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**Morally Defensible Violent Political Action in Liberal  
Democracies: Left-Wing Inspired Riots, Protests, and Civil  
Disobedience**

Bachelor's Thesis

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Study programme: Politics, Philosophy, and Economics

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## **Declaration**

1. I hereby declare that I have compiled this thesis using the listed literature and resources only.
2. I hereby declare that my thesis has not been used to gain any other academic title.
3. I fully agree to my work being used for study and scientific purposes.

In Prague on 30.07. 2024

Elise Brady

## References

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## **Abstract**

The thesis explores the justification of violence in political protests within the twenty-first-century United States, focusing on non-state actor violence such as riots, occupations, and blockades. It employs a unique cumulative argument structure, traditionally used in legal and scientific contexts, to systematically address the moral and practical dimensions of protest violence. Central to the analysis are three justificatory strategies: Radical Democracy, Marxism, and Liberation Theology. Each framework is examined for its ability to justify political protest violence under specific conditions, with an emphasis on its strengths and limitations. By synthesizing elements from these strategies, the thesis develops a nuanced argument that seeks to justify protest violence in certain circumstances while neutralizing counterarguments. The concluding argument includes a unique and holistic way of approaching justifying political violence, with certain aspects utilized to address particular circumstances and criticism. This cumulative approach not only provides a robust defense of protest violence but also offers a comprehensive critique of the arguments against it, contributing to the broader discourse on political philosophy.

## **Abstrakt**

Práce zkoumá ospravedlnění násilí v politických protestech ve Spojených státech 21. století se zaměřením na násilí nestátních aktérů, jako jsou nepokoje, okupace a blokády. Využívá jedinečnou kumulativní strukturu argumentů, tradičně používanou v právním a vědeckém kontextu, k systematickému řešení morálních a praktických rozměrů protestního násilí. Ústředním bodem analýzy jsou tři ospravedlňující strategie: radikální demokracie, marxismus a teologie osvobození. Každý rámec je zkoumán z hlediska jeho schopnosti ospravedlnit

politické protestní násilí za specifických podmínek, s důrazem na jeho silné stránky a omezení. Syntézou prvků z těchto strategií práce rozvíjí nuancovanou argumentaci, která se snaží za určitých okolností ospravedlnit protestní násilí a zároveň neutralizovat protiargumenty. Závěrečný argument zahrnuje jedinečný a holistický způsob přístupu k ospravedlňování politického násilí, přičemž určité aspekty se využívají k řešení konkrétních okolností a kritiky. Tento kumulativní přístup poskytuje nejen robustní obranu protestního násilí, ale nabízí také komplexní kritiku argumentů proti němu, čímž přispívá k širšímu diskurzu o politické filozofii.

## **Keywords**

Protest, Political Violence, Radical Democracy, Marxism, Liberation Theology, Cumulative Argument, Argument Strategy, Revolution, Liberal Democracy

## **Klíčová slova**

Protest, Politické násilí, Radikální demokracie, Marxismus, Teologie osvobození, Kumulativní argument, Strategie argumentů, Revoluce, Liberální demokracie

## **Název práce**

Morálně obhajitelné násilné politické akce v liberálních demokraciích: nepokoje inspirované levicí, protesty a občanská neposlušnost

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## **Introduction**

Undertaking the task of justifying political violence appears dangerous; its justification could lead to implications of war and destruction. However, this academic text has no ambitions to justify the violence witnessed on the battlefield or by state power, but rather the violence used in protests: actions in the media of vandalism, broken windows, and protestors with homemade gas masks facing down a line of militarized police. Non-violent resistance has produced radical change across continents, but what justifies the moment a protestor decides “enough is enough” and puts down the sign and picks up a brick? Violent political protest has played a significant role in change, and as protest strategies become more sensationalized in the media, an investigation into its justification appears relevant. The thesis aims to analyze certain aspects of political protest violence and construct a unique and robust argument for its justification, specifically in the framework of the United States in the twenty-first century. This work will contribute to a long-standing discussion of political and moral philosophical views regarding political violence and its justification. Although the thesis plans to outline and explore existing arguments that justify political violence, its significant contribution lies in its unique argumentative structure. The thesis will outline solidified justificatory strategies—Radical Democracy, Marxism, and Liberation Theology—and examine their contributions to the discussion of political protest violence. However, each justificatory strategy does not provide a satisfactory argument for the justification of political violence in the United States, as inevitable tensions exist in the context or plausibility. Therefore, the thesis aims to synthesize certain substantial elements of the existing justificatory strategies by utilizing a methodological device inspired by the cumulative argument. The cumulative argument is a lesser-known argumentative structure in informal logic, which will be outlined further in the preliminary chapters due to its



complexity and the small amount of published literature on the subject. By utilizing respected political and philosophical perspectives and a unique and comprehensive argumentative strategy, the thesis provides a new and unique approach to the question of “When is political protest violence justifiable and in what circumstances?” The new and original argumentative structure proposed in the thesis aims to provide a nuanced and holistic answer to this critical question.

The relevance of the thesis lies in its timely examination of a critical issue in modern political discussion. In an era where political unrest and protest movements frequently make headlines, understanding the multiple dimensions of political violence in protest is crucial for scholars and protestors. The United States, with its history of violent and nonviolent resistance, serves as a compelling case for analysis. Recent events in contemporary U.S. history, from the civil rights and anti-war movements to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and Occupy Wall Street, motivate analyzing political protest violence. Political violence in the United States is not just a recent occurrence; the nation’s history is rooted in violence, from the colonization of Indigenous peoples to the Revolutionary War. Therefore, the country provides an interesting and complex case for political and philosophical analysis regarding violence.

Furthermore, this thesis is particularly applicable given the United States’ current socio-political climate, characterized by deep-seated inequalities, systemic oppression, democratic backsliding, and increasing civil unrest. By providing a comprehensive framework for evaluating political violence, this work aims to contribute to the ongoing dialogue about achieving social change while providing a new and original argument structure. Moreover, this work challenges prevailing narratives that often dismiss or condemn political violence without understanding its contexts. Through this exploration, the thesis aspires to offer valuable insights for grappling with the complexities of protest, resistance, and social justice in the twenty-first century.

## **Outline**

Chapter 1: Preliminaries provides contextual development and definition building of critical terms, particularly “political violence” and the methodological device, the “cumulative argument.” Part 1.1, Defining Political Violence, will first outline the actions and ideas encompassing the concept of “political violence,” provide examples, and exclude specific actions to narrow the understanding of the subject matter further. The definition of political violence will also involve contextualizing and structuring an understanding of the United States as a liberal democracy. This approach aims to clarify the dynamics between a liberal state governed by the rule of law and the interplay of human expression and political violence. Chapter 1, Part 1.2, will also include an overview of the cumulative argument: the methodological device used to justify political protest violence in certain circumstances. Part 1.2.1, Introduction to the Concept of the Cumulative Argument, will explain the cumulative argument structure used in informal logic and highlight literature that has inspired the original cumulative argument presented in the thesis. Part 1.2.2 will provide an overview of the original and unique cumulative argument that justifies political violence by synthesizing specific justificatory strategies.

Chapter 2: Justificatory Strategies will provide an overview of the three justificatory strategies used to synthesize an argument for justifying political protest violence in certain circumstances. This section incorporates the literature review concept as it outlines articles and works paramount to each justificatory strategy. Parts 2.1, 2.2, and 2.3 will present a thematic progression through the key justificatory frameworks employed in this thesis. Specifically, Part 2.1 will provide an overview of Radical Democracy, Part 2.2 will address Marxism, and Part 2.3 will examine Liberation Theology.

Chapter 3, Original Cumulative Argument, will utilize Radical Democracy, Marxism, and Liberation Theology to develop a comprehensive justification for political protest violence in

specific situations. Part 3.1 will outline the commonalities among the three approaches to demonstrate their cohesion and shared perspectives. Following this, Part 3.2 will confront pragmatic counterarguments against political protest violence: subsection 3.2.1 will discuss the argument that violence is counterproductive. Continuing on, subsection 3.2.2 will address the claim that violence is unnecessary. Finally, Part 3.3 will address moral concerns raised by deontologists regarding the justification of political violence, providing a detailed examination of how these concerns are addressed by synthesizing the three strategies. Lastly, the Conclusion will summarize the findings of the unique cumulative argument and offer insight into the applicability of the argument in future U.S. protests.

## **Chapter 1: Preliminaries**

### ***1.1 Defining Political Violence***

The term “political violence” broadly refers to violent actions with political motives, including acts ranging from terrorism to vandalism. However, the thesis will focus specifically on violent actions occurring within political protests by non-state actors in the United States. This specific scope is chosen to maintain relevance and applicability to studying political violence concerning protests. The scope of political protest violence in the thesis will attempt to contain all aspects typically associated with protests in the United States, involving protest actions such as:

- Riots: Spontaneous or planned public disruptions involving physical disturbance or clashes with authorities/counter-actors, typically as a product of political or social tensions;

- Black Blocs: Groups of protestors dressed in black and using tactics of anonymity to carry out actions such as riots, property destruction, vandalism, arson, etc.;
- Marches: Peaceful or violent/disruptive public walks through streets, typically ending at a symbolic location;
- Occupations: Long-term sit-ins in which protestors set up camps within public, private, or government spaces. Occupations can lead to destruction of property, arson, or looting;
- Blockades: Physical barriers set up by protestors that may involve property destruction or illegal appropriation of materials. (Fahlenbrach et al., 2016)

The thesis will first adopt a broad definition of violence outlined by Thomas E. Hill to provide a more precise scope of political violence. Hill's definition involves the use of physical force to injure or damage persons or objects; "often, violence is a 'violation' of a legal or moral norm, as in assault, murder, mayhem, kidnapping, rape, torture, etc." (Hill, 2000, p. 108).

