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Understanding Pope Francis

Argentina, Economic Failure, and the Teología del Pueblo

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Since the election of Jorge Bergoglio to the Chair of St. Peter in 2013, much has been written about the views of economic life expressed in many of his speeches as well as in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* (2013) and his encyclical *Laudato si'* (2015b). Although many have applauded the evident skepticism of free markets and economic globalization that pervades these texts, others, including many practicing Catholics, such as myself (see, e.g., Gregg 2013, 2015), have taken issue with aspects of Pope Francis's critiques of the market economy. These aspects range from significant omissions in his analyses, such as the connection between economic globalization and widespread reductions in poverty, to the manner in which he characterizes the arguments of those who favor economic liberty and its associated institutional supports as the optimal way for realizing worthy Christian goals such as substantially reducing absolute poverty.

Pope Francis's views on these questions did not emerge in a vacuum. Like all those elected to the papacy before him, Jorge Mario Bergoglio brought a range of ideas, convictions, and experiences to the exercise of the teaching office of the papacy, or what the Catholic Church calls its *magisterium*. It would be difficult to understand particular emphases of Saint John Paul II's teaching documents, for example, if

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readers did not know that Karol Wojtyła lived through the agony of Poland during World War II and experienced the denial of freedom that was part and parcel of two totalitarian systems: National Socialism and Marxism–Leninism. Likewise, it is possible to draw connections between Wojtyła’s particular interests as an academic philosopher who had a strong interest in natural-law theory and the way in which particular ideas are expressed in magisterial documents promulgated during his pontificate, especially some of the early encyclicals.

In the case of Jorge Bergoglio, there is less material to survey in this regard. Bergoglio was not and has never claimed to be a theologian, philosopher, or any other form of academic practitioner. Nevertheless, he has brought a distinct set of experiences and ideas to his role as bishop of Rome and universal pastor of the Catholic Church. The purpose of this paper is to identify and briefly elaborate upon the most pertinent of these experiences and ideas inasmuch as they help to explain some of his comments and observations about the economy. The first concerns the particular political and economic experiences of Argentina from World War II on. The second is the influence of what is known as the *teología del pueblo*, “theology of the people.”

From Riches to Rags

There is a saying that is often attributed to Peru’s Nobel Prize–winning author Mario Vargas Llosa:

There are countries that are rich
and countries that are poor.
And there are poor countries that are growing rich.
And then there is Argentina.

In the annals of economic decline, Argentina is invariably cited as the twentieth century’s textbook case of how a once wealthy, relatively politically stable country moved over a series of decades to being a nation characterized by profound political instability and a steady march toward economic decrepitude. Born in 1936, Jorge Bergoglio lived virtually all his life until his election as pope through this transformation. It is reasonable to suggest that witnessing the effects of this change would affect some of Pope Francis’s thinking about economic questions. This is not to claim that there is an immediate and traceable cause-and-effect relationship. Nor am I implying that Pope Francis reflects on economic matters solely through the lens of Argentina’s twentieth-century economic ups and downs. To claim that these experiences had no impact whatsoever on the pope’s outlook would, however, be a dubious proposition.

The sad economic history of twentieth-century Argentina is well documented. A particularly comprehensive and succinct survey is outlined in Mauricio Rojas’s short

book *The Sorrows of Carmencita: Argentina's Crisis in a Historical Perspective* (2002). For our purposes, two dimensions of this decline are especially significant. The first is the phenomena of Peronism and its economic expressions. The second is the failure of the economic liberalization program upon which Argentina embarked in the early 1990s: this program resulted in the financial crisis of 1998–2001, from which, it is arguable, Argentina is still recovering.

Perón, Peronism, and the Path of Economic Nationalism

Pope Francis is often described as a Peronist when it comes to his political and economic views. This label, however, is not immediately helpful in understanding him inasmuch as Peronism is not a simple movement to interpret. There are, for instance, left-wing and right-wing forms of Peronism, a division that erupted into open and violent conflict in the 1970s in the lead-up to the outbreak of the leftist Montonero insurgency (which combined Marxist and left-wing Peronist elements), a military coup d'état that overthrew President Isabel Perón in 1976, and the Dirty War as the army moved to eliminate an extremely violent and widespread insurgency and deployed extremely brutal methods in doing so. Another complicating factor is that Juan Perón himself adopted a range of positions at different points of his political career.

