religious actors. I distinguish between the following formations:<sup>2</sup>

- Actors of the formation Hope for an Afterlife (Jenseitshoffnung) concentrate their faith on their salvation in the hereafter. They are not politically active. The formation is predominantly composed by classical Pentecostals and Evangelicals. They belong mostly to the lower class, both formal and informal.
- Actors of the formation we call Values of God's Kingdom want to bring these values to bear in the society by means of social service. They usually adhere to historical Protestantism, Evangelicalism, small independent Pentecostal churches or churches of indigenous people. Their social position varies between lower middle class and lower class.
- In the formation Law of God, the actors try to bring divine commandments in a legalistic way to bear in society. They usually come from the Evangelical as well as the Pentecostal tradition. Often, they belong to the descending (lower) middle class and the formal lower class.
- Actors of the formation Management&Prosperity strive to dominate the political system by means of prosperity doctrine, management ideals, and dominion ideology. They often belong to Neopentecostalism, classical Pentecostalism, or Charismatics. Socially they are located in the rising upper middle class through to even the upper class.

What are the relations between these agglomerations of actors? Of course, these relations are shaped less by religious positions than by the growing polarization of the political field. Today, the formations MANAGEMENT and LAW generally belong to the religious right. In

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> These labels are problematic even for denominational studies. For example, even organizations identified as Neopentecostal expose, despite semantic similarities, a completely different praxis in the upper middle class than in lower classes.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> For details on the making of this typology see Schäfer 2019.

contrast, the formation VALUES OF GOD'S KINGDOM articulates positions of the liberal left. The actors of both camps cooperate with either right or left Catholics and with secular organizations. Depending on the country, this derives into, more or less, open conflicts. The formation AFTERLIFE, however, is politically not active.<sup>3</sup>

Our further reflections are guided by the polarization between the religious right and the religious liberal left. In what kind of political conditions does it occur?

# 3 Political conditions – Laicity and religion

For the political performance of religious actors, the liberal, secularist, and laicist revolutions in the 19th century against the Catholic colonial power are highly important.<sup>4</sup> However, religious freedom and *laicité* were established and realized in very different ways. By far not in all countries applied a strict laicism following the French model. There are many mixed forms. On a scale of laicism, Mexico would be at the top, Guatemala in the middle, Brazil in the lower third; and the Catholic State-Church model of Costa Rica at the very bottom.

This raises the question of which socio-political factors orient and limit the political involvement of religious actors.

*Laicism* itself is important. The degree to which laicism is enforced by the State limits the degree as to which religious actors are politicized. In Mexico, thanks to strict legal separation of State and churches, politics has been largely kept free from religious discourse. Nevertheless, laicism is only one factor among several others.

The percentage of *Protestant population* is often seen as indicating well the political significance of Pentecostal actors. In Latin America, the proportions vary between almost 50% in Guatemala and less than 10% in Paraguay and Mexico. However, on closer examination this indicator is at best of interest for voting in elections. Yet, by no means all Pentecostals vote for so-called "Christian" candidates. Therefore, the indicator is not very reliable.

In addition, in Latin America—unlike in the USA—there is a real spectrum of *political parties*, some of which can look back on important political traditions, such as the Peronists in Argentina, the APRA in Peru or the PT in Brazil. Therefore, the electorate—Pentecostal or not—safeguards traditional loyalties that do not stem from religious orientation. Moreover, one cannot project religious loyalties clearly onto political parties, as it is the case in the USA.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> But firstly, it exercises the well-known depoliticizing function of the non-political; and secondly, its followers are occasionally mobilized for the goals of the formation LAW OF GOD.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Latin America is generally regarded as the "Catholic continent." But for our purpose and because of a lack of time, we can neglect the relation between Pentecostalism and Catholicism in this lecture. However, it is good to know that Latin American Catholicism is highly differentiated in religious and political terms. A strongly institutionalized but financially weak hierarchy is different from a magicalritualistic popular praxis; and the political spectrum ranges from the Theology of Liberation to Catholic fascism. Thus religious competition and political alliances with Pentecostal actors are possible in all directions.