However, Hill cautions that this definition is not always relevant, as not all bodily or object damage is wrong; he brings to mind violence that may even be celebrated, such as a surgeon cutting a person for a life-saving surgery or the joy of watching a boxing match (Hill, 2000, p. 108). Therefore, he elaborates that approval (such as moral and legal) at the end of an act prevents the action from being labelled as violent (Hill, 2000, p. 108). Political violence, then, is "violence with political purposes" (Hill, 2000, p. 108). To Hill, "for violence to be political... the primary aim is not merely for revenge, profit, personal grudge, and the like,.. but at least in part to gain or retain control of legal and political institutions, to express an ideology, to gain or assert a perceived right, etc." (Hill, 2000, p. 108). In summary, to Hill, political violence involves an act that enacts physical harm to a body or object that is not approved by certain boundaries and serves a political purpose. Hill's definition is well-suited for the thesis because it provides a comprehensive framework that distinguishes politically motivated violence from other forms of

harm, allowing for a focused analysis of protest actions within a liberal democracy like the United States.

The scope and criteria of political violence must also be established for the thesis to encapsulate the forms of political violence that will be investigated. The works of sociologist Charles Tilly provide a critical concept to apply to the criteria of political violence, specifically in his discussions of “collective violence.” Tilly’s concept of collective violence provides a narrower scope, as it excludes individual violent acts in the political realm and explains the relational nature of violent, non-governmental actors. According to Tilly, in his work *The Politics of Collective Violence* (2008), “collective violence is not simply individual aggression writ at large” and possesses a relational aspect based around social interactions, processes, and structures (Tilly, 2008, p. 4). Tilly’s relational approach emphasizes the importance of understanding the social ties, structures, and processes that influence collective violence. The relational mechanisms between protestors in politically violent protests create an understanding of the types of protestors and protests investigated in the thesis, such as protest groups or protestors that share collective social ties and interact. This relational aspect excludes randomized acts of violence with no connection to a broader protest movement that may erupt from a chaotic protest atmosphere. Therefore, it eliminates randomized acts of violence that may not serve the goals or be part of the shared interests of the larger group, for example, excluding random attacks or muggings of bystanders during riots. Following Charles Tilly's framework, the thesis will focus on collective violence: group actions rather than isolated individuals. This collective violence includes organized or spontaneous violence by protest movements and groups with shared social processes, ideas, or structures. For instance, this consists of the George Floyd protests in 2020, where various forms of collective action, including riots, property destruction, and long-term occupations, were unified by common themes of racial justice and police reform

(Cachelin, 2023). Tilly's perspective is crucial for the thesis as it shifts the focus from individual motives to the broader social interactions that facilitate collective violence.

Further criteria for "political violence" must be included, mainly the exclusion of terrorism. Terrorism possesses a complexity and distinct nature that necessitates separate, extensive analysis. Though a form of political violence, terrorism's key distinct features will be limited from the thesis. Specifically, the thesis will exclude the terroristic indirect strategy of "victim target differentiation" as well as the fear and psychological strategies associated with terrorist attacks (Yamamoto, 2023). In terrorist attacks, one of its complexities lies in the victim target differentiation, in which terrorists will attack targets of violence (victims/non-combatants) to elicit responses from target third-party actors (such as governments) and to advance the terrorist's goals (Yamamoto, 2023, p. 1) A violent terrorist attack has political goals, but its indirect nature (attacking victims/uninvolved parties instead of directly attacking the parties of interests) differentiates it from violent protest tactics (Yamamoto, 2023, p. 2).

Furthermore, the focus on specific responses elicited from victims/bystanders/noncombatants of terrorist groups differentiates terrorism from the political violence discussed in the thesis. Terrorists seek to elicit fear, anger, panic, anxiety, and vengefulness from opponents, and desire, joy, fervor, satisfaction, or even sympathy from supporters or potential supporters (Yamamoto, 2023, p. 11) While terrorist attacks aim to manipulate emotions and reactions through indirect violence, protest groups typically direct their actions towards immediate and clear political or social goals (Yamamoto, 2023). For instance, protest movements, such as the Palestinian Liberation Movement protests, aim to bring attention to the United States' involvement in Israeli attacks, massive casualties, and colonization of Palestinian peoples by directly engaging in demonstrations, marches, confrontations with authorities, and in some cases, riots, and property destruction. While violence is involved in these instances, the distinction must

be made that there are no targeted “victims” and no indirect attacks on individuals, such as bystanders or random civilians, to further the political goal of the protest group. Any outliers of these restrictions cannot be included in the broader movement. Additionally, there is no attempt to instill fear, anxiety, or psychological distress. Unlike terrorist groups, which often target civilians to provoke broader societal responses, protest groups focus their actions on drawing direct attention to their causes and demanding change from specific political institutions or figures. This distinction highlights the more direct and targeted nature of political protest violence compared to the often broad and indirect strategies employed by terrorists.

Further criteria for the framework of political violence include a focus on actions situated explicitly within a liberal democracy such as the United States. The United States is characterized by its basis on liberal democratic theory, specifically with a focus on the rule of law, the exercise of freedom, the autonomy of humans as moral agents, a constitutional framework, and democratic governance such as checks and balances and free elections (Greenwood-Reeves, 2022). In such a context, political violence manifests differently compared to authoritarian regimes or conflict zones. The presence of democratic institutions, legal frameworks, and civil liberties influences the expression of political violence. Protest movements in liberal democracies may be based on influencing democratic institutions such as legislative bodies or swaying public opinion or government policy through direct and visible actions. The context of a liberal democracy like the United States also means that violent political protests are performed under the scrutiny of the free press and with strictly outlined legal consequences in the Constitution. This criterion is crucial for understanding the dynamics of political violence in the U.S., where actions such as marches, riots, and occupations are protest tactics and reflections of the broader democratic engagement and contestation within the political landscape. This context differentiates the political violence in liberal democracies from that in other political

systems, where avenues for peaceful protest and institutional change might be restricted or absent.

The scope outlined for the definition of political violence in the context of the United States as a liberal democracy provides limitations and a general outline of the concept being investigated in the thesis. By narrowing the scope of political violence to social movements and civil unrest, such as Black Blocs or riots, the thesis aims to address the political and philosophical implications of political violence undertaken by citizens and avoid extreme forms of psychological and physical harm such as terrorism.

### ***1.2 Cumulative Argument and Originality***

The pivotal aspect of the thesis methodology is the cumulative argument, which will consider all accumulated perspectives highlighted in the thesis to answer the central question: can violence in political protests be justified and under what circumstances? While cumulative argumentation in informal logic inspires the methods of argumentation in the thesis, the thesis will take a unique approach to the argumentation strategy. This thesis will create a unique synthesis of three different justificatory perspectives—Radical Democracy, Marxism, and Liberation Theology—to justify political violence in certain circumstances by drawing from certain complementary aspects of each perspective. Each perspective on its own cannot justify political violence and answer the research question in full in the context of the liberal United States in the twenty-first century. Therefore, a new holistic argument must be created. By drawing distinct aspects from the three justificatory strategies and synthesizing them, the thesis provides a clear, holistic argument that can neutralize counterarguments and justify certain acts of political violence in the liberal democracy of the United States in the twenty-first century.



### 1.2.1 Introduction to the Cumulative Argument

The inspiration from informal logic argumentation structures must be understood to understand the cumulative argument used as the basis of the thesis methodology. While a prevalent argument structure used in ordinary daily reasoning, the cumulative argument remains a less well-known or formally defined argument structure in informal logic. While there appears to be a lack of consensus on a strict definition of the concept of the cumulative argument across the limited literature on the topic, some key characteristics and a general understanding of the argument will be laid out to understand the inspiration of the unique approach the thesis takes. A general knowledge of a cumulative argument structure and its central characteristics was crafted utilizing three academic texts relating to informal logic and argument structures by authors Robert Audi in *Cumulative Case Arguments in Religious Epistemology* (2017), Douglas Walton and Fabrizio Macagno in *Profiles of Dialogue for Relevance* (2016), and Douglas Walton and Thomas Gordon in *Cumulative Arguments in Artificial Intelligence and Informal Logic* (2017). The cumulative argument structure is broadly defined as one in which multiple premises (declarative statements), lines of reasoning, or pieces of evidence are brought together to support a conclusion (Audi, 2017; Walton & Gordon, 2017; Walton & Macagno, 2016). The pieces may be weak or unable to support the conclusion, but each piece creates a more robust bias (Audi, 2017; Walton & Gordon, 2017; Walton & Macagno, 2016). The force of the argument comes from its ability to bring together diverse evidence, reasoning, or premises to create a more comprehensive and robust support for the conclusions, especially in complex and multifaceted areas (Audi, 2017). The cumulative argument structure is apparent in everyday reasoning, legal reasoning, scientific hypothesis reasoning, and medical reasoning (Walton & Gordon, 2017).

