We are confronted by the overwhelming yet contradictory reality of a “world system” in crisis five thousand years after its inception, which has globalized its reach to the most distant corner of the planet at the same time that it has paradoxically excluded a majority of humanity. This is a matter of life and death. The human life invoked here is not a theoretical concept, an idea, or an abstract horizon, but rather a mode of reality of each concrete human being who is also the absolute prerequisite and ultimate demand of all forms of liberation. Given this framework it should not be surprising that Ethics is an ethics grounded in an avowed affirmation of life in the face of the collective murder and suicide that humanity is headed toward if it does not change the direction of its irrational behaviour. Ethics of Liberation seeks to think through this real and concrete ethical situation in which the majority of contemporary humanity is immersed, philosophically and rationally, as we hurtle toward a tragic conflagration on a scale that is unprecedented in the biological trajectory of the human species.

The themes explored here are of such dimensions that I can only seek to place them for descriptive purposes in an architectural framework of categories of analysis that will take shape as the result of an ethical “process” of construction. Our point of departure is a world system of globalized exclusion whose exploration requires the critical assimilation of the thought of numerous contemporary thinkers who have been selected because they are most relevant to the argument. Future works will explore such problems as the grounding of the principles of the ethical framework set forth here, as well as the concrete treatment of the most critical liberation struggles waged by emerging sociohistorical subjects seeking recognition within civil society in each country and on a global scale.
Contemporary ethics at the end of the twentieth century and at the beginning of the third millennium has some “problematic knots” that must be disentangled—aporai or dilemmas that we will address fully and polemically—while undertaking to analyze them from the perspective of the ethics of liberation. Two spheres of debate are particularly lively in this context. In the first place, the debates that proceed from (a) the denial that a normative ethics can be developed that is based upon a rationality with empirical validity given that its deployment would be grounded at the level of mere value judgments—a position maintained by the school of analytical metaethics (since G. Moore’s *Principia Ethica* in 1903), among others—all the way to (b) the affirmation of a utilitarian ethics of “the greatest happiness for the greatest number.” I will explore the first, continuing with Habermas’s discourse, with reference to the supposed existence of normative claims (which are not merely subjective judgments but instead have at least the intention of satisfying claims of rightfulness). But I will also attempt to go further by attempting to demonstrate the possibility of developing an ethics grounded in factual, empirical, and descriptive judgments. I will incorporate the contributions of utilitarianism, which has been so criticized by the metaethics of the philosophy of language and formalist moralities (including that of John Rawls), thereby retrieving the material aspect of the drives toward happiness, although I will demonstrate the inconsistency inherent in this approach in terms of the claim that seeks to ground a universal material principle with sufficient validity.

Second, I will situate the ethics of liberation with regard to a debate that is still in progress and which has confronted (c) the ethics of communitarianism, inspired by history and values, in the face of (d) formal ethics (particularly discourse ethics). I will incorporate both of these for varying reasons but will situate them at distinct moments of the architectural process of *Ethics of Liberation*. I will include the communitarian ethics (of Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, or Michael Walzer) at the material level of my ethical architecture. In this way I seek to articulate the contributions of this school within a redefined horizon that will facilitate the transcendence of its particularistic incommensurability and open it up to a universalism of content beyond the merely historical, hypervalues, or the authenticity of a specific cultural identity. The practical truth of its content will thus enable a claim of universality. In a similar fashion I will also incorporate aspects of proceduralist and formalist moralities (ranging from Emmanuel Kant up through Karl-Otto Apel to Jürgen Habermas, in particular), but this will be accomplished through a radical reconstruction of their function in the overall ethical process. Their transformative incorporation will help clarify the moment of “application” of the ethical material principle.

We will also engage philosophical perspectives such those of (e) prag-
matism (as reflected in thinkers running the gamut from Charles Sanders Peirce to Hilary Putnam) or (f) system theory (Niklas Luhmann); I will draw from these what is necessary in order to define (g) a third principle: that of feasibility, inspired by the thought of Frank Hinkelammert.

In this way the goodness claim (with reference to the subject of the norm, action, microphysics of power, institution, or ethical system) is attained as the end result of a complex process wherein the content of truth, intersubjective validity, and ethical feasibility have the effect of producing or enabling the fulfillment of “the goodness claim” (das Gute). In a definitive sense “the good” person is a concrete ethical subject, but only once this subject has brought “goodness” into action upon a normative basis. This summary overview of the landscape we are about to explore concludes part I of this book, and it might appear that we have already exhausted the central themes of ethics in general. Nonetheless, it is only in part II of this book where the ethics of liberation as such begins to undertake the development of its own theses.