Another factor is the presence of US-*missionaries*. The rule seems to be this: The less influence they have, the stronger is the trend towards politicization among national personnel. Brazil is the best example of this rule.

An important factor is *finance*. Money is a universal medium of exchange. Of course, it is true that money hardly buys religious authority in direct way—simony is illegitimate. Nevertheless, money can be used to buy propaganda, media, "friends," influence, transport, buildings, etcetera. All this can help to obtain religious symbolic capital and to buy or to found a "religious" political party. Especially the MANAGEMENT-formation offers many examples of enrichment among religious experts, the influence of money on the religious field, and the investment of church-money and religious recognition in politics.

The access of religious actors to *media*—radio, television, the Internet—is extremely important for mass mobilization. However, it depends directly on both finance and laicism of the State. Prosperity preachers of mega-churches usually have a very good fundraising record. It is their "primitive accumulation," one could say with Marx. They preferably invest this money in media. Nevertheless, depending on the national degree of laicity, these practices are more or less strongly regulated. In Mexico, media access for religious actors is generally forbidden, and financial operations of churches are strictly controlled. In Brazil, in spite of a generally laicist frame, church money is being invested tax-free in "church" broadcast, and the "religious" revenue can be reinvested, for instance, in "ecclesiastical" real estate or firms, and so forth. This generates bootleg money and accounts in Panama. (De Sanctis 2015) But above all, the media generate publicity and thus political capital.

A further factor is the extent to which laicity is anchored in the *habitus* of a national population. In Colombia, after the end of the Catholic State-church in 1991, MANAGEMENT actors<sup>5</sup> were able to establish "religious" political parties in very short time. Among other factors, this was possible since religious interference into politics was habitually accepted by the public and by the political system. Together with the political right, the majority of the MANAGEMENT-actors caused the 2016 plebiscite on the peace process to fail—with a campaign plagued by generalized fraud, systematic lies, psychological manipulation, and deception of the electorate, according to a judgment of the highest administrative court. (Consejo de Estado 2016)

To the contrary, the example of Mexico shows that a strictly laicist policy can keep political interference by religious actors to a minimum, even under conditions of religious freedom. In Mexico, religious discourse in politics is still widely regarded as a nuisance.

In sum, it is difficult to point out general patterns for all Latin America. However, one thing is present throughout the continent: the contrast between ethical discourse and God Talk.

# 4 "God Talk" and religious ethics – the problem of revelation

When I say "God Talk" I don't mean "theo-logy" in general. Rather, I use the term to denote the direct overdetermination of political events or actors with religious meaning. For

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> ...with a weak percentage of Protestant population of about 15%.

instance, the Guatemalan dictator Efraín Rios Montt (1982) and the Mexican ex-president Felipe Calderón (2006) were called "King David;" or indigenous customs are labeled as "demonic", as for instance by the putschists in Bolivia.

In contrast to these religious-political strategies, modern democracies are based on the differentiation of social fields. In modernity, politics, law, economy, religion, etcetera are expert games with their own practical logic.<sup>6</sup>

God Talk severely contradicts the very foundations of modern, pluralistic, and democratic societies. It serves to dominate the political field by absolute religious judgments—immune against secular critique. The religious experts of the formations MANAGEMENT and LAW deliberately undermine the linguistic boundaries between social spheres and thus promote the breakdown of social differentiation.

In the present, such de-differentiation is an important condition for the emergence of postdemocratic conditions (Crouch) and refeudalization.<sup>7</sup> In politics, this trend is noticeable among other things by the fact that more and more extremely wealthy individuals are holding high political offices thanks to the mobilization by means of money and their own media. It is not anymore the merits gained by many years of political work that lead to (electoral) success. Furthermore, income is inherited, work-free and risk-free; social politics is turned into alms-giving. Finally, the holders of economic and communicational capital tear down the boundaries of the political field. God Talk partakes in eroding the functional limits of modern societies.