An example of a cumulative argument structure can even be found in literature, with the character Sherlock Holmes's famous "deductive logic" skills often used as an example (Walton

& Gordon, 2017). However, an even simpler example of cumulative argument structure can be provided in a legal setting, in which a prosecuting lawyer is attempting to support the conclusion that John Doe murdered Jane Doe. A simple cumulative argument structure can go as such:

Proposed Accusatory Conclusion: John Doe killed Jane Doe.

Evidence One: John Doe was spotted near the scene of the crime by neighbors on the day of the murder.

Evidence Two: Jane Doe's wallet was found in John Doe's apartment.

Evidence Three: John Doe possesses several weapons in his apartment.

Here, an example of the cumulative argument structure's force is apparent; while each piece of evidence proposed by the lawyer may not be enough to support the conclusion that John Doe murdered Jane Doe when each piece is brought together, the bias towards the conclusion grows stronger. It becomes increasingly apparent that John Doe is guilty of the murder of Jane Doe.

Further complications exist regarding the cumulative argument structure, which can be applied to the complexity of the thesis. Arguments that appear to work against the cumulative argument structure can test the strength of the argument, and the cumulative argument must be strong enough to withstand any counterarguments that may undermine it. In the example, a defending lawyer may propose counter-evidence such as:

Counter Evidence One: John Doe is left-handed.

Counter Evidence Two: Autopsy reports of Jane Doe prove that she was attacked by a killer using their right hand.

Is this counter-evidence enough to undermine the strength of the cumulative argument? While it would be up to the jury to decide in this legal scenario, it is important to clarify that the prosecuting lawyer must be prepared to build a cumulative argument strong enough to prevail

against any counter-evidence that could defeat the prosecutor. The prosecuting lawyer in the representing case works to establish a strong enough argument that the defendant is guilty beyond a reasonable doubt, there being enough proof for the jury to decide the defendant guilty. There may need to be more evidence to prove John Doe is guilty. However, in the example, the evidence must stand strongly enough against counterarguments that John Doe is guilty for the prosecuting party to win the case.

Likewise, the cumulative argument applied in the thesis does not promise absolute certainty, as can be expected in formal sciences; it is always fallible as a part of the social sciences. However, because the subject matter of the thesis is philosophical and political and aims to justify political violence in certain situations, infallibility is not necessary; the aim is to investigate permissibility in violent political protest, not to say that violence is always acceptable.

### **1.2.2 The Original Cumulative Argument**

The argument structure presented in this thesis draws inspiration from the cumulative argument structure described above. The original cumulative argument compiles evidence through justificatory strategies to build an argument, such as the legal example described. However, the argument used in the thesis emerges as distinct in numerous ways. Firstly, the thesis delves into political philosophy and joins its debate on political violence in a liberal democracy while applying a new methodological device not utilized in informal logic. As highlighted in the Introduction to the Cumulative Argument, the device is typically used in a legal or medical setting and not in political philosophy, providing a new outlook on political violence.

Furthermore, the unique nature of the argument lies in its ability to synthesize three different justificatory strategies into a compelling argument that addresses counterarguments

effectively. Each justificatory strategy is insufficient to justify political protest violence in the liberal democratic United States and address counterarguments. Therefore, the original cumulative argument pulls certain aspects from each strategy and synthesizes them to fully neutralize each counterargument that may undermine a justification of political protest violence. Unlike the inspiring cumulative argument structure, which simply builds entire pieces of evidence on top of each other to reach a conclusion, this synthesis will be done by considering the most plausible aspects of each justificatory strategy while also addressing and discarding their weaknesses or incompatibility. This synthesis can be pictured as a rope, with particular strands of strategies woven together to create a stronger and stronger chord (the argument). Certain strands to address specific arguments may be thicker or thinner, depending on their plausibility regarding each counterargument or example. Ultimately, the thesis will utilize all three strategies to some extent to create a strong, capable, and unique argument for justifying political violence in certain circumstances and providing a new outlook for political philosophy.

## **Chapter 2: Justificatory Strategies**

Chapter two, Justificatory Strategies, explores the three perspectives that justify political protest violence in the liberal United States. Specifically, three strategies are explored in the thesis by reviewing literature and seminal texts on the strategies, providing a literature review while also sketching a holistic overview of each strategy, which will later be used for the original cumulative argument. While numerous schools of thought justify political protest violence, this analysis will focus on Radical Democracy, Marxism, and Liberation Theology. Anarchism and Constitutional Morality are excluded for specific reasons. Anarchism, despite its significant contributions to theories of political violence, fundamentally rejects all forms of hierarchical authority and government, making its inclusion less relevant to a discussion centered on

reformist and revolutionary perspectives within the existing state structure of the United States. While Anarchism offers promising perspectives, the Anarchist perspective denies the existence of the state and, therefore, does not remain pertinent to an argument contextually set in a liberal democracy.

On the other hand, Constitutional Morality emphasizes adherence to constitutional principles and the rule of law, which typically advocates for non-violent means of political change within a legal framework. The United States constitutional and legal framework typically rejects violence from citizens and legitimizes the state's monopoly of violence, inherently protecting itself from violent uprisings (Leider, 2020). While Constitutional Morality does offer specific arguments for rights to freedom of expression (including violent or disruptive expressions) in the United States, its focus on legalistic and procedural approaches to resolving political disputes contrasts sharply with the more radical and aggressive strategies discussed in Radical Democracy, Marxism, and Liberation Theology. By concentrating on these three perspectives, the thesis aims to provide a more cohesive and focused analysis of justifications for political protest violence within contexts of significant systemic oppression and state suppression.

## ***2.1 Radical Democracy***

Radical Democracy provides an expansive position on political protest violence by presenting said violence as a legitimate expression of democratic practice and self-determination. Radical Democracy focuses on the extension of the liberal democratic principles of equality and freedom while not identifying with the institutions of the liberal state (Celikates, 2021). Radical democracy follows the idea that democracy is an inclusive, continuous, unfinished, and reflexive process emphasizing the non-institutional nature of democracy. The theory integrates

contributions from theorists such as Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, who argue for the importance of agonistic pluralism, and Jürgen Habermas's emphasis on communicative rationality and deliberative processes (Lloyd & Little, 2009). It offers a comprehensive approach to addressing the complexities of modern democratic struggles, including addressing systemic issues within society and opening a space for conflicting voices (Celikates, 2021). The following sub-section describes the foundational ideas of Radical Democracy and explores its perspective on the justification of political violence.

Radical Democracy takes many forms; however, Robin Celikates outlines commonalities in *Radical Democratic Disobedience* (2021). Celikates offers a comprehensive and succinct description of Radical Democracy and its perspective on political violence, which is paraphrased below.

Firstly, democracy is not reduced to or identified with the institutions of the liberal state, such as elections or parliaments, but instead materializes in practices that challenge the existing hegemonic order. It opens a space for contestation and radical reconstruction of the dominating order. Radical Democracy works to challenge the existing order of liberal democratic governments and its existing relations of power. Secondly, Celikates states that the effort for reconstitution is primarily “defined negatively, by being directed against entrenched forms of unfreedom and inequality” (2021, p. 129). Tertiary, Radical Democracy does not have secure legal or moral principles to stand on or a specific ideal to realize, as this prevents actual contestation and agonism, which are seen as key components for a healthy, evolving democracy. Therefore, radical transformative political practices focus on the “democratization of democracy through struggles for freedom and equality; these struggles remain central in addressing democracy's need for continuous self-transformation as the latter cannot, or very partially, be institutionalized” (2021, p. 129). Fourthly, the democratic agency realized in these

transformation practices is understood as a constituent power, which extends far beyond the constitution-making process (2021, p. 129). “Radical democratic theory understands constituent power as the capacity of the demos to act, its capacity to overturn an old order and to establish a new one in a collective act of creativity and spontaneity” (2021, p. 129). Lastly, the demos is not the ideological vision of a homogenous people or the subjects under a constitution or constitutes itself as the sovereign. For example, rejection of “the people” of the United States united under shared and homogenized principles. Instead, the demos are collective plural and conflictual subjects; therefore, they are incapable of being represented by one voice or being entirely articulated in a constituted system (Celikates, 2021, p. 129).

From the descriptions of Radical Democracy, Celikates describes that democracy is not a system of government but a political process and form “in which the constituent power of the *demos* manifests and articulates itself in a necessarily open-ended and conflictual manner. (2021, p. 130). Regarding disruptive protests and, in general, the political violence outlined in the thesis, Radical Democratic theory emphasizes its place as an example of bottom-up practices in which the demos can articulate themselves and their contestation with hegemonic order (Celikates, 2021). According to this perspective, protest violence and disobedience transcend the limitations of liberal government structures of legality and concepts of revolution vs. reform (Celikates, 2021). It is crucial to understand that Radical Democratic theorists take an agonistic approach: conflict and contestation indicate a healthy and transformative political process (Celikates, 2021). Here, a pertinent example of the demos’ contestation in the form of protest is the Stonewall Riots of 1969 in California, a series of spontaneous, often violent demonstrations by members of the marginalized LGBTQ+ community against a police raid at the Stonewall Inn in New York City and which is widely regarded as the beginning of the modern LGBTQ+ movement in the United States (Edsall, 2003). From a Radical Democratic perspective, as a marginalized group of

society, Stonewall rioters represented a part of the demos aiming for radical transformation and extension of freedom and equality for LGBTQ+ citizens. Celikates encourages readers to see protest and dissent as “the heart of democracy” and as a way to counter the dominant state discourse that views protest, disobedience, resistance, or conflict as dangerous and anti-democratic (Celikates, 2021, p. 130). Radical democratic perspective understands and embraces verbal or physical contestation for its practices of citizenship and challenge of the state (even those not recognized as citizens by the state), such as LGBTQ+ individuals in 1969, who were considered security threats, “sexual perverts,” and outcasts (Edsall, 2003). The Stonewall riots further exemplified Radical Democracy actualized, as its motivation erupted from LGBTQ+ individuals’ frustration with their lack of freedom and equality to other citizens in the United States; their actions worked for a negative reconstitution of forms of unfreedom and inequality.

