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“Popular Wisdom” Between Ethics and Politics - The Concept of ‘People’ in Argentinian Liberationist Thinking

In 1970, the Argentinian theologian and philosopher Juan Carlos Scannone (1931-2019) invited a group of young intellectuals to a series of workshops at the Universidad del Salvador. In the context of a convolved political situation characterized by daily upheavals and violent repressions, the group aimed to articulate an ideological alternative to both Peron’s populism (which had set the tone for many years in Argentine politics) and the de facto governments of the “Revolución Argentina” (1966-1973). At the core of these workshops stood the work of Jewish Philosopher Emmanuel Levinas’ *Totalité et Infini*, which Scannone had been exposed to in his years of study in Europe. This was the first reception of Levinas outside Europe, and these meetings would plant the seeds of what would be later known as the “Theology of the People” and the “Philosophy of Culture.”

Three sources of inspiration nurtured these intellectual, religious and cultural expressions: the Bible, what Scannone called “popular wisdom,” and Levinas, who would be assimilated creatively by the Argentinian. For instance, Levinas’ individualist ethical approach would be transformed in Scannone’s hands into a collective vision of a people seeking political liberation, while “the other’s face” found expression in “the face of the oppressed Latin American peoples.” However, Levinas frequently expressed suspicion about such “translations” of his ideas (the two even discussed it in person in a meeting in Paris in 1981), as they seemingly led to a blurring of individuation, which lay at the core of one’s direct responsibility towards the other.

An analysis of Scannone’s concept of ‘people’ in light of Levinas’ critique of politics will help us to better understand not only the dynamics between these two thinkers but also a process of migration of certain philosophical ideas that would shape Argentinian liberationist thinking for decades.