

A PATH OF LIBERATION
POPULAR MOVEMENTS, DEVELOPMENT “FROM BELOW”
AND THE NEOPOPULIST CHALLENGE IN LATIN AMERICA

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Latin America has long been a laboratory of social quests. In it there flows, with a certain naturalness, a strong aspiration for justice, a persistent memory of exclusion, a popular religiosity that has not ceased to generate bonds, and democracies that, even when they have achieved important institutional advances, continue to display enormous fragility. In this context, to speak of freedom and liberation cannot mean repeating old ideological schemes or limiting oneself to describing successful or failed social struggles. It means asking about the real emergence of personal and communal subjects capable of taking part in the construction of the common good from the base, “from below”.

Popular movements appear precisely at this point of intersection between social wound and creative capacity. They are not simply pressure organizations, nor spontaneous expressions of discontent. At their best, they are places where the excluded recover voice, face, memory and project. For this reason, it is insufficient to interpret them only as movements “against” something. In Latin America, many of them are also movements “for”: for land, housing and work; for cultural recognition;

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for the identity of communities that do not wish to be managed as residues of the system, but recognized as subjects of history.¹

This intuition coincides with a broader transformation in the way collective action is understood. Geoffrey Pleyers has noted that today “it is not so much in the virtual world that political subjectivities and the actors of social movements are created, but rather in the articulations and reciprocal fertilizations between the world of the internet and that of public squares, between everyday life and political life, between social networks and coexistence in militant spaces”.² This observation allows us to see that contemporary popular movements do not live outside technological modernity, but neither are they reducible to it. They inhabit a new public square, hybrid and fragile, where indignation can mature into responsibility or degenerate into mere reaction.

The decisive question consists in discerning when a popular movement contributes to liberation and when it is absorbed by logics that neutralize it. Authentic liberation is not identified with a mere inversion of positions of power. It is not enough for some of “those below” to occupy the place of some of “those above” if the deep grammar of domination remains intact. Nor is it enough for the language of social justice to be used to legitimize new forms of dependence, which reveal a neglect of the principle of subsidiarity. A liberation worthy of the name requires that the person and the people emerge as subjects: capable of truth, responsibility, participation and communion. The recent Encyclical *Magnifica humanitas* helps us to recover this awareness: the paragraphs devoted to explaining what it means to “build in the good” are like a vindication of the subsidiarity and solidarity needed to recover persons and the people as subjects.³ Moreover, the people are recovered as a subject when the subjectivity of the person enters upon a path of renewal.

For this reason, liberation cannot be thought apart from an anthropology. When the human being is conceived only as the product of economic-political structures or of social conditionings, freedom is reduced to the mechanical result of an external transformation. When he is conceived only as a self-sufficient individual, freedom is

¹ Cf. R. GUERRA LÓPEZ, “Descubrirnos pueblo. Movimientos populares, populismo y la búsqueda de una renovación democrática en América Latina”, in PONTIFICIA COMISIÓN PARA AMÉRICA LATINA, *La irrupción de los movimientos populares. ‘Rerum novarum’ de nuestro tiempo*, Librería Editrice Vaticana, Ciudad del Vaticano 2019, p.p. 161-183.

² G. PLEYERS, *Movimientos sociales en el siglo XXI. Perspectivas y herramientas analíticas*, CLACSO, Buenos Aires 2018, p. 20.

³ LEÓN XIV, Encyclical *Magnifica humanitas*, Mensajero, Bilbao 2026, n.n. 11-14.

impoverished and becomes a dynamism that conceals a sheer will to power. In both cases something essential is lost: the person is a relational subject, wounded but capable of conversion, conditioned but not determined, historically situated but open to truth and to gift. The liberation for which the human heart longs, therefore, must include the reform of unjust structures, but also the purification of desires, loyalties, forms of coexistence and political imagination. The liberation we most deeply desire is true personal and eventually communal conversion.