Outside of Celikates’ arguments, another critical aspect of Radical Democracy necessary for the thesis is its approach to human rights. Author Katheryn McNeilly, in her work *After the Critique of Rights* (2016), discusses works from classic Radical Democratic theorists to extend the discussion of how the perspective views the concept of human rights. She reminds the reader that, at its core, Radical Democracy seeks to challenge the key tenets of liberalism and liberal democracy, which includes its limited conception of human rights. “Democratizing democracy” or radical transformation of democracy consists of challenges and profound transformation of liberal democracy, and regarding human rights, its focus on assimilation, individualism, and strict interpretation of rights in the context of existing liberal democratic power structures. Radical Democratic theorists do not wish to abandon all concepts of human rights from liberal democracy but rather rework their conceptions through engagement and conflict. Radical democracy’s approach to human rights involves its broader idea of democracy constantly evolving and a complete, fully inclusive democracy that remains “to come” or a futural approach



to democracy (McNeilly, 2016, p. 278). This futuristic approach characterizes human rights as a constantly evolving concept driven by constant dispute and discussion, which motivates true democracy (McNeilly, 2016). It treats human rights as an unfinished project, just as it treats democracy as something to attain in the future, while constantly criticizing the current conceptions of human rights and liberal democratic values. While liberal democracy may still treat human rights as a futural concept, Radical Democracy approaches this future more radically “in that it involves maintaining a critical relation to power, to that which is excluded from any hegemonic idea or discourse, and using this to drive a futural politics” (McNeilly, 2016, p. 278). In conclusion, McNeily’s belief explains that Radical Democracy embraces a constant reconception of human rights and is always working towards a better, more radical plural conception of rights;

It is this futural promise which allows human rights and their politics to be used in working towards radical social transformation. In this way, the politics of human rights viewed in a futural way may fit with a broader politics of democracy to come; human rights emerge as a micro-location for democratic activity toward completely achieved radical and plural socio-political relations, which always remain just out of grasp and so may form one site for struggle towards a radical and plural democracy which always remains to come. (McNeilly, 2016, p. 279)

Radical Democracy acts as a justificatory strategy for political violence in the liberal democratic United States due to its basis on extensions of equality of freedom, non-institutionalized concepts of democracy, emphasis on contestation and transformation, uplifting of marginalized actors in the demos, and emphasis on resistance and rebellion from the alienating affects of hegemonic liberal democracy (Springer, 2011). Agonistic public spaces, including protests and actions, become a basis for emancipation from the political order and

breed room for voluntary association, pluralism, and an enhancement of democratic engagement (Springer, 2011). Furthermore, its emphasis on an ever-evolving concept of human rights and its challenges to the liberal democratic approach of human rights applies to the justification of political violence, as it provides a new perspective on social and political movements that focus on human rights demands and may use political violence to achieve them. Therefore, it becomes apparent that Radical Democracy strongly supports the political protest violence outlined in earlier thesis sections.

## **2.2 *Marxism***

Marxist theory provides an essential perspective on when and under what circumstances political protest violence can be ethically justified. The Marxist perspective is rooted in the works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels and is based on the view that revolution will be an aspect of the class struggle to overthrow the oppressive bourgeois system. However, what does revolution entail? The following sub-section will explore a Marxist perspective on the justification of political protest violence and under what circumstances it can be justified.

The basis of Marxist theory revolves around class struggle, the struggle between the bourgeoisie (capitalist ruling class) and the proletariat (the working class) (Singh, 1989). The conflict between the two revolves around the institution of private property and the philosophy of history, in which the exploited proletariat class works under the bourgeoisie to create goods and services (Singh, 1989). In his work *Marx on Revolution and Violence*, Adam Schaff succinctly describes the Marxian philosophy of history to explain the fundamental ideas of a socialist revolution (Schaff, 1973). Marxist socialist revolution first describes that two aspects label every socio-economic formation: its specific mode of production, or the productive forces that exist in that period, such as raw materials, human knowledge, and technology, as well as the relations of

production between people, mainly reflected by private property ownership and laws (Schaff, 1973, p. 265). Regarding the classes Marx described, the bourgeoisie possessed ownership over the modes of production and benefited from private property laws and ownership. Meanwhile, the proletariat works within the modes of production under the bourgeoisie for wages (Schaff, 1973, p. 265). Relations of production are linked to the interests of specified social groups and their relationship to productive forces (mainly private property); here is where groups are sectioned into classes (Schaff, 1973, p. 265). Once again, in Marx's time, the bourgeoisie class was sectioned based on their ownership of the modes of production, such as factories and land. At the same time, the proletariat lacked ownership of modes of production and instead worked for wages to survive (Marx & Engels, 2002). When people's relations of production agree with the modes of production, social formation during that era develops normally and stimulates further development of productive forces, such as technological advances (Schaff, 1973, p. 265). However, if the productive forces no longer serve relations of production, dysfunction manifests in the attitudes of the social classes; some are interested in maintaining the privilege that exists in the current state of the socio-economic formation, while others are interested in change (Schaff, 1973, p. 265). Here lies the class struggle that Marx described between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat; the wealthy and privileged bourgeoisie wishes to maintain their privilege while the proletariat wishes for liberation from capitalism (Marx & Engels, 2002). The dysfunction between social classes manifests a period of revolution, which either results in a new socio-economic formation or a fall of a civilization, which occurred in history more than once (Schaff, 1973, p. 265). However, this does not always culminate in violent revolution, with Marx and Engels emphasizing the possibility of a peaceful transition to socialism but stressing the relativity depending on a nation's situation (Schaff, 1973, p. 265).

While Marx and Engels emphasized the possibility of peaceful transition, the duo both approved of violent, armed revolution as the end-point of class struggle. For example, the final paragraphs of the *Communist Manifesto* read:

The Communists disdain to conceal their views and aims. They openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions. Let the ruling classes tremble at a Communist revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have the world to win. (Marx & Engels, 2002, p. 258)

Although early works emphasize violent overthrow, Marx and Engels recognized that the necessity for violence could vary by context and that a peaceful transition could occur. As Schaff notes, "The problem of revolution had its specific aspects in every part of the world," suggesting that revolutionaries might adapt their strategies based on local conditions (1973, p. 266). A key component is that Marxist theory views the state as an instrument for the oppression of the proletariat and a tool of capitalism (Marx & Engels, 2002). "The state is nothing but a machine for the oppression of one class by another" (Engels, 1891). The destruction of capitalist states and their replacement with a proletarian state was seen as crucial. However, the approach could vary from a violent revolution to a peaceful transition and differ depending on the unique characteristics of each country's political and socio-economic systems (Schaff, 1973).

In the context of the United States, Marx, at the time of his writing, believed in the possibility of a peaceful transition for the proletariat of the U.S. However, this was when the United States lacked the strong military, bureaucratic apparatus, advanced technology, and wealth it possesses today (Schaff, 1973). A potent symbol of capitalism in the 21st century, the United States is equipped with ever-growing modes of production in the forms of technology such as AI, surveillance systems, and advanced manufacturing techniques. New developments of modes of production within a capitalist system further entrench the power of the owners of

modes of production, which can still be applied to today's socio-economic status. Although politically, culturally, technologically, and economically, the United States (and the rest of the world) has changed since the time of Marx, Marxian theory still holds firm; the ruling class (bourgeois capitalist owners such as owners of software companies, factories, or corporations) continues to maintain power and is protected by the government, with the United States' powerful domestic police force. Furthermore, the wealth disparity and the increasing concentration of capital in the hands of a few have exacerbated class tensions, which can be seen in movements such as Occupy Wall Street that began in 2011. As the capitalist state of the United States continues to evolve, from a Marxist perspective, the proletariat (those working under modern-day capitalism) will inevitably rise against it.

Marxism sees political protest as a crucial tool in the necessary revolution of the working class. Marx argues that while the need for violence depends on the situation of each proletarian revolution, revolutionaries must be prepared for capitalist states to use violence against protesters. Thus, Marxism supports violence as a reaction to state repression and a means to achieve revolutionary goals. The United States has a notable history of heavily suppressing political movements, such as the civil rights movement, Occupy Wall Street, and Black Lives Matter (Knuckey et al., 2012).

For instance, during the 2011 Occupy Wall Street Movement, protesters witnessed numerous violent suppression tactics from police forces. Occupy Wall Street was a protest movement that began in 2011 in New York City's financial district, aiming to highlight economic inequality and the influence of corporations on government policy and action (Knuckey et al., 2012). According to the report *Suppressing Protest* by Knuckey et al. (2012), the movement's slogan, "We are the 99%," highlighted its focus on the disparity between the wealthiest 1% and the rest of the population. According to Knuckey et al., the movement saw numerous instances of

police violence, including pepper spray, baton strikes, physical assaults, and mass arrests. Reports detailed aggressive tactics such as police punching peaceful protesters, breaking a protester's thumb, and attacking journalists seemingly at random (Knuckey et al., 2012).