Despite these complications, broad features of Peronism are relatively simple to identify.¹ In the first place, Peronism has always been reliant on charismatic leaders. All Peronist presidents of Argentina, whether Perón himself or, more recently, Néstor and Cristina Kirchner, have invested considerable resources in developing a cult of personality. This emphasis on “the leader” reflects a second dimension of Peronism, which is populism and the type of populist rhetoric that goes along with populist movements. Peronist movements have typically sought to appeal to “the people,” especially those from working-class and lower-middle-class backgrounds, against the interests of the elite. In Argentina, this orientation meant a hostile view of, among others, employers, the financial sector, and those perceived as adhering to liberal and conservative constitutional principles. To this extent, Peronism relies heavily on an us-versus-them rationale: workers against the middle class, Argentines against foreigners, trade unions against employers, and so on.

Part of this logic plays out in a third feature of Peronism: nationalism of the political and economic type. By the early 1950s, Perón had implemented economic nationalist policies such as intense state-directed industrialization and import-substitution programs, which were accompanied by efforts to minimize foreign investment. The latter goal was realized primarily through the nationalization of British-owned infrastructure and banks. This nationalization is associated with

1. For comprehensive explanations of these characteristics, see Brennan 1998.

Peronists' tendency to see foreign investment and companies as exploiters and extractors rather than as sources of income and capital for the host nation (see Rojas 2002, 49–97).

Peronism is also characterized by what might be called the economics and policies of clientelism, underlain and often justified by reference to corporatist theory. From its beginning, Peronism has involved creating large constituencies of supporters through disbursement of state largesse, whether in the form of direct welfare payments or government jobs. At the same time, Peronism relies on corporatist organizational theory in which people are corralled into groups recognized by the government, which then seeks to coordinate “capital” and “labor” in ways that promote the common good.

In 1949, Juan Perón oversaw Argentina's adoption of a new corporatist-inclined constitution. He then proceeded to push the policies articulated in this constitution even deeper into the economy. His government forced trade unions, businesses, universities, journalists, and even high school students into state-controlled associations. The associated doubling of public-sector employees, Rojas stresses, “triggered a development that was to lead to one of Argentina's severest problems, namely growing corruption and a contest for privilege” (2002, 74). Not surprisingly, much business activity ceased being directed by consumer demand and was instead focused on pursuing political favors.

Argentine society became deeply polarized politically between 1946 and 1955 as Perón pursued us-versus-them politics: the pursuit was so extreme that in a speech delivered in August 31, 1955, he called for the killing of any one of his supporters to be met by the killing of five opponents of Peronism. Nineteen days later the Argentine military, with the support of the Catholic Church, removed Perón from power (Rojas 2002, 63–76). Successive governments, however, did little to dismantle the economic structures he had put in place, not least because of fears of working-class unrest (Rojas 2002, 63–76).

The effects of Perón's agenda as a set of economic policies are well documented. It resulted not only in a redistribution of wealth to the working classes (thus cementing wage earners' loyalty to Perón and the Peronist movement) but also in diminishing exports, declining competitiveness as Argentine industry and agriculture were sheltered behind tariffs, an outflow of foreign capital, rampant inflation, and significant underperformance in per capita gross domestic product (GDP) vis-à-vis other nations. With regard to the latter, Argentina went from having one of the highest incomes per capita in the late 1800s to being nearer the middle of international rankings. In 1890 and 1900, for instance, Argentina's GDP per capita was almost equal to that of Germany. Today, it is less than half as high (van Zanden et al. 2014).

For much of Jorge Bergoglio's life, Peronists were not in control of the government. Peronist political parties were often banned or dissolved by military and civilian governments. That said, however, there is little question that Peronism still commanded the allegiance of millions of Argentines. Pope Francis appears to have some

affinity for the types of political culture associated with Peronism, especially the notion that the state should express the ideas and priorities of ordinary people—a point I elaborate when I discuss the influence of *la teología del pueblo* on the pope's thought.

Free Markets and the Argentine Experience

Although Peronism has certain identifiable characteristics, it is also marked by the type of ideological fluidity often associated with dependence on a charismatic leader. This fluidity is highlighted by the fact that Argentina's effort to pursue a free-market liberalization program was presided over by a Peronist president, Carlos Menem, from the late 1980s on (Rojas 2002, 97–139). The program ended, however, in the financial crisis that gripped Argentina from 1998 to 2002, a period in which the archbishop of Buenos Aires was Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, S.J.