From this perspective, development “from below” is not a merely sociological slogan. It is an anthropological requirement, which becomes a defense of subsidiarity lived historically. It means recognizing that all persons, especially the poor and the marginalized, are not passive recipients of public policies, but protagonists of knowledge, bonds and solutions. It also means accepting that democracy is not exhausted by the electoral procedure or by technocratic administration. A democracy without persons awakened in their humanity, without living social subjects, becomes a shell available for any strategy of capture. By contrast, when there are persons, communities, associations, cooperatives, families, parishes, schools, unions and popular movements renewed by a process that vindicates their dignity and their need to be and to act together with others in freedom, democracy acquires an invaluable human density.⁴

Here the double challenge announced in the subtitle of this reflection appears. [On the one hand, popular movements can help to rebuild democratic life because they reactivate social subjectivity. On the other, they can be instrumentalized by neopopulism, especially when social suffering becomes raw material for the concentration of power. The frontier between people and neopopulism is therefore one of the most delicate questions of our time.⁵ The people is a historical, cultural and moral reality: a community of persons united by bonds of solidarity, memory and shared destiny. Neopopulism, by contrast, tends to produce simplified and fragmented representations of the people, based on the logic of “you” versus “us”, which become functional to the messianic leader of the moment.⁶ In this regard, it does not seem

⁴ Cf. R. GUERRA LÓPEZ, “Educar para la democracia. La democracia como adjetivo y sus consecuencias educativas”, in *Revista Latinoamericana de Estudios Educativos*, México, vol. XXVII, 1º y 2º trimestres, 1997, p.p. 9-31.

⁵ Cf. FRANCISCO, *Fratelli tutti*, nn. 155-169; R. GUERRA LÓPEZ, “Fratelli tutti y el desafío del neopopulismo”, *Vatican News*, 4 March 2021 [Lecture at the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences].

⁶ Following, in part, some reflections by ENRIQUE KRAUZE, I have defined neopopulism—of the right or of the left—as: “the demagogic use that a charismatic leader makes of democratic legitimacy in order to promise access to a possible utopia and, once victorious, to consolidate power outside the law or by transforming the laws at his convenience”. R.

strange to me that among several Latin American neopopulist ideologues—of both the left and the extreme right—a peculiar interest in the most polarizing aspects of Carl Schmitt’s thought should reappear.⁷

Contemporary political literature has explained this phenomenon through diverse categories. Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, for example, define populism as a “thin” ideology that considers society to be divided into antagonistic camps, “the pure people” against “the corrupt elite”.⁸ The usefulness of this formulation lies in showing that neopopulism does not only simplify reality: it moralizes conflict to the point of making it almost irresolvable. If the adversary is not a mistaken interlocutor but the incarnation of absolute evil, then dialogue becomes betrayal, and cooperation—at least partial cooperation—for the sake of the common good becomes impossible.

In Latin America, this mechanism acquires particular force because it feeds on real wounds. The corruption of many elites is not imaginary. Nor is inequality. The distance between parties and popular life is evident. Neopopulism does not arise from nothing: it takes hold where representative democracy has lost credibility and where citizens feel that their sufferings have not been heard. Nevertheless, its answer is usually a false liberation. It promises to return power to the people, but ends by replacing the people with the voice of the caudillo; it promises participation, but in reality cultivates emotional adherence; it denounces privileges, but creates new oligarchies; it invokes justice, but weakens legality.

For this reason, popular movements can be a path of liberation only if they preserve their critical autonomy, even with regard to the ideology with which they feel most affinity. When they submit uncritically to a party apparatus or to a providential figure, they cease to be a school of the people and become a choreography of power. The true value of popular movements does not lie in acclaiming, but in organizing; not in repeating slogans, but in generating fraternal bonds; not in destroying institutions, but

GUERRA LÓPEZ, “Descubrirnos pueblo. Movimientos populares, populismo y la búsqueda de una renovación democrática en América Latina”, in PONTIFICIA COMISIÓN PARA AMÉRICA LATINA, *La irrupción de los movimientos populares. ‘Rerum novarum’ de nuestro tiempo*, p. 176.

