Populism, People and a Task for Public Theology

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This contribution is written within the contemporary Brazilian and Latin American contexts, where there are different understandings of populism, including positive ones. Populism, as an inter-contextual concept, has to be understood from a wide variety of perspectives. Theologically speaking, I suggest that it is necessary to look closely at the notion of people as ochlos rather than demos or even laos, for which there is a tradition within liberation theologies in Latin America and around the world, and, of course, in biblical witness. Churches would then, in the first place, have to be agents of dialogue among the people and the forging of horizons of meaning oriented towards a common good. I shall expose this in three steps: (1) through a contextualization from two recent events that point to challenges of popularity and, potentially, of populism or populisms; (2) through a discussion of the concept of populism, especially in dialogue with Ernesto Laclau; and (3) through a theological reflection on foundations and activities needed for a meaningful public theology in this context, focusing on the concept of “people”.

Challenges of Popularity and Populism

In mid-August 2017, former human rights government minister and now federal deputy Maria do Rosario of the Workers’ Party accepted an invitation from our Institute of Ethics at Faculdades EST in São Leopoldo, Brazil, and gave a lecture on the human rights situation in Brazil. Not surprisingly, she had a full house in front of her and presented a very worrying picture of the human rights situation in the country. She valued very much the contribution of churches and theology towards the practice and theory of human rights. A boy from a slum gave a moving witness during the discussion and said, crying, that it was the Worker’s Party, under then president Lula and with Rosario as minister, that had given him strength and hope to become a hip-hop artist. Their presence and politics were, one could say, able to light a flame of hope in the midst of despair. Shortly after the event, a video with part of Rosario’s speech was posted on her Facebook page. Thousands of reactions immediately poured in, most of them offensive and related to her person—and what, to many, she represents—and in no way to what she had said. That she was “disgusting” [nojenta] was about the “nicest” thing they could write about her. The wider context is probably illuminating: only two days earlier, Rosario had won her case before the High Court against her fellow deputy Jair Messias Bolsonaro who, during a session in Congress, had said “she did not deserve to be raped” because she was “very ugly”. The judges unanimously understood this meant, effectively, to declare that rape was a kind of benefit to the victim, and judged it to be an “evil expression” that “despises the dignity of any woman”. At Rosario’s lecture, we commemorated the victory, which is the victory of many women she represents, a victory, indeed, for human dignity and human rights, especially women’s rights. And yet, despite Bolsonaro showing at every moment he stands for a clearly racist, misogynous, homophobic and authoritarian attitude, even invoking the death penalty and the legitimacy of torture, he has been elected president and—he is highly popular. One could call this populism: the focus on a state leader with a messianic appeal to the masses.

On his part, former president Luis Inácio Lula da Silva, a highly charismatic leader, has fallen into public disgrace. What happened to him, a politician who left office at the beginning of 2011 with the approval of 80 percent of the population? What happened to him who, some would say, was

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a populist, and a very successful one? Why is somebody portrayed as the incarnation of evil before he is elected, then becomes a kind of messiah and now, for many, the incarnation of evil again, without reasonably balancing his successes and failures? Some make it seem as if he was the only corrupt person in the country. At the same time, there is no material proof of his having received as a bribe the three-story apartment in the Guarujá resort he was convicted for, and photos circulating on websites showing a luxurious intérieur were proven to be forged and had to be taken off the web. In using Lula as a type of scapegoat, all the traditional oligarchies in politics and the economy want, so it seems, to cover up their own wrongdoings. But beyond that, why is there so much aggressive energy, so much hatred against a president under whose direction thirty-six million people left the poverty zone? It seems to be the old political messianism in reverse: either the president is the country’s savior or the devil himself. Congress, which includes some thirty parties in 2019 that are not tied directly to the elected president, acts on its own grounds and appears to waive any responsibility for the government and its policies. Some would say such a sway is the result of populism—either the president’s or the others’. The tide can turn quickly, especially when power constellations change.