When Menem was elected to office, he was confronted with recession and hyperinflation. Jettisoning traditional Peronist policies, Menem engaged in the wide-scale privatization of many state-owned industries; sought to end subsidies, reduced tariffs, and other forms of protectionism; and, above all, set a fixed one-to-one exchange rate between the U.S. dollar and the new Argentine peso. The program itself was portrayed specifically as one of economic liberalization, especially by Menem's fourth minister for the economy, Domingo Cavallo. Argentina itself was presented as the new posterchild for the benefits of free markets. Between 1990 and 1998, for example, per capita income grew by almost 40 percent, and the Argentine economy was 50 percent larger in 1998 than it was in 1990 (Rojas 2002, 111).

Over time, however, more and more problems with the economic liberalization program surfaced, some of which owed much to the fact that the program was not as free market as many supposed. In the first place, efforts to liberalize the highly regulated labor market were blocked by Argentina's Congress and powerful Peronist trade unions in the mid-1990s, which made it more difficult for Argentina to address its high unemployment levels. The unemployment problem was worsened by the fact that many privatized former state companies laid off large numbers of workers, thereby increasing levels of poverty and extreme poverty, the former reaching approximately 35 percent of the Buenos Aires population by October 2001—approximately 1.5 million people—and the latter approximately 12 percent of the Buenos Aires population (Rojas 2002, 128).²

Privatization also acquired a bad image in the Menem years. In the first four years of Menem's administration, approximately sixty large publicly owned companies were sold off, and close to eight hundred public properties were sold. Efficiency of services increased, but people were now also charged real costs, which had formerly

2. Poverty is defined here in the terms used by the then Argentine Central Bureau of Statistics: the relation between available income and the cost of a certain quantity of goods and services judged necessary for tolerable living. Extreme poverty is defined as an income that does not give access to an acceptable calorie intake for an adult person (2,700 calories per day).

been hidden by subsidies. The whole process of selling off was also immediately marked by corruption scandals involving politicians, which destroyed the legitimacy of the privatization program in many Argentines' eyes (Rojas 2002, 115–17).

Overshadowing Argentina's move toward a free market was the fact that government spending did not substantially decrease (and was fueled by the need to meet the increasing costs of social security, pensions, and unemployment insurance) (Rojas 2002, 131), while public and private indebtedness continued to grow (Rojas 2002, 122). The straight jacket established by convertibility meant that the government could not embark on measures (such as devaluation) that might have addressed the debt problem. Given the memories of hyperinflation and the fact that the government had invested so much of its credibility in breaking the back of inflation, it was difficult for the government to end convertibility. With international and domestic investors losing confidence in Argentina's capacity to meet its debt obligations, loans to and investment in Argentina increasingly dried up.

Much more could be said about Argentina's experience with what was perceived to be a thorough-going effort to liberalize the Argentine economy. For our particular purposes, however, what matters is the fact that it ended in what Argentines today call their "Great Depression." This outcome inevitably created a jaundiced view of free markets among a population already skeptical of the merits of liberal economies thanks to the powerful influence of Peronism. *Neoliberalismo*, as free-market economics is called in Latin America, continues to carry very negative connotations in Argentina across all sectors of society, including the Catholic Church. One may dispute, of course, the accuracy of this understanding of the nature of a free-market economy and economic globalization. What is not in doubt is that this negative view *is* the image of market economies that prevails in much of Latin America and among many Latin American Catholics.

That Pope Francis in part shares this view is evident from a small book, *Diálogos entre Juan Pablo II y Fidel Castro* (1998), that Bergoglio coordinated or compiled in the aftermath of John Paul II's visit to the Communist dictatorship in 1998 and as the Argentine economic crisis began to unfold. The book shows not only that Bergoglio was at the time of publication deeply critical of communism and socialism, especially in terms of the social damage inflicted by these systems, but also that the future pope disliked *neoliberalismo*, going so far as to say that "no one can accept the precepts of neoliberalism and consider themselves Christian" (Bergoglio 1998, 7).³ Specifying that he was not opposed to economic productivity or the capital accumulation that is a prerequisite for growth, he criticized what he called "the spirit that has driven capitalism, utilizing capital to oppress and subject people, ignoring the human dignity of workers and the social purpose of the economy, distorting the values of social justice and the common good" (7). Neoliberalism, he added, "brings about

3. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted in the references.

unemployment, coldly marginalizing those who are superfluous,” and “corrupts democratic values by alienating from them the values of equality of social justice” (7).