In the instance of the heavy repression of Occupy Wall Street, a movement specifically started to critique the effects of capitalism on the “99%,” a Marxist perspective would permit the use of violence by protesters. According to Marx, the movement critiqued capitalism and was met with heavy state suppression, which would entail the necessary use of force to counteract such violence. While perhaps not the exact image of Marx’s proletarian revolution, the Occupy Wall Street movement protested the economic situation and highlighted the systemic issues within a capitalist framework.

In conclusion, from a Marxist perspective, strategic political protest violence appears justifiable when peaceful protest does not achieve the goals of a movement or a movement experiences heavy state suppression; as to Marx, the key to the liberation of the exploited lies in revolution. While the movement must aim to undermine an exploitative capitalist system, it is arguable that many significant protests throughout U.S. history have exemplified this struggle. Movements such as the civil rights movement, the Occupy Wall Street Movement, and the BLM movement have all, in several ways, highlighted and opposed the inequalities perpetuated by capitalist structures. Therefore, according to Marxist theory, protest violence in these contexts can be seen as a necessary and justified response to state repression and a means to further the cause of proletarian revolution and systemic change. At its core, Marxism focuses on the idea of human emancipation and freedom from exploitation, which implicitly critiques capitalism and its effects. Its fundamental focus on human emancipation justifies political protest and, when necessary, the use of violence to resist and overthrow capitalist oppression, which utilizes state suppression to maintain its existence.

### ***2.3 Liberation Theology***

In their fundamental text, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, theologians Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff ask, “What part have *you* played in the effective and integral liberation of the oppressed?” (Boff & Boff, 1988, p. 9). This question represents the central motivation of Liberation Theology and its applicability to the thesis as both a theological framework with political and moral implications. The section below will outline a general overview of Liberation Theology and its applicability to the thesis.

Liberation Theology is a political and theological movement originating in the 1960s with Catholic theologians in Latin America. (Kirlyo & Cone, 2011). Liberation Theology promotes a radical reconstruction of society and involvement in political struggles to uplift and liberate the poor and marginalized while finding inspiration from the Christian gospel and teachings of religious and political leader Jesus Christ (Boff & Boff, 1988). Founding liberation theologians believed that human beings deserved emancipation from hunger, sickness, injustice, and indignity caused by systemic issues within societies (Gutiérrez, 1973). Originating as a reaction to the large amounts of poverty witnessed in Latin America, liberation theologians criticized joint efforts to aid people experiencing poverty, with theologians such as Leonardo Boff calling for more radical action and moving beyond “aid and reformism” (Boff & Boff, 1988, p. 4). The movement's seminal text, *A Theology of Liberation* by Gustavo Gutiérrez, critiques the concept of development and reformism, describing the development of impoverished countries as ineffective, counterproductive, and frustrating (Gutiérrez, 1973). According to Gutierrez, development efforts of impoverished countries in Latin America ignored the root causes of poverty, which came from economic, social, and political oppression of marginalized groups by governments and organizations that control the world economy (Gutiérrez, 1973). To liberation theologians, the key to aiding people experiencing poverty is

recognizing they are oppressed by systems of capitalism and supporting their political, economic, and social liberation (Gutiérrez, 1973). Utilizing Jesus Christ as an exemplary figure, the movement cites his focus on justice, compassion, and active opposition to oppression as foundational principles for their advocacy and actions (Gutiérrez, 1973). The teachings of Jesus Christ alone show enough support for the oppressed, with teachings in the *Bible*: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free" (Luke 4:18 King James Version). However, Liberation Theologians place significance on the particular aspects of Christ that focus on the liberation of the oppressed (Gutiérrez, 1973). Here, an intersection with Marxist beliefs becomes recognizable, as Liberation theologians found influence from Marxist thought regarding the exploitation of capitalism and its oppression as a cause for the poverty and systemic issues they witnessed (Gutiérrez, 1973). Poverty and oppression are examples of structural problems which are backed by the Christian concept of sin. Liberation Theologians such as Gutiérrez describe sin as the root cause of the systemic problems causing marginalization, poverty, and oppression. Christians and those living under God were obliged to right the oppression that sin brings about (Gutiérrez, 1973). Gutiérrez summarizes this concept by saying:

To sin is to refuse to love one's neighbors and, therefore, the Lord himself. Sin—a breach of friendship with God and others—is, according to the Bible, the ultimate cause of poverty, injustice, and the oppression in which persons live. In describing sin as the ultimate cause we do not in any way negate the structural reasons and the objective determinants leading to these situations. It does, however, emphasize the fact that things do not happen by chance and that behind an unjust structure, there is a personal or collective will responsible—a willingness to reject God and neighbor. (Gutiérrez, 1973)



Additionally, the “preferential option for the poor” in Liberation Theology plays a vital role in the connection between Christianity and liberation and the movement as a whole. According to the movement,

God possesses a ‘preferential option for the poor,’ not because they are necessarily better than others but simply because they are poor and live in inhumane circumstances; it is in meaningful action toward our neighbor, particularly the poor, that solidarity is intensified, and we come in contact with the Lord. (Gutiérrez, 1987, as cited in Kirylo, 2011 p. 183)

The focus on the “preferential option for the poor” emphasizes a focus on the liberation of the oppressed. According to Liberation Theology, “the poor” encompasses a collective group of individuals, drawing from Marxist theory involving the proletariat, the financially impoverished, and those suffering from various forms of social injustice a systemic inequality (Boff & Boff, 1988). Examples of the collective poor applicable today in Latin America and also the United States include People of Color, the Black community, Indigenous communities homeless individuals, Disabled individuals, the Queer community, and the working class.

Three other vital aspects of Liberation Theology include conscientization, praxis, and a further understanding of liberation (Kirlyo, 2011). Firstly, conscientization involves the education of oppressed groups (with the consented help of practitioners of Liberation Theology or by their means) to give them “the opportunity and freedom to evaluate their reality, which ultimately leads to their growth and transformation” (Kirlyo, 2011, p. 184). Through conscientization, oppressed groups realize the reality of their oppression. This system has oppressed them, and they begin to possess a “greater understanding as to how to change and transform those realities,” leading to organization and movement towards liberation (Freire, 1985, as cited by Kirylo 2011 p. 184). Secondly, praxis involves the intersection between reflection, Christian prayer, and political action, moving from simply reflecting on injustice to

directly trying to change it socially, politically, and economically (Kirlyo, 2011). In a Latin American context, praxis involves an extensive range of direct involvement in oppressed and marginalized communities. Praxis involves teaching democratic practices, health practices, countering malnutrition, and general education in rural communities and in countries such as Brazil (Williams, n.d.). Liberation theologians were actively involved in various social and political resistance movements across Latin America as well, emphasizing principles of social justice and aligning with the poor to advocate for systemic change, including complex movements such as the FSLN (*Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional*), an armed socialist and Christian based Nicaraguan resistance movement (Lowy & Pompan, 1993). Lastly, liberation, in Liberation Theology, “expresses the aspirations of oppressed peoples and social classes emphasizing the conflictual aspect of the economic, social, and political process which puts them at odds with wealthy nations and oppressive classes” (Kirlyo, 2011). Liberation includes institutional liberation, psychological liberation, social liberation, and in general, liberation from “sin” which is viewed as the reason for injustice and oppression.

In the context of the United States, Liberation Theology’s critical concepts remain the same. However, its definition of the “collective poor” should be broadened to encapsulate the marginalized and oppressed communities within the nation, as economic poverty only includes a small part of individuals struggling under the current U.S. system. Evidence shows that many Americans continue to face significant oppression and systemic harm: economic, social, and political. In 2019, 17.5% of Americans, or about 57.4 million people, lived in poverty despite the U.S. being a “wealthy democracy”(Brady, 2023, p. 3). Certain racial and ethnic groups, such as Black, Latino, and Native Americans, experience poverty rates that are twice as high as those of white Americans. Child poverty is especially severe, with 33.5% of Black children, 29.8% of Latino children, and 29.4% of Native American children living in poverty (Brady, 2023, p. 3).

Poverty is only one aspect of systemic issues in America. Black Americans face systemic racism and prominent levels of police violence. Despite the civil rights advancements, Black communities continue to suffer from racial brutality and discrimination. For example, Black children face the highest risk of maltreatment, including neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and lack of medical treatment (Kim & Drake, 2018). Additionally, Black individuals are disproportionately subjected to police violence; Black men are about 2.5 times more likely, and Black women are 1.4 times more likely to be killed by police compared to their white counterparts (Edwards et al., 2019).

These issues extend to other marginalized groups, including women, Queer people, and Disabled people, who also face significant challenges under the U.S. economic, political, and social systems. From a Liberation Theology perspective, the pervasive inequality, harm, and poverty demonstrate a need for continued efforts to address these injustices. If systemic issues like poverty and racial disparities were resolved, movements like Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter might be unnecessary. However, the persistence of these problems underscores the need for ongoing support, organization, and transformation to address societal neglect and harm. Such protests highlight the importance of action and education in striving for systemic change. Liberation is a duty of humankind according to liberation theologians, and movements that work to achieve such act as an example of Jesus Christ. Liberation theology, therefore, embraces tactics that achieve liberation or begin the journey for transformation, even in cases of violence.