Lula himself said in his speech, before turning himself in to the federal police and starting to serve his sentence after being convicted, that he never was just a person, but was, rather, “an idea”. Even in custody, what he represents for the transformation of Brazil and the dreams and hopes he continues to kindle go far beyond a single person—although they depend on this person as representation of the idea. This is one way to understand why it was so difficult for his followers at the trade union’s headquarters to let him walk over to the federal police officers who then took him to jail. It is

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3 Perlatto, op. cit. (note 1), 71, names as elements for populism in its recent, critical key: “the presence [...] of charismatic and personalistic leaders, the excessive control of the market through a hypertrophied State and the orientation for the execution of social policies that are considered to promote assistencialism [a patronizing, giving aid rather than a help to be self-sustaining] and clientelism” (usually applied to Lula and Dilma in Brazil, Morales in Bolivia, Correa in Ecuador, the Kirchners in Argentina, Vasquez and Mujica in Uruguay, Chavez and Maduro in Venezuela).


no mere coincidence that before the political act that included Lula’s speech that there was a religious ceremony that showed the historical partnership of the Roman Catholic Church, but also of sectors of other churches, with the trade unions, landless worker’s movement and the Workers’ Party. It is safe to say that this religious-political partnership made possible the emergence of a new civil society towards the end of the military regime. Offically, the ecumenical ceremony presided over by Bishop emeritus Dom Angelico Sandalo Bernardino, a long-standing friend of Lula’s, was in memory of Lula’s deceased wife, Marisa. Bishop Angelico and his fellow celebrants tried hard to guarantee silence and a spiritual attitude for this religious moment. Of course, no strict separation between religion and politics was possible, not even intended, but Bishop Angelico managed to maintain a reasonable respect for someone and something bigger than politics: God and faith. And so, he could even, for a moment, silence the many cries of “não te entrega (do not turn yourself in)” that emerged from the public. As an ecumenical voice, Rev. Lusmarina Campos Garcia, a Lutheran pastor in Rio de Janeiro who formerly served in Geneva, spoke. Her voice recalled the traditional Brazilian and Latin American joinder of the struggle for citizenship and ecumenical engagement. To be ecumenical meant to struggle for justice, and Christians struggling for justice considered themselves, with pride, ecumenical. Campos Garcia made clear that, even with Lula imprisoned, the values and struggle he stood for could not be imprisoned. The cause is wider, and the political and religious support for it is wider. Her words were an important part of helping Brazilians to understand Lula’s imprisonment as a victory rather than just the incarceration of an outlaw. Yes, Lula is much more than a person, but it is only his person that had the legitimacy to proclaim the continuation of the struggle and, at the same time, to comply with the law. He could have opted for fleeing or fighting, but he stayed in order to not endanger the democratically legitimized rule of law, even as he continued to affirm there was no proof against him and that he was innocent. A great, a necessary, and an effective speech, I would say. Some would certainly say it was populist.

Let us now look more closely at a challenging Latin American understanding of populism developed by Ernesto Laclau (1935-2014).

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ANOTHER VIEW ON POPULISM: ERNESTO LACLAU

Laclau, an Argentinian political philosopher, lived since the 1970s in England, where he taught at the University of Essex. He is known, together with his life partner, Belgian political scientist Chantal Mouffe, as a post-Marxist, post-foundational defender of what they call radical democracy. Both are particularly interested in the discursive and militant articulation of popular movements. Their thinking served as an inspiration for the Spanish political popular movement *Podemos* and the Greek *Syriza* movement. Although they have different emphases, both Laclau and Mouffe defend a post-foundational view, seeking to avoid both pre-figured and eschatologically pre-set foundations. They are informed by Antonio Gramsci’s theory of hegemony, Lacan’s psychanalytic theory of the subject and post-structural semiotic theory, among other resources. They also strongly resist the traditional way of despising the people as mere masses prone to manipulation.

For Laclau, this means moving from the universalism of the absolute to the universalism of the particular. He takes up the Gramscian distinction between *plebs* as particularity and *populus* as an abstract universality hegemonically constituted. There is *populus* only as incarnated in the *plebs*, so it is not a pre-established given. The people and social order are not created by preconceived concepts, institutions or even a charismatic leader, but emerge performatively through discourse in difference and constant struggle, dispensing a non-discursive reference as foundation.