In fact it is upon the basis of the assumed “goodness claim” of norms, acts, microstructures, institutions, or ethical systems that victims appear as the concretion of the effects of their application, according to the mechanism that Max Horkheimer defined as one of “material negativity.” My point of departure here is from the perspective of the victim, such as Rigoberta Menchú (a woman, of Maya Quiché indigenous origin, brown-skinned, Guatemalan . . .). “Goodness claim” becomes inverted and is dialectically transformed into “evil” because it has produced a victim such as her. This is also the point at which the analysis of the great critical or “accursed” philosophers begins, such as Marx; those of the first Frankfurt school: Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Walter Benjamin; and also Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, Emmanuel Levinas, and so on. In this way, it is such ethical-material critiques that set the philosophies of negation into motion.

Suddenly, the consensus-building attributes of discursive reason that could not bring to bear its basic norms because the affected participants are always empirically and inevitably in asymmetry, can now be “applied” thanks to the symmetrical intersubjectivity of the victims who have joined together in a community of victims. New and unexpected problems emerge at this point, which have been dealt with by Jean Piaget or Lawrence Kohlberg, but in a new light following the reinterpretation undertaken by Paulo Freire. It is in this context that I formulate for the first time the epistemological question of the “third” criterion for the demarcation of the critical social sciences (superseding the position expressed in this regard by Karl Popper, Thomas Kuhn, P. Feyerabend, or I. Lákatos, and hoping also thereby to clarify certain ambiguities of “critical theory”). I also high-
light meanwhile how Ernst Bloch evidenced for us the positive meaning of yearning with hope for the possibility of utopia, from the perspective of the symmetrical intersubjectivity of the victims.

This is the path by which we arrive at the most critical moment in the architecture of the ethics of liberation, after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, as I seek to give a contemporary meaning to long-standing debates played out by Rosa Luxemburg, Antonio Gramsci, José Carlos Mariátegui, and so many others. My purpose is to lay the basis for new horizons of strategic and tactical ethical reasoning grounded in the metaethics of liberation. These reflect complex processes of articulation among the victimized billions of the world system, who emerge as critical communities with critical activists at their core. Their expressions include the new social, political, economic, racial, environmental, gender-based, and ethnic movements that emerged during the last quarter of the twentieth century. These are struggles for the recognition of victims who transform the character of previous liberation movements, which this Ethics seeks to legitimize and to provide with a philosophical grounding. My hope is that Ethics of Liberation could provide these movements with some guidance as to ethical criteria and principles for the unfolding of the praxis of liberation from the perspective of the victims, as they confront the effects of oppressive norms, acts, microstructures, institutions, or ethical systems in the context of everyday life, in the present historical moment, instead of postponing their application to some later moment when the revolution has arrived.

It might seem to some that this is an endeavor limited to the elaboration of an ethics of “principles.” In fact, although my emphasis here is on criteria and principles, this is an ethics that is nonproceduralist in character, grounded in daily life and the dominant models prevalent in that context, and which seeks to encompass the nonintentional negative effects (the production of victims) resulting from every kind of autonomously organized and regulated structure. This ethics develops a material ethical discourse that is content-based and formal (and intersubjective in its validity) and that takes empirical feasibility into account, always seeking to approach issues from the perspective of the victims at all possible levels of intersubjectivity. Jürgen Habermas pointed out to me at a meeting in St. Louis in October 1996 that he did not expect very much from the normativity of ethics; I wouldn’t expect much either if I believed that the only cause that motivates the demands that set processes of liberation of the victims into motion were of a purely ethical character. My approach instead is that such motivations include affective drives that are deeply rooted in the critical superego of the oppressed, and that are often nonintentional in character, grounded in social contexts and cultural values, and in historical and biographical causes and factors, and in the impetus of principles
such as responsibility and solidarity. Ethical philosophy expresses these in an articulated, structured, and rational manner that incorporates such non-proceduralist structures of this kind that are always implicit. To make them explicit is our philosophical responsibility. The enunciation of principles has a dynamic complementary relationship to play with respect to actions undertaken that seek liberation, by helping deconstruct false or incomplete contrary arguments, and by developing arguments in favor of such liberation processes.

I don’t expect very much in terms of this ethics’ explicit theoretical normative capacity, but I continue to believe that it can play a strategically necessary role in another dimension, which is especially important in collective learning processes where critical consciousness can be developed as part of the political, economic, and social organizing efforts of new emerging social movements in civil society.