The overview of justificatory strategies sets the stage and provides an understanding of the perspectives that can be used for the cumulative argument.

### **Chapter 3: Original Cumulative Argument**

The following section and sub-sections will synthesize the justificatory strategies—Radical Democracy, Marxism, and Liberation Theology—to create a satisfactory argument to justify political protest in the United States in certain circumstances. Each justificatory strategy possesses weaknesses and is insufficient to neutralize all counterarguments; therefore, strands of each strategy will be synthesized to create a unique and nuanced argument strong enough to make a plausible defense. As seen above, each justificatory strategy offers convincing perspectives on permitting violent political protest in the United States; however, each possesses weaknesses when confronting specific counterarguments. Radical Democracy appears to provide the strongest argument for justifying political protest violence in the United States for numerous pragmatic reasons: its basis in the liberal democratic theory of freedom and equality, its encouragement of its rejection of institutions as dominant structures over the demos, its rejection of homogenization, its inclusivity for marginalized voices, its agonist perspective, its belief of democracy as an ever-evolving process, and its evolutionary concept of human rights (Celikates, 2021; McNeilly, 2016). In the context of the political violence outlined in the thesis, such as riots, blockades, Black Blocs, and other protest methods typically used by marginalized groups, these aspects of Radical Democracy greatly support its justification. Rejection of decisions or actions of dominant political institutions in times of perceived injustice explains the validity of disturbing order, legality, and peace. Inclusivity and embrace of marginalized voices support violent political protests motivated by issues created by marginalization, such as the Stonewall Riots or Black Lives Matter movements. An agonist perspective accepts forms of conflict, including disruptive protest, and champions a constant and ever-changing system driven by the demos and its wants. Lastly, praise of “bottom-up” change further solidifies an acceptance and

permissibility of protest forms that represent the grievances of the underprivileged or minority groups (Celikates, 2021) .

However, with its strengths comes weaknesses; for instance, Radical Democracy lacks the strong emphasis on economic struggles and capitalist exploitation that Marxism provides, a crucial aspect to discuss in the context of the modern capitalist United States. It cannot stand on its own against certain counterarguments for political protest violence as well, such as violence being immoral and therefore, unjustifiable. Regarding moral criticism, Liberation Theology plays a more substantial role in the argument. Hence, while Radical Democracy will act as the core justificatory strategy for synthesized argument, its tensions and weaknesses will be supplemented with specific aspects from Marxism and Liberation Theology.

### ***3.1 Commonalities: Radical Democracy, Marxism, Liberation Theology***

Firstly, it is essential to outline the commonalities between the three strategies to establish their cohesion and strength in shared qualities. Many commonalities exist between the three, partially owing to Radical Democracy and Liberation Theology finding foundations in Marxism (Celikates, 2021). After analyzing each strategy and outlining them in Chapter 2, three crucial commonalities come to the surface:

1. An emphasis on support and voices for the oppressed; in Marxism, the proletariat; in Radical Democracy, the voices of the marginalized; and in Liberation Theology, the “collective poor” (Gutiérrez, 1973; Lloyd & Little, 2009; Schaff, 1973).
2. A view that political protest violence (as outlined in the thesis) can lead to a form of transformation of society from a social, political, and economic perspective.
3. A rejection of state institutions in some form, whether as a capitalist tool (Marxism), the cause of poverty/inadequate care for the impoverished (Liberation Theology), or as a

hegemonic order not identified with true democracy (Radical Democracy) (Celikates, 2021; Gutiérrez, 1973; Schaff, 1973)

4. A support for political protest violence that does not advocate for its use in every situation and instead considers the use of violence contingent upon specific circumstances.

These commonalities exemplify how a combination of Radical Democracy, Marxism, and Liberation Theology proves useful and cohesive in defending political protest violence in certain circumstances. However, inevitable tensions also exist between all three, which exemplifies why a synthesis must be made of the strategies and not just a simple combination of all their perspectives. Counterarguments will be examined and addressed to strengthen the overall argument to develop a justification for political protest violence in specific circumstances,

### ***3.2 Addressing Pragmatic Concerns***

#### **3.2.1 Counterproductivity**

It is best to start the cumulative argument by addressing pragmatic concerns in justifying political protest violence. Firstly, a counterargument is that violence is counter-productive in achieving protest goals (Greenwood-Reeves, 2022). As James Greenwood-Reeves describes, “If a protest cannot be used to reach its stated goals, then it cannot be rationally justified... (2022, pp. 120–121). According to quantitative studies, violent political protest is usually “counterproductive” as it can alienate the broader public whose support would be beneficial for institutional or systemic change, and it incurs retribution and further violence from the state, posing risks for protestors (Chenoweth and Stephan 2008 as cited in Greenwood-Reeves 2022). There are many instances in which peaceful or non-violent protest methods have succeeded; sit-

ins continue to be an effective form of protest, gaining prominence from their usage in the 1960s civil rights movement (Knuckey et al., 2012). However, an important question regarding this counterargument occurs: What is a productive and successful protest?

Of course, the first answer would be systemic or institutional change, which non-violent protests have produced; mounting pressure from environmental activists in the late 1960s led to the passage of landmark anti-pollution laws, the Clean Air Act (1970) and Clean Water Act (1972) (*National: Clean Air Legislation*, n.d.). However, a version of success regarding a single protest leading to systemic or institutional change is a limited perspective; it places weight on a single protest rather than systemic or institutional change motivated by a broader movement. It also limits the definition of success to institutions or policy. Instead, James Greenwood-Reeves recommends structuring ideas of successful protest into two forms: short-term value and long-term value (Greenwood-Reeves, 2022). The core of Radical Democracy and a compatible aspect of Marxism will be used to address the counterargument and the different concepts of success. Long-term success encompasses numerous outcomes from protests, such as systemic or institutional change, as highlighted by the Clean Air and Clean Water Acts passed by non-violent protests. However, from a Radical Democracy perspective, the idea of success can be further expanded. Public disturbances, riots, occupations, or blockades represent a form of public contestation, which Radical Democrats view as a healthy form of the ever-evolving, plural democracy and practice of citizenship (Lloyd & Little, 2009). The agonistic perspective of Radical Democracy contends that contestation leaves room for discussion and change, and violent disruption is an example of this dispute (Celikates, 2021). There are many instances in recent history in which violent protests as part of broader movements have opened up a new dialogue in the nation; the BLM movements of 2020, though demonized by the media for its destructive tactics and violence, opened up a new public discussion of systemic and

institutionalized racism, the racist history of the United States, and police violence (Greenwood-Reeves, 2022).

Simply put, it motivated lawmakers, politicians, educators, academics, and common citizens to ask, “Why are these protestors so angry? What is all the fuss about? What is wrong?.” From a Radical Democratic perspective, raising public awareness, bringing new marginalized voices into the discussion, and disrupting “business as usual” aids in society's productive transformation and evolution, defining it as a success. In the BLM example, a Radical Democracy’s version of success did occur nationwide, with certain communities experimenting with new forms of policing (such as in Camden, New Jersey), major news flooding with discussions surrounding the movement, and in general, people beginning to question how the nation moves on after the death of George Floyd (Landeragan, 2020; McCoy, 2022). As Austin McCoy states, long-term change exists in questioning “...how we can enlist more people in a movement to create a more humane, nonviolent, and democratic system of public safety, one that is based on justice and respect, not domination” (McCoy, 2022, p. 81).

Radical Democracy supports arguments for the long-term success of political protest violence and aids in justification and countering pragmatic concerns. However, it does not necessarily provide a strong argument for definitions of short-term success outcomes from protest violence. Here, a single aspect of Marxism becomes a more plausible defense. Greenwood-Reeves describes how violence can be instrumentally helpful and have short-term successes in specific instances (2022, p. 122). Moments of self-preservation, group-preservation, or reciprocating state violence can all be instrumentally useful; for example, when a protestor manages to throw a gas canister back at police or appropriate materials to form a blockade against weapon-wielding riot police. The crucial idea here from the Marxist justificatory strategy is reciprocity of violence and group preservation. Marxism views violence as necessary when



state suppression of revolution occurs to protect and further the movement (Schaff, 1973). Protest movements in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have witnessed heavy state repression. Most recently, the 2024 U.S. university occupations for the pro-Palestinian movement saw heavy police repression. Across the country, social media and news reports broadcasted violent police attacks on encampments and barricades, with weapons such as tear gas, tasers, and beatings of both students and professors (Fayyad, 2024; *Hundreds of Students Arrested*, 2024). Marxism would support a form of attempts to preserve the movement—protestor response to police suppression or violence, whether out of fear/self-defense, group preservation, or reciprocity to the violence of the state—as state suppression necessitates violence in return.

It is essential to remember the tension here; the Marxist revolution typically focuses on economic/anti-capitalist “revolution.” Social and political movements such as the Pro-Palestinian occupations may cause tension due to lack of economic dimension; however, social, and political issues can be explained as symptoms of capitalism, especially from a Marxist perspective. The United State’s involvement in Israel’s occupation and genocide of Palestinian people exemplifies its support of settler-colonialism (by Israel), and its political and economic support of the occupation implies a financial benefit for the U.S. Marxism views imperialism and colonialism as a product of capitalism, as an expansion of capitalism and the global economy, and continuous exploitation of peoples (Sathyamurthy, 1997). Therefore, it is apparent that while each movement may not be entirely economically based, Marxism considers socio-political issues with an economic dimension.