In sharp contrast to God Talk, the actors of the VALUES-formation articulate religious convictions in the context of political debate as ethical statements. Thus, their interventions are accessible for criticism and dialogue under secular and laicist conditions. For example, they expound the prophetic concept of a just society (*mishpat*, in the Old Testament) as an example of how social policy can be shaped—but not as an absolute judgment. Such an argument is open to be questioned from secular and laicist positions on social justice. Some of the ethical interventions of the current Mexican President López Obrador work in this way.

However, Christians of the Pentecostal movement seem to be particularly susceptible to God Talk. Why is that so?

The Pentecostal movement originated in the USA at a time when the *logos* of technocratic modernity had largely erased the millennia-old myths of humanity. It is important to record the difference: *Myth* lends meaning to existence; *logos*, in turn, operates with facts.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> In everyday life and from the perspective of actors, operations that belong to different fields are constantly being mixed up. Nevertheless, different logics apply. But these are fully expressed only in the field-specific interaction of experts.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Olaf Kaltmeier 2019; Neckel 2010; Schäfer 2020, 657 ff.. We refer basically to the following traits: (1) reinforcement—nearly as in medieval estates—of origin, heritage, and the associated acquis; (2) work- and risk-free income; (3) erosion of the principles of performance and merit; (4) transformation of social policy into voluntary alms; (5) kin-liability in employment relationships: If someone is ill, they must send a family member.

However, modernity soon created its own myths: the boundless capitalist accumulation and innovation; the development into a technocratic paradise; individualism; Social Darwinism, as homologous to the evolution of species. Finally, money became the blood of the social body. Thus, the technocratic *logos* turned itself into the key-myth of capitalist modernity. However, the paradise of modernity was—and still is—only accessible to the rich and educated.<sup>8</sup>

In harsh contrast, the first members of the Pentecostal movement were definitely among the losers of the technocratic revolution, just like many poor Pentecostals in Latin America are today. From their position of powerlessness, the first Pentecostals cultivated their own myths.<sup>9</sup> The decisive myth of the Pentecostal movement among the lower classes is the possibility of directly receiving divine revelation through ecstatic experiences. In other words, without Bible-reading divine truth turns accessible for illiterate people. For the *Millhands and Preachers* (Pope 1942) of the first generation, who otherwise had no resources, the belief in direct revelation and in the imminent return of Christ was the only means of self-affirmation and empowerment. Also today, in the small Pentecostal churches of the Latin American slums the belief in direct revelation serves still the self-protection of the exploited. It is a praxis of lay persons for their everyday life.

To the contrary, political activism is usually the business of religious experts. They are objectively obliged to obey the institutional dynamics of their organizations. They have a clientele with the capacity for effective action in society. They have very good chances of accumulating various types of capital that are objectively valuable in various fields of society, among others in politics. These favorable conditions tempt the leaders to play out a specific advantage: God Talk. Thus, the formation of MANAGEMENT—especially the Neopentecostals among it-literally concentrate specialists for the political abuse of pretended "direct revelation". Further, it is important to note that these experts do not act from subaltern positions, but from social positions of power. Multi-million dollar mega-church leaders claim the authority of direct divine instructions at their hands, give themselves the title of "apostles", demand unconditional obedience, and deliver political judgments "in the name of God"—for instance even the order of murdering a certain politician.<sup>10</sup> They link their claim to revelation with other myths-mostly self-invented as Spiritual Warfare, Prosperity, or Dominion. In doing so they aim at the most comprehensive possible control of political institutions such as parties, parliaments, and governments. Guatemala, Brazil, Bolivia, and Colombia, among others, show how it works. Through their strategic mobilization on social-