⁷ Cf. C. BARRETO - P. CASTELLANOS - J. NAVARRO - D. GARCÍA - R. GUERRA LÓPEZ, “Las nuevas derechas latinoamericanas”, in D. MEZA – A. CIURLO, *Trayectorias cruzadas. Catolicismos y política en la América Latina contemporánea*, Editorial Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Bogotá 2025, p.p. 553-582; R. GUERRA LÓPEZ, “Political Theology and The Crisis of Contemporary Democracy”, forthcoming. See also: A. BORGHESI, *Carl Schmitt. Dal manicheismo alla teologia politica*, Studium, Roma 2024.

⁸ C. MUDDE and C. ROVIRA KALTWASSER, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2017, chap. 1.

in compelling them to be transformed, to listen and to serve. A truly popular politics does not simply speak “for” the people or “in the name” of the people: it is born from real forms of belonging, listening and co-responsibility.

The Social Doctrine of the Church and Christian social thought can offer here a specific contribution. Not because they possess a complete technical program, but because they recall that justice needs a moral source deeper than the mere dispute for power. Fraternity, social friendship and the preferential option for the poor are not sentimental ornaments. They are criteria that prevent liberation from being reduced to resentment, politics to strategy, and the people to a disposable mass. Wherever the logic of gift breaks in—in the family, in the school, in the believing community, in gratuitous service, in concrete solidarity—there opens up a space that power cannot fully absorb.

This logic does not cancel social conflict, nor does it ask for naivety in the face of injustice. On the contrary, it makes it possible to confront injustice without turning the adversary into an absolute enemy and without justifying unworthy means in the name of supposedly redemptive ends. A liberation that sacrifices truth, freedom or the dignity of the person ends by producing new forms of servitude. An integral liberation, by contrast, recognizes that structural change and personal conversion are not rival alternatives. They need one another. Unjust structures deform freedom; but deformed freedom also produces unjust structures.

Hence the importance of educating for social subjectivity. Latin America does not need only better administrators or more effective charismatic leaderships. It needs peoples capable of saying “we” without annulling the “I”; communities capable of memory without nostalgia; movements capable of protest without idolatry of confrontation; institutions capable of receiving criticism without shutting themselves up in self-defense. Development “from below” requires historical patience: forming capacities, caring for bonds of solidarity, creating mediations, sustaining processes and avoiding the temptation of more or less rapid messianic solutions. As we have so often heard: time is greater than space.

It should be added that this task has a spiritual and cultural dimension that must not be concealed in a forum such as the one in which we are gathered. Societies are not sustained only by norms, incentives or procedures; they are also sustained by shared goods that cannot be manufactured by decree. Trust, gratitude, forgiveness, civic patience and the willingness to serve are moral and spiritual reserves without which

freedom is exhausted in demand and liberation is transformed into explicit or concealed social resentment. For this reason, a reflection on popular movements should not be a mere description of repertoires of protest. It must ask what kind of humanity is being gestated in them: whether they form freer and more solidary persons, more responsible communities and more just institutions; or whether, on the contrary, they end by feeding dependence, permanent suspicion and uncritical obedience. The whole reflection that Pope Leo XIV, in *Magnifica humanitas*, has offered on building Babel or rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem is also relevant here.

In conclusion, the Latin American experience of popular movements compels us to rethink freedom and liberation simultaneously. Freedom is not only the absence of coercion; it is the capacity to follow the truth voluntarily and thus to participate responsibly in the construction of authentic common good. Liberation is not only emancipation from external oppressions; it is the integral recovery of the person and of the people as subjects. Where popular movements strengthen that subjectivity, they contribute to renewing democracy and humanizing development. Where they are captured by neopopulism, they are transformed into instruments of new colonizations and unworthy dependencies. The challenge, then, consists in accompanying the dynamisms that are born “from below” so that they are not devoured by the logic of power, but fecundated by a culture of dignity, fraternity and the common good. This accompaniment is not born of one who has been inoculated with the virus of power and self-referentiality. It is born of the converted heart which, fragile though it may be, trusts in the healing power of Jesus Christ—that is, of the One who has become event and good news for “everyone, everyone, everyone”, without exception.