To conclude, the Radical Democracy perspective, combined with an aspect of Marxism, redefines how a protest can be “productive” or successful and rejects political protest violence as always unproductive. Radical Democracy provides the justification that long-term achievements

of violent political protests can and should occur outside of institutions and in the public sphere in the form of discussion and questioning. Marxism explains that short-term achievements of protest violence, such as group preservation or reciprocity from state violence, can justify violence as a necessary protection of the broader movement.

### **3.2.2 Needlessness**

Another pragmatic concern to address is the needlessness of violence. As Greenwood-Reeves says, “There is (supposedly) always a non-violent alternative to violence in achieving social and political goals...the violent option is unnecessary. Therefore, it is unjustifiable” (Greenwood-Reeves, 2022, p. 117). What justifies political violence when nonviolent alternatives can be used? Nonviolence is widely accepted when it is available and valuable. Nonviolence is preferable as it reduces risks, protects individuals, and prevents unintended consequences (Greenwood-Reeves, 2022). This counterargument is helpful because it reminds protestors to evaluate and reflect on their actions; “The ‘needlessness’ counterargument forces the protester to truly interrogate whether an act of violence is necessary to achieve certain aims” (Greenwood-Reeves, 2022, p. 117). However, a protester’s evaluation may not always conclude with nonviolent means. As explored above with an aspect of Marxism, a presumption that nonviolence is always an option or effective ignores the violent tactics of the state and the need for self and group preservation. Arguments for self-defense are generally recognized in everyday contexts, and this principle can be applied to protester’s immediate responses to state actions, such as police brutality. It is difficult for most individuals to adopt the position that they would refrain from defending themselves or other protesters if subjected to physical assault by law enforcement. Moreover, as Marxism states, protecting the movement may necessitate violence when experiencing state suppression. However, the concept of “necessity” must be explored

further. When, if ever, does non-violence prove insufficient? When is change necessary, and when is it time to escalate to violence?

James Greenwood-Reeves explains that “necessity” in an event is contextually defined (2022, p. 119). While lawyers, legal advisors, and philosophers disagree on what necessity entails or its plausibility, its contextuality aids in justifying political protest violence in some circumstances. Greenwood-Reeves states that its plausibility depends on the urgent or immediate threat or the failures of the liberal democratic system this violence is in response to (Greenwood-Reeves, 2022). The state outlines what it does and does not consider a threat, self-defense, or necessary action. Typically, it would not be on the side of a disruptive protest. However, relativity still lies in what can be considered necessary, even if the protester’s definition of necessity counters that of the dominant state. Relativity is where the justificatory strategies become applicable—Radical Democracy and Liberation Theology—and several examples will illustrate their relevance.

One pertinent example to the thesis that Greenwood-Reeves describes is the Attica Prison Riots of 1971 (2022, p. 118). After constant internal processes, legal petitions, complaints, and a written manifesto/demands, no effort was made to reduce horrific prison conditions, such as overcrowding, lack of medical treatment, and dangerous solitary confinement rules (Robbins, 2016). The predominantly Black and POC (People of Color) inmates’ frustrations built, and a riot broke out, leading to 43 deaths (33 inmates and 10 officers/employees) (Robbins, 2016). While the thesis’ outline of political violence does not encapsulate purposeful attempts/murders, the actual riot that first broke out exemplifies the political violence covered in this work. Was this riot necessary? From a legal standpoint, perhaps not, but avenues of expression through the liberal democratic system did not bring about change, and only after the riot did inmates see a radical change in their quality of life and welfare (Greenwood-Reeves, 2022). Inmates resorted

to violence to reestablish their (what liberal democracy considers) human rights after having exhausted their institutional and systemic options, achieving access to proper medical care, freedom from dangerous solitary confinement, increased religious freedom, and lack of censorship of their mail (Kaba & Nia, 2011).

A Radical Democratic perspective would see a justification for this violence precisely due to its futural perspective on human rights. As outlined in Chapter 2, Radical Democracy views restrictions imposed by institutions on human rights as stagnant and something to be ever-transformed through dispute and questioning (McNeilly, 2016). Institutional restrictions on who deserves human rights, how to attain them, and what counts as a violation of human rights must be challenged: exactly what occurred by Attica Prison Inmates. The Attica inmates faced neglect and a lack of necessities, making their frustrations and desire for change understandable and reasonable. Greenwood-Reeves argues that, despite legal boundaries, their actions were necessary to regain certain rights (2022). Radical Democracy supports this argument by challenging the limitations imposed by institutions and the state on who deserves rights when they deserve them and how these rights can be secured when violated. Although the prisoners' actions were violent, their protests played a role in continuously redefining human rights and, consequently, in the ongoing transformation of democracy. This contestation, though resulting in unfortunate casualties, did help with the transformation of human rights and the prison reform movement as a whole, as the New York State Department began revising prison regulations (Robbins, 2016). Therefore, Radical Democracy would support violence in a circumstance such as the Attica Prison Riots. It challenged the liberal concept of human rights, and its conflict led to a new transformation in systemic regulations.

A step can be taken further in this analysis by adding an aspect of Liberation Theology, specifically its emphasis on liberation and its contribution to a broader definition of “necessity.”

Liberation Theologians like Leonardo and Clodovis Boff also critique institutions, particularly their approaches to “reform” or “development,” arguing that such reforms often come from the very groups or organizations responsible for the problems and often make the “collective poor” more dependent on the system that oppressed them (1988). While these observations were written specifically in the context of Latin America, these ideas can be applied to the United States and a justification for political violence as being necessary in certain circumstances. Once again, in the example of the Attica Riots, the state chose to ignore prisoners at “proper” liberal democratic attempts for better conditions. In this instance, there was minimal attempt to even reform the overcrowded prison the inmates suffered in until after the riot. A core of the argument for needlessness is that “The existence —or presumed existence — of well-functioning, liberal-democratic institutions to resolve disputes of legitimacy seems to remove the defense of necessity for such activists because it *is not necessary* (Greenwood-Reeves, 2022, p. 119). But just as there were failures of reform in Latin America during the birth of Liberation Theology, so too do failures occur in the functions of the liberal democratic state and its ability to resolve issues. These failures seems especially apparent in their treatment of Black and POC prisoners in Attica Prison. Here, Liberation Theologians call for praxis; the inmates experienced their conscientization— being aware of their suffering under the prison system— and being removed from the rest of society, chose to achieve their liberation. While Christianity and its followers typically aim for peace and compassion following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, Liberation Theologians maintain their position that Jesus’ teachings promote liberation and, sometimes, social unrest: “Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Matthew 10:34 King James Version).

The Radical Democracy justificatory strategy emphasizes a new, evolutionary understanding of human rights, thereby countering the needlessness of violence. However, while

it embraces minority voices, it lacks an actual aspect of the liberation of oppressed people. Liberation Theology manages to fill this gap in the justification of political protest violence. Its justification of the violence in the Attica Prison Riots highlights its support for the liberation of Black and POC inmates and the necessity of revolt in that context.

### ***3.3 Addressing Moral Concerns***

Addressing the moral concerns regarding the justification of violence requires further synthesis of the three justificatory strategies. The moral concerns surrounding the justification of political violence can be summarized as “violence is innately immoral and therefore unjustifiable” (Greenwood-Reeves, 2022, p. 103). These moral concerns typically come from a deontological perspective; permitting violence could lead to an overrun of society by violent tyrants or that violence harms people and their innate dignity. Both Hill and Greenwood-Reeves have structured counterarguments surrounding the deontological objections. A brief overview of their counterarguments to deontology will be made, followed by an application of the justificatory strategies.

Thomas E. Hill, in *A Kantian Perspective on Political Violence* (1996), establishes two counterarguments to Kant’s objections to political violence. Kant was staunchly against political violence and revolution, and his deontological formulas create strong objections to its justification. His argument against political violence is based on his two formulas from *Metaphysics of Morals* (1996) and *Groundwork* (2013):

- The Universal Maxim Formula “Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law;” (Kant, 2013)

- The Humanity Formula: “So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means” (Kant, 2013).

While deontology holds an immense depth and background, these maxims present two key counterarguments regarding political violence. For the universal law formula, if political violence were to become a universal maxim (e.g., law), it would allow too many people to commit violence in too many circumstances, and therefore, it is unreasonable and immoral to permit any political violence (Greenwood-Reeves, 2022). For the Humanity Formula, violence treats an individual as a means to an end and violates their innate dignity; and therefore, political violence breaches the Humanity Formula and is immoral (Greenwood-Reeves, 2022). Hill manages to address each of these counterarguments.

Regarding the Universal Law Formula, Hill points out that constructing a maxim that *never* permits political violence is just as unreasonable as always permitting it. For instance, never undertaking political violence would prevent tyrannical or authoritarian regimes from being rightfully ended. While it is important to not overly justify violence, Kant appears to take his position to too far of an extreme. Hill instead proposes applying qualifications to the universal maxim that may allow for specific circumstances in which violence can be justified but still protects against randomized acts of violence. For instance, he proposes a maxim: “to use violence to achieve my political goals if the goals are very high priority and the violent means are necessary, likely to be effective, and predicted to cost me nothing comparable to failing to achieve my goal (2000, p. 118). Hill’s proposed maxim provides a more reasonable approach to political violence, as it does not limit all political violence that may be needed in certain circumstances but also prevents unnecessary violence.

Regarding the Humanity Formula, a keyword to focus on is “merely.” Hill argues that the Humanity Formula should be applied more as a general principle rather than a strict rule in every situation. This flexibility is necessary because the formula's strict criteria can impose unreasonable limitations on intuitively justifiable actions, such as those taken in emergencies or as acts of self-defense (2000). Greenwood-Reeves notes that such situations, such as a police officer punching an unarmed journalist, require immediate action. In such instances, individuals often lack a neutral perspective of practical reason. Consequently, they tend to view aggressors primarily as objects rather than beings with intrinsic value. To address this issue, Hill states that the Humanity Formula should be interpreted at the system level rather than in isolated instances. The focus should be on whether the overall system respects human dignity and autonomy rather than whether each individual action strictly adheres to the formula. Hill contends that the qualification of “merely” allows for exceptions in the case of self-defense or other justified violence, provided these actions are part of a system that treats individuals as ends in themselves rather than merely as a means to an end. This broader understanding makes room for justifying acts of political violence when they are framed within a legal and moral context that upholds respect for human dignity and autonomy (Hill, 2000). The question now is not whether violence itself is deontologically immoral but rather whether the protester treats an individual as merely a means to an end. Is there a way to participate in violent political protest without treating an individual merely as a means to an end? Furthermore, regarding the universal law maxim, what circumstances appear necessary to warrant a qualification/limitation to the maxim?

A synthesis of the justificatory strategies can create guidelines for instances in which violent political protest may avoid deontological criticism. Adhering to principles that ensure violence is not gratuitous and is only used in certain circumstances can help mitigate treating individuals as mere means. While Radical Democracy and Marxism lack strong moral



dimensions, they each possess certain aspects that aid in the justification of political violence. Meanwhile, Liberation Theology, with its moral dimensions based around Christianity, provides key ways to address moral concerns and plays a significant role in addressing the deontological concerns. Each justificatory strategy provides different perspectives and ways in which to navigate deontological concerns.

Firstly, Liberation Theology's moral dimensions argue that to uphold deontological principles, protestors should minimize harm and focus on targeting institutions rather than individuals. While Liberation Theology does justify political violence in certain circumstances, its Christian roots align closely with Kant's Humanity Formula is due to its basis on Christian teachings that emphasize the inherent dignity and worth of every individual. For instance, the principle of loving one's neighbor and the call to respect each person's intrinsic value resonates with Kant's formula, which insists on treating individuals as ends in themselves rather than as mere means to an end. Though he disagreed with this comparison, many modern academics and philosophers see the two as similar (Hill, 2000). Thus, Liberation Theology maintains a moral commitment to protecting human dignity even when justifying political violence. Minimizing harm and targeting institutions instead, such as government buildings, statues, and or corporate offices, provides an avenue for political violence that does not treat humans as a means to an end, thereby avoiding violation of the Humanity Formula. However, it is important to remember Hill's broader application of the Humanity Formula; Liberation Theology would embrace applying it to a more systemic view, as Liberation Theology emphasizes conscientization and praxis to create a better system that does not harm the innate dignity of humans.

Minimizing harm in violent political protest ensures that the violence used is proportional to the injustice being addressed and aims to reduce harm to non-combatants. For example, avoiding any accidental or purposeful harm against bystanders as well as using proportional

means of violence, such as clashes with police that are also utilizing violent tactics. Liberation Theology, with a strand of Marxism, supports these principles of minimizing harm. Liberation Theology creates a complex dichotomy between the concept of liberation and praxis and the compassionate, often peaceful teachings of Jesus Christ. Liberation theologians choose to focus on biblical teachings that emphasize justice and liberation, but they still find their foundation in the compassionate messages of Christ. Therefore, in the context of violent protests motivated by attempts for liberation of a particular oppressed group (such as the Palestinian Movement, Black Lives Matter, the Stonewall Riots, or even the Attica Prison Riots), liberation theologians would support these movements as an example of praxis. However, on the other hand, the compassionate and peaceful aspects of Christianity would likely support an effort to minimize harm, such as avoiding harm to bystanders or randomized acts of violence. An element of Marxism can be included to enrich this argument; Marxism argues that violence should be used strategically to dismantle oppressive structures and address state suppression when necessary. Therefore, actions should be calculated to minimize collateral damage and harm to ordinary people while targeting oppressive institutions. Combining the two perspectives, the compassionate aspect of Christianity, including acknowledging the innate dignity of individuals and the strategic usage of violence to address suppression from Marxism, would recommend a principle of minimizing harm, even in cases of riots or Black Blocs.

An example of minimizing harm to individuals is the targeting of racist statues during the BLM movement of 2020. The movement saw numerous statues and monuments defaced, destroyed, or toppled by protesters. For example, in Washington, D.C., protesters dismantled a statue of a Confederate war general. They then set it on fire due to its representation of beliefs associated with slavery and racial oppression (*Protesters Topple Confederate General Statue*, 2020). While this act involved arson, trespassing, and vandalism, no bodily harm was done to

individuals. From the perspective of the Humanity Formula, the ethical justification for these actions lies in their focus on rectifying a significant moral wrong—namely, the celebration of figures associated with racial oppression. The goal was to address and contest the historical injustices these symbols represented rather than to use individuals as mere instruments for achieving political ends. Avoidance of harm also follows the compassionate teachings of Jesus Christ, which Liberation Theologians advocate for in solidarity with the oppressed and the rectification of unjust structures (Gutiérrez, 1973). The protests against these statues can be seen as an embodiment of these teachings, aiming to address and dismantle symbols of systemic injustice, thus aligning with the principles of Liberation Theology. While Marxism does not offer a clear perspective on this example, an enrichment of Radical Democracy may be used. Radical Democracy enriches the argument by highlighting the role of public contestation and conflicts in the ever-evolving concept of democracy. In this example, the removal of statues representing oppressive historical periods reflects a form of democratic engagement that challenges the status quo and works to reframe public memory. While this dispute resulted in violence, Radical Democracy would embrace the attempts at bringing arguments and conflict against the liberal democratic state's choices in who to memorialize.

When addressing deontological concerns about political protest violence, the synthesis of Liberation Theology, Marxism, and Radical Democracy provides a nuanced framework for justification of political protest violence. Kant's deontological principles, mainly the Humanity Formula, emphasize the intrinsic worth of individuals and challenge any use of violence that treats people as mere means to an end. However, applying these principles, supported by Liberation Theology, Marxism, and Radical Democracy, shows how political violence can align with deontological values.

Liberation Theology's emphasis on human dignity supports the principle of minimizing harm whenever possible, reflecting its commitment to respecting the intrinsic value of every individual. This perspective ensures that while political violence may be justified, aiming it at structures or institutions rather than individuals ensures minimal harm or violation to human dignity. Marxism, while lacking a strong moral aspect, strengthens the justification by supporting strategic violence to dismantle oppressive systems. The emphasis on strategic violence, or using violence when peace is not an option, would support a focus on minimizing harm, addressing violence proportionally (such as police suppression), and ensuring violence is purposeful and essential to the movement. Furthermore, Radical Democracy enriches this argument by highlighting the role of public contestation in democratic evolution. Removing oppressive symbols can be seen as a form of democratic engagement that challenges and transforms public discourse. This approach supports the notion that political violence can be a legitimate expression of dissent within a democratic framework. The synthesis of the core of Liberation Theology, woven with aspects of Radical Democracy and Marxism, neutralizes the deontological counterargument while ensuring violence is not gratuitous and proportional.

## **Conclusion**

The argument presented in this thesis operates on the premise that political protest violence, in the context of relational, non-state, and non-terroristic actors, can be justified under certain conditions, especially when conventional forms of protest have proven insufficient or are met with severe state suppression. To achieve this, the argument synthesizes three justificatory strategies: Radical Democracy, Marxism, and Liberation Theology, each contributing unique perspectives that together offer a robust defense of political protest violence. The argument forms many of its foundational justifications through Radical Democracy, as it provides a strong

framework. However, in forming the metaphorical argumentative “rope” Radical Democracy proves to be insufficient on its own to address all counterarguments and examples. Notably, it lacks a focus on economic struggles and capitalist exploitations, which are crucial in the context of the United States as a capitalist society. To address this gap, Marxism is incorporated into the argument. This perspective adds depth to the justification of violence, particularly in instances where state violence prompts retaliatory actions. To further enrich the justification and address specific moral and pragmatic concerns, elements of Liberation Theology are integrated. Liberation plays a key role in the argument by addressing moral concerns surrounding the justification of political protest violence. By incorporating Liberation Theology, the argument suggests that sometimes violence is a necessary form of resistance against deeply entrenched systems of oppression. Liberation Theology also provides a nuanced understanding of "necessity," framing political violence as a potential catalyst for broader societal transformation when nonviolent methods have been exhausted.

A synthesis of the three provides a unique outlook on the contentious political climate and socio-economic status of the United States. A Radical Democracy perspective acknowledges its liberal democratic foundations yet challenges its institutions and government structure. A Marxist perspective provides a new lens for addressing economic inequalities, specifically in a capitalist system such as the United States. Finally, a Liberation Theology perspective connects to the United States' large population of Christians; while still appealing to the Christian population in its roots, it challenges typically conservative Christian views surrounding the liberation of marginalized groups.

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