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Historical Protestantism and evangelical fundamentalism of the Gilded Age have been duped in different ways by the technocratic Logos. Some—such as Henry Ward Beecher—advocated Social Darwinist ideas of progress, while others treated the Bible as an empirical fact-book.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> The Pentecostal movement shared one of these updated myths with many evangelical organizations: premillennialism. "God does not let the trees grow into the sky"—a popular critical theory of evolutionism.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> For instance, in 2005 Pat Robertson publicly called for the assassination of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez by a CIA task force because God presumably told him so. <u>http://www.patrobertson.com/pressreleases/hugochavez.asp</u>. 24.8.2005, accessed 1.10.2006.

moral issues—such as gender, abortion, or family—the MANAGEMENT-actors also serve the interests of the formation Law. Thus, they create a broad basis for mobilization.

A sharp contrast exists to the praxis of the formation VALUES OF GOD'S KINGDOM.<sup>11</sup> In this formation, a change in the concept of revelation takes place. The young and often poor leaders consider revelation a clearly personal and a religious experience. This does not mean political abstinence. But the spiritual experience is not applied directly and as objective truth to social issues. For their religious convictions, the actors rather seek ethical mediations that work in contexts of dialogue with non-believers and believers of other faiths. They do not aim at dominating a society; they want democratic participation, social work, or the rule of law—as for example in the case of the Brazilian *Frente de Evangélicos pelo Estado de Direito*.

These considerations allow confirming a well-known property of the Pentecostal movement at large: it is able to adapt very flexibly to different social circumstances. However, this ability is ambivalent.

# 5 Ambivalent adaptability – from war to refeudalization

We can examine the ambivalence of adaptability by the example of the formations MANAGEMENT and VALUES in Central America during the last 40 years. In this period, we can roughly distinguish three phases of social change. Each of them has led to changes in the political strategies of religious actors.

The first phase is characterized by armed conflicts and/or dictatorships. Besides Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua, other countries such as Peru, Chile, Argentina and Brazil had similar experiences. During this period, the formation MANAGEMENT made particular use of the narrative of "Spiritual Warfare" to convey aggressive religious dispositions to its members, to legitimize violence from above, satanize the opposition, or to prevent peace negotiations. The VALUES-formation, on the other hand, generally supported peace processes. Those Pentecostals involved in the opposition from below adapted to ethical discourse with regard to political issues while maintaining enthusiastic ritual forms.

In the second phase, the majority of Latin American countries were forced to submit to the restructuring policies of the International Monetary Fund and were transformed according to neoliberal principles. As a result, traditional social forms of organization—such as the trade unions—lost relevance; and at the same time, a new, technocratic and upcoming class gained power. The formation MANAGEMENT reacted to this development by enhancing its propaganda for prosperity. It thus legitimizes the winners, and it blames the unsuccessful for their calamities. On the other hand, the formation VALUES in this situation increasingly focused on social work, the propagation of social justice, the recognition of ethnic groups, and the emancipation of women. In short, it defended the victims of the neoliberal attack.

In the third phase, we currently experience refeudalization. As already mentioned, the practical logic of refeudalization consists in the fact that extremely well-resourced actors

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> This formation is (still) influenced by historical Protestantism. But more and more independent Pentecostal churches and congregations as well as Pentecostal academics are joining.

dissolve the boundaries between differentiated social fields and enforce wide-ranging claims to power. The formation MANAGEMENT has been able to adapt quickly to this logic by means of its Dominion ideology. According to the logic of refeudalization, religious experts of the formation MANAGEMENT propagate their imaginary "divine revelation" in order to claim political power for "Christian" politicians or even for themselves. Here, the Dominiondoctrine gains special significance as a religious theory of how to undermine social differentiation. Seven Mountain Dominionism is an example of this all-embracing religious claim to power. However, Dominionism is highly controversial within the Latin American Pentecostal movement. The actors of the VALUES-formation, in contrast, emphasize *political* strategies for the political arena, such as the promotion of Human Rights and the rule of law as well as the implementation of international jurisdiction. Moreover, they insist on legitimate diversity regarding family, gender, and ethnicity. And finally, many actors in this formation are directly and personally confronted with the objective consequences of economic refeudalization, such as land-grabbing or the sharp increase in extractivist industries.