Such position comes in opposition to what he sees as a liberal, formal, technocratic and pragmatic occupation of politics and democracy, valuing excessively politics over “the political” as a space of articulation and hegemony of the people. Rather than any pre-political foundation on which to build, there is, for Laclau, an “empty signifier” to be filled according to the hegemonic forces. Applying this to the above case, we could say that

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12 Ernesto Laclau, Emancipación y diferencia (Buenos Aires: Ariel, 1996), 43-68, as mentioned by Nicolás Panotto, “Mediaciones analíticas em el trabajo de ernesto laclau: uma relectura crítica desde la antropología política”, *Pléyade* 16 (2015), 235-259, here 239. I would like to thank Nicolás for the important subsidies he has made available to me for this section, and for his critical reading of a first draft.
Lula as “idea” fills the place of such an “empty signifier”. It is to a certain extent contingent that it be Lula who is the signifier of the popular struggle. However, it is certainly his person and what he represents that makes him so important for many. Another example of this phenomena is Nelson Mandela, whose person and name represented the concrete struggle of black people in South Africa and beyond, as well as more broadly the principles of equality, freedom, solidarity and justice.  

The 2013 protests in Brazil offered an example of an emerging popular stance, with non-traditional protest groups taking to the street and complaining about the presence of traditional pressure groups. It was certainly a popular manifestation, and a very diverse and amorphous one at that—triggered by the rise in price of bus tariffs, but then exacerbated by a host of different and divergent demands. While there was some debate and discourse, there was little articulation or strategic planning, and so this important movement had no sustainability and no lasting, concrete, effect. In the meantime, there has been political protest and social critique both defending and critiquing Lula, with nationalists demonstrating against corruption and for the imprisonment of Lula. As such, popular debate, including taking to the streets, is positive for democracy, with various groups articulating their demands and fighting for hegemony. However, there is, generally, no dialogue between the two groups, no debate with at least a common goal, just rhetoric, where one is characterized as friend or foe. Brazil is, I contend, in dire need of a culture of dialogue and a reasonably common vision—and such vision should indeed emerge from below. This can be nurtured by the churches, as I shall argue in the third section.

For his part, Laclau develops, in his _On Populist Reason_\(^{14}\), a theory of populism in which he describes as normal rather than as a pathology or dangerous deviance from democracy. However, this approach is more descriptive than normative and, at least theoretically, leaves open the possibility of all kinds of hegemonies. Mouffe is more normative in her agonistic theory of democracy. Rather than creating opposition between insiders and outsiders, friends and enemies, she talks about struggling in a pluralistic democracy that has as its goals freedom and equality. Rather than friend or foe, there are legitimate adversaries. A culture of conflict—not of violence or false harmony—is certainly something that should be part of our conviviality and our construction of a just society.

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It is important to note that while liberation theologies and philosophies in Latin America tend to stress, even more so in their post- and decolonial mode, the overcoming of essentialist and prefigured rationalities, modernities, democracies and even religiosities, authors like Enrique Dussel connect with normative and externally established elements such as the preferential option for the poor or victims. For Dussel and others, following Emmanuel Lévinas, the messianic irruption of the other becomes tantamount.\(^{15}\) While Laclau shares such anti-totalitarian ontology, he does not adopt the ethical interpellation of the other. Following Dussel’s logic, I would suggest that, beyond the emergence of a popular drive from below, we need ethical interpellation and references for just procedure and for a reasonable definition of what democracy is to be, precisely in order to hear the voices of the excluded and marginalized and not succumb to sheer power, rhetorical or otherwise, of one group coming to dominate the rest. What is, then, the opportunity and task for a Public Theology? I come to my third and last part.

**THE CENTRALITY OF THE PEOPLE—\(^{15}\)**
**TASKS FOR A PUBLIC THEOLOGY**

As we have seen, populism is a polysemic, ambiguous and often vague concept. In Latin American political theory, it traditionally meant the closeness of the single, charismatic leader to the masses that bypassed the elites and the established order. However, the supposedly uniform masses, seen as incapable of transformation and subjectivity by both the right and the left, came, in Laclau’s redefinition of populism, to be discovered as people—not in a nationalistic sense, but, first and foremost, in a social sense. The people are the oppressed, the downtrodden, the excluded, the marginalized as Liberation Theology taught us. Hugo Assmann, one of the most radical liberation theologians in the 1970s and 1980s, later questioned many of his own presuppositions and came to see the people, not as only being in want or in need of something they lack, but as bearers of wishes, of desires. Their subjectivity and embodiment came into focus. At the same time, Assmann articulated the need for an education that pre-eminently included the development of solidary, competence and sensitivity.\(^{16}\)