I began to write this book in October 1993, twenty years after a bomb set by right-wing extremists partially destroyed my house and my study in Mendoza, Argentina, and drove me into exile in Mexico, where I have lived ever since. At that time I was writing *Towards an Ethics of Latin American Liberation*.3 This was an ethics that took the affirmation of “exteriority” as its point of departure, and which, beyond Heidegger, was inspired by Latin America’s popular struggle. The present work takes the next step with respect to that initial effort and is characterized by a greater emphasis on issues of negation and materiality, with a much more elaborately constructed rational architecture of principles. My current approach is not only different because it comes twenty years later, but principally because during the intervening period the overall historical context has changed, and a new perspective has matured within me, at the same time as the discourse of ethics in contemporary philosophy has been transformed.

In the first place, the above-mentioned ethics was qualified as “towards an ethics.” This book, instead, is an ethics as such. Second, my initial work was denominated as “of Latin American liberation.” Now, I seek to situate myself in a global, planetary horizon, beyond the Latin American region, beyond the Helleno- and Eurocentrism of contemporary Europe and the United States, in a broader sweep ranging from the “periphery” to the “center”4 and toward “globality.”5 Third, as is evident, in the seventies I took my point of departure from the philosophers most studied during that period: the last stage of the work of Martin Heidegger, Paul Ricoeur, Hans-Georg Gadamer, the first Frankfurt school, the contributions of Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Levinas, and many others. Now, we must take into account not only these philosophers, but also, in particular, more recent developments in philosophy in the United States and Europe—as I have already indicated
above. In addition, at that time the debate that my initial efforts at an ethics of liberation were grounded in had come out of the context of the Latin American reality I was immersed in, from the perspective of groups of activist scholars with whom I was engaged, and from my critical rereading of texts. Now, out of world reality and from some personal dialogues with philosophers of “the center,” the reflections have reached new pertinence. In the fourth place, the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, the collapse of the Soviet bloc, the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua in 1990, and increased pressures on the Cuban Revolution through the U.S. blockade have together implied a series of setbacks for alternative models of social order that once nourished the hopes of people around the world in the possibility of a path out of their misery. All of this has contributed to a generalized sense of disenchantment and even desperation among the oppressed, and to the virtual disappearance of critical thinking among philosophers.

The Cold War is over, and along with it the geopolitics of bipolarity. At the same time the United States’ indisputable military hegemony has been restored, and the dictates of U.S. foreign and economic policy and culture have been globalized. The crisis of revolutionary utopias causes many to give up entirely the search for alternatives to the contemporary global system, and the metaphysical dogma of neoliberalism à la Friedrich Hayek (the new “grand narrative” and the only “utopia” acceptable to the powers that be) consolidates its domination. The prevailing judgment amid the “public opinion” that is dominant in philosophical circles assumes that “liberation” must give way to functional, reformist, “feasible” acts. But despite this, and contrary to what many claim, it seems as if the ancient suspicion of the necessity of an ethics of liberation from the perspective of the “victims,” of the “poor” and their “exteriority” and their “exclusion,” has reaffirmed its relevance amid the terror of a harrowing misery that destroys a significant portion of humanity at the end of the twentieth century, together with the unsustainable environmental destruction of the Earth.

The ethics of liberation does not seek to be an ethics for a minority, nor only for exceptional times of conflict and revolution. It aspires instead to be an ethics for everyday life, from the perspective and in the interests of the immense majority of humanity excluded by globalization throughout the world where the current historical “normality” prevails. The philosophical ethics most in fashion, the standard ones, and even those that have a critical orientation with a claim to being postconventional in character, are in fact themselves the ethics of minorities (most emphatically of hegemonic, dominating minorities; those that own the resources, the words, the arguments, the capital, the armies) that frequently and quite cynically can ignore the victims, those most affected, who have been dominated and excluded.
from the “negotiating tables” of the ruling system and from the dominant communities of communication. These are victims whose rights have not been advocated or vindicated, who go unacknowledged by the ethos of authenticity, who are coerced by the dominant legality, and with a claim to legitimacy that demands recognition.

In any event, Ethics of Liberation does not supplant my previous effort, which includes themes, explored in five volumes, that I will not repeat here. Instead my emphasis here is on updating and where necessary reformulating and radicalizing the previous work, and on developing new, more fundamental aspects of its argument, clarifying, expanding, and retracting some of its elements in response to certain critiques of its approach. But because this is deliberately a work of synthesis, the themes to be addressed cannot be explored in all of their detail; instead I will only outline a “process” (in six specific moments or dimensions) and situate the “place” of the matter dealt with within the overall architectural framework of my approach. A full analytical exposition would require much greater space than is possible in a single work of this character. The themes that are “outlined” in this fashion can be studied in greater detail in other works of mine and in the works of colleagues to whom I will refer. Only in some cases will my exposition of these cases be more detailed, when it concerns questions that I deal with for the first time.