In conclusion, we can see that both the formations VALUES and MANAGEMENT adapt to changing circumstances. Most actors of the VALUES-formation take these changes as results of a social transformation. The experts of MANAGEMENT rather claim higher revelation in order to legitimize their own policies.

Coming to the end, our comparisons among politically active Pentecostals elicit a normative observation.

# 6 Post-secular dialogue – normative comments

Latin America is the continent with the strongest social antagonisms worldwide. This facilitates recognizing religious differences sharply. In the Pentecostal Movement—according to the broadest sense of the term—strong differences come to light between the formations that we have called MANAGEMENT and VALUES.<sup>12</sup>

The well-to-do MANAGEMENT actors legitimize neoliberal politics and refeudalization with religious ideologies such as Spiritual Warfare, Prosperity, and Dominionism. They are mainly interested in their own shares in political power. Their most important instrument to undermine social differentiation is God Talk, that is, the immediate transfer of religious meanings to political, economic, and cultural affairs. In conclusion, at the very center of their praxis is the transformation of money and political power into a religious fetish.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> The fundamental difference can be exemplified very well if we look at a religious practice that is very typical of the Pentecostal movement, that of the miracle. The logic of the prosperity doctrine in economic terms and that of dominionism in political terms pursue the self-interest of individuals and religious groups. The actors invoke miracles for themselves. The logic of the miracle in the Pentecostal churches of the lower class in most cases is reversed: one prays primarily for others and performs miracles on others.

At this point, I take the liberty of speaking as a theologian: One is reminded of (Deutero-) Isaiah's polemics against the golden Babylonian idols. For me, the formation MANAGEMENT theologically represents the heresy par excellence of late modernity.

On the contrary, the actors of the formation VALUES are mostly at home in the slums or the crowded neighborhoods of the lower middle class. They bring Christian practice to bear by standing up for democratic participation and social justice, both through ethical discourse and social commitment. Thus, they respect not only the differentiation of modern societies; they also respect their neighbors, the non-Christian people. They respect them because they are fellow human beings or, in religious key, because they are fellow creatures of God.

The respect towards others can be expressed in humanist key *and* in religious key. Movements that hold religious ethics legitimately coexist with an equally legitimate laicist State in a modern, post-secular society. In my opinion, the recommendation by Jürgen Habermas<sup>13</sup> is valid for this condition: All of us, laicist *and* religious people, need to become able to *interpret* and to *translate* the convictions *of* the other – and our own convictions *to* the other.

Coming back to Pentecostalism, a final remark: The recommendation of Habermas does not contradict an enthusiastic piety. In the Pentecostal churches of the VALUES-formation the believers certainly experience to be filled with divine power—with strength, *fortaleza*, as Doña Rosa calls it. But their hermeneutical standpoint—their social position—is *not power*. Their position is rather on the "lower side of history", *el reverso de la historia*, as the theologian of liberation Gustavo Gutiérrez calls it. Here, to be endowed with divine strength bestows resilience for the struggle against the daily consequences of exploitation and against the inroads of the power brokers. Most probably, the legitimate Pentecostal movement is just that—and only that!—what researchers so often declare it to be: Legitimately, it is a movement of the poor, the outcasts on the margins of society... Let us say, the congregation of Doña Rosa.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> "Moral sentiments, which until now could be expressed only in a rather exclusionary way through religious language, might find general resonance as soon as they find a redemptive formulation for what has been almost forgotten, but is still implicitly missed. This approach very seldom succeeds, but sometimes it does. A secularization that does not annihilate is brought about as a kind of translation." Habermas 2004.

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