On one level, such a critique of capitalism is not unusual in some Catholic social thought and even manifested itself in some earlier social encyclicals, especially *Quadragesimo anno* by Pius XI (1931). That said, some of the language employed in *Diálogos* and some of the specific issues it highlighted—most notably unemployment—reflect the Argentine crisis of the 1990s. Moreover, the contrast between Bergoglio’s reflections on capitalism in this book and John Paul II’s reflections in his third social encyclical, *Centesimus annus* (1991), are significant.⁴ Although John Paul did critique a form of capitalism, *Centesimus annus* made it clear that capitalism properly understood was not simply an economic system that worked better from the standpoint of utility but also part and parcel of a free society and an arena in which people could realize important virtues. On a moral level, by contrast, Bergoglio in 1998 appeared to see fewer redeeming features in a capitalist economic system and to be more skeptical of the market economy’s capacity to create real opportunities for human flourishing.

La Teología del Pueblo

During his time as archbishop of Buenos Aires, Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio was censorious, sometimes outspokenly so, of aspects of the populist presidencies of Néstor and Cristina Kirchner. But in July 2015, Pope Francis appeared with Bolivia’s left-populist president Evo Morales before the Second World Meeting of Popular Movements. The speech Francis delivered at this meeting (Francis 2015a) had more than a populist edge to it in terms of content and rhetoric. The same may be said of his address to the participants at the (first) World Meeting of Popular Movements in October 2014 (see Francis 2014).

In the numerous addresses, press conferences, and interviews Francis has given since becoming pope, it is difficult to find any criticism of left-populist policies that comes close to matching his impassioned denunciations of market economies. Likewise, Jorge Bergoglio’s critiques of the Kirchner regimes were not directed so much at the populist dimension but at generic problems such as the corruption and unemployment that are characteristic of but not specific to populist regimes. What is consistent across all these remarks and statements by Bergoglio as archbishop, cardinal, and pope is an emphasis on *el pueblo*.

The stress on “the people” owes something to particular intellectual currents that have marked Latin American Catholicism since the late 1960s, most notably *la teología del pueblo*. The origins of this theology are found in the Second Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium* (1964). In this text,

4. See John Paul II 1991, especially paragraphs 30 and 42.

one way in which the council described the church was as “the People of God.” As stated in *Lumen gentium*, the phrase “the People of God” expresses the ideas that “[i]n the beginning God made human nature one” and that “all men are called by the grace of God to salvation” (13). The stress is thus on universality—not on sectionalism.

This language acquired rather different meaning in the Latin America of the late 1960s. In the case of Marxist versions of liberation theology, the idea of *el pueblo de Dios* was subsumed into the rationale of class conflict: “the people” against the oppressors, the proletariat against the bourgeoisie, dissenting theologians against the church hierarchy, and so on. A somewhat different take was adopted in what is known as the *teología del pueblo*. This school of thought was developed primarily by three Argentine priests—Rafael Tello, Lucio Gera, and the Jesuit Juan Carlos Scannone—and it certainly influenced Jorge Bergoglio, S.J., from the 1970s on (see Scannone 2014).

The first thing to note about the *teología del pueblo* is that it rejects Marxist categories. As Scannone commented in an interview in 2011, the main difference between his position and that of the Marxist liberationists is that his theology “has used neither Marxist methodology for analyzing reality nor categories taken from Marxism” (Armato 2011). Another prominent characteristic of the *teología del pueblo* is its deep respect for the popular piety expressed in phenomena such as veneration of local saints, public processions, localized religious art, and specific prayers that draw upon the experience and history from which the prayer emerged. In practical terms, the *teología del pueblo* has inspired many priests and religious to live in and serve the slums of Buenos Aires (see, e.g., Vedia 2013). Significantly, the *teología del pueblo* has never expressed hostile views of the church’s teaching authority, let alone portrayed that authority as an instrument of class oppression. Unlike prominent liberation theologians such as Leonardo Boff or Jon Sobrino, S.J., no “people theologian” has found his writings subject to investigation by those charged with maintaining the orthodoxy of Catholic teaching on matters of faith and morals.

The *teología del pueblo* does, however, take “the people” as its primary reference point, and it is unclear if “the people” is defined precisely in the same way that Vatican II understood the concept of “the People of God.” Gera, for instance, specifically identified *el pueblo* as the “marginalized and scorned majority” in Latin America (1974, 91). This characterization would seem at odds with *Lumen gentium*’s use of the phrase “the People of God” to underscore universality. What Gera’s interpretation meant for those Latin American Catholics who were not on society’s margins seems unclear.

Unlike Marxists, the theologians promoting *la teología del pueblo* do not believe that *el pueblo* need a Leninist-like vanguard of middle-class intellectuals to lead them out of the darkness. If anything, the *teología del pueblo* is skeptical of *all* elites. In an article