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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. The aim of the group was to articulate an ideological alternative to, on the one hand, Peron’s populism, that set the tone for many years in Argentine’s politics, and to the de facto governments of the “Revolución Argentina” (1966-1973) on the other, in the context of a extremely convolved political situation, characterized by daily popular upheavals and violent repressions. At the core of these workshops stood the Jewish Philosopher Emmanuel Levinas’ *Totalité et Infini*, to which Scannone was exposed in his years of study in Europe. This was the first reception of Levinas outside Europe. 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, which would be assimilated creatively by the Argentinian.

For instance, Levinas’ individual ethical approach would be transformed into a collective vision of a people seeking for political liberation. “The other’s face” will now be “the face of the oppressed Latin American peoples.” Levinas, however, frequently expressed concern and suspicion about such a transition, as it could lead to the blur of the individuation, which stems from one’s direct responsibility towards the other - including in a meeting they had in Paris in 1981.

An analysis of Scannone’s concept of ‘people’ in light of Levinas’ critic of politics will help us to better understand not only the dynamics between them, but also the process of migration from center to periphery of ideas that would shape the Argentinian liberationist thinking for the decades.