Laclau, then, inverts the meaning of populism from a manipulation of the masses by a leader to a way of performative, discursive and pluralistic articulation of subjectivities that on acquiring hegemony emerge as people, the *plebs* creating the *populus*. Theologically, this is relevant because populism, in this sense, focuses the attention on the people, or we could say on the priesthood of all believers. From the standpoint of Latin American Liberation Theology, the freeing from bondage in Egypt led to political and social liberation and a new configuration of the oppressed people of God. 17 I can only register here that such a view neglects the fact that liberation from Egypt was followed by the occupation of the land with nefarious consequences, including new oppressions that last to this very day. For Liberation Theology, the interest for the people is intrinsically linked to the option for the poor, seeking their emancipation both in society and in the church. 18 Within the urgency of situations in which the people found themselves massively oppressed, the notion of the “crucified people” was introduced, a kind of historical soteriology that links the concrete suffering of the people to Jesus Christ’s salvific work. 19 The “people” or “people of God” generally refer to the Greek *laos [theou]*.20 In a further radicalization of Korean Minjung, i.e. people’s theology, the term “people” can also echo the Greek *ochlos*, the common people, a term used by Philo and Josephus and many others in a derogatory way, but portrayed positively in “a close relationship to Jesus” especially in the Gospel of Mark. 21

Theologically, one is part of God’s people through baptism, but practically comes to understand and adopt such a condition on a daily and continuous learning basis. Baptism is a given, a moment, but also a process. To be a Christian is, then, something constantly in the making within the constant horizon of the scandal of the cross and resurrection of Christ. Similarly, being a “people” is not a given, but part of a continuous process.

20 See the call for a laocracy from both a theological and democratic-theoretical point of view, and, thus, not only focused on the church, but on society in Jörg Rieger, Jung Mo Sung and Nestor Míguez, *Beyond the Spirit of Empire* (London: SCM, 2009).
From the amorphous mass emerges the people, the *populus* from the *plebs*, the People of God from the human species, the city of God from within the earthly city. The people, in general, and the people of God are, then, not a given, but a process, an “event” rather than an institution, as underlined in their specific ways in Leonardo Boff’s “ecclesiogenesis” and Vitor Westhelle’s “Church Event”. People are, therefore, not simply a representation of a reality but a programmatic concept. The people of God, as embodied subjects, have as their dynamic, not predefined and yet within the horizon of the incarnation, the embodiment of God in Jesus Christ. Such embodiment shows God assuming vulnerability, a vulnerability typical of the reality of most people in most contexts. Also in Jesus’ practice, the people he was sent to were not simply a given, but modified and reconstructed by Jesus’ presence, Jesus’ words and deeds. In and through Jesus, the best and worst of humanity became visible—the generosity of the “sinful woman” that anointed Jesus (Luke 7:36-50) as well as the brutality of those who condemned and crucified him. As Luther insisted, believers are simultaneously justified and sinners, justified *in spe*, in hope, and sinners *in re*, in fact. To live with such uncomfortable, but realistic ambiguity is not easy, but necessary to be able to constructively contribute to the church’s edification and the construction of a just society.

A close look at who and where the people are is, then, needed. In Brazil and Latin America, it has become common to state that “while Liberation Theology opted for the poor, the poor opted for the Pentecostals”, a statement I first heard from José Comblin, an eminent Belgian-Brazilian liberation theologian. So the people can be found in settings where they theoretically might not be, because they lack the correct discourse. Indeed, there is little explicit consciousness of citizenship and much less discourse on citizenship, social justice and transformation in most Pentecostal churches. And yet, many of those churches are the most efficient in giving people a sense of being people, and articulating community. This has to be understood by theology and, not least, a public theology, as a contribution to the emergence of a people. Public theology must be a listening theology; it has to be a learning theology; and from there, an articulating, networking, conflictive, agonistic theology. With concrete bodies, concrete subjects thus being

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heard and perceived in the public sphere, their voice and contribution will emerge. That does not mean that it is automatically always edifying. We cannot escape ambiguity even within the church, and the church is part of the world’s ambiguities. Ideally, the church can provide a space where the concrete anxieties, needs and desires can be uttered and articulated. This is what we need today more than ever in Brazil and, I presume, in many other contexts. As such a space, the church, beyond all public statements it may make, becomes a strong witness to society by its sheer presence and endurance—of the people, by the people and through the people.