On the other hand, I have included in this book discussions of the work of numerous contemporary philosophers of ethics. I do this not because of some kind of purism of bibliographical scientificity, but instead because my purpose is to grapple with the thinking of relevant authors in order to incorporate their contributions to the discourse of the Ethics of Liberation, and to pursue the logic of its approach by “bringing water to the mill” of my central arguments from other sources. Frequently, as Ethics seeks to produce a double effect of developing an overall architecture and of subsuming the reflections of contemporary ethicists, it may seem that we have lost our path along the way. I ask for the reader’s patience in order to discover and pursue the driving thread of the discussion that is developed through the efforts of the authors whose work is explored here. In any event, many themes remain open for further exploration and study in the future. The research program of a fully developed critical ethics is developed initially only in broad strokes; other works in the tradition of the philosophy of liberation should complete it. I hope that colleagues and students will help to fill these necessary gaps.

I would like to emphasize that when I refer in this work to the concept of the “Other” I will situate myself always and exclusively at the anthropological level. It is too simplistic to pretend to refute Ethics of Liberation by misunderstanding the theme of the Other as that of a nonphilosophical prob-
lem—by suggesting, for example, that it is theological in character, as in the case of the work of Gianni Vattimo or Ofelia Schutte. In my approach, the Other is understood as being the other woman/man: a human being, an ethical subject, whose visage is conceived of as the epiphany of living human reality in bodily form (corporeality). The approach to the concept of the Other that I rely upon in this work is exclusively a matter of rational, philosophical, and anthropological significance. In the context of *Ethics*, the only Other that could be referred to in the most absolute terms would be something like an Amazonian tribe that has never had any contact with any other contemporary civilization, which is a very rare phenomenon. The freedom of the Other—following in this aspect the approach of Maurice Merleau-Ponty—cannot be an absolute unconditionality, but instead is always a quasi-unconditionality with reference or “relative” to a context, a world, a concrete reality, or a feasibility. In *Ethics* the Other will not be denominated either metaphorically or economically with the label of the “poor.” Now, inspired by Walter Benjamin, I will refer instead to the subject of *Ethics* as a “victim,” a concept that is both broader and more exact.

The Fifth Congress of the Afro-Asiatic Association of Philosophy was held in Cairo in December 1994. There we organized an International Committee of the Third World in order to deal with South-South philosophical dialogue. This book seeks to contribute to the continuation and deepening of these dialogues in the context of the twenty-first century.

It should not be forgotten that the ultimate framework or context for *Ethics* is the process of globalization; but, unfortunately and simultaneously, this process also necessarily implies the exclusion of the great majority of humanity: the victims of the world system. My reference to the current historical age as one of globalization and exclusion seeks to capture the double-edged movement that the global periphery is caught between: on the one hand, the supposed modernization occasioned by the formal globalization of finance capital (“fictitious” capital as Marx characterized it); but, on the other hand, the increasing material, discursive, and formal exclusion of the victims of this purported civilizing process. *Ethics* seeks to provide an account of this contradictory dialectic, constructing the categories and the critical discourse capable of enabling us to reflect in philosophical terms regarding this self-referential performative system that destroys, negates, and impoverishes so many at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The threatened destruction of the majority of humanity demands an ethics of life in response, and it is their suffering on such a global scale which moves me to reflection, and to seek to justify the necessity of their liberation from the chains in which they are shackled.

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versity of Mexico (UNAM), for which I am grateful. I am also grateful for the support provided by the UNAM’s Department of Graduate Studies. I also presented it at the Philosophy Department of the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana (UAM-Iztapalapa), various portions of it in Spain (Madrid, Valencia, Murcia, Pamplona, Cadiz, the Canary Islands), as well as in Haiti, Cuba, Argentina, Colombia, Peru, Bolivia, Paraguay, Guatemala, Costa Rica, Brazil, the United States, Canada, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, Norway, Sweden, Egypt, the Philippines, among other settings. My students at the UNAM participated actively in this work, especially those who encouraged it and criticized it creatively, including Marcio Cota, Germán Gutiérrez, Silvana Rabinovich, Juan José Bautista, Pedro Enrique Ruiz, and many others. Debates with Karl-Otto Apel, Paul Ricoeur, Gianni Vattimo, Richard Rorty, Franz Hinkelammert, and others preceded and accompanied the writing of this book. I am very grateful for the corrections to the text made by my friends Raúl Fornet-Betancourt, Eduardo Mendieta, Michael Barber, Hans Schelkshorn, Mariano Moreno, and James Marsh. Last, I want to express publicly my acknowledgment of two institutions, the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana and Mexico’s National System of Researchers, because the research that made this book possible is the fruit of the support provided to me as professor of the faculty of the university and as a member of Level 3 of the National System of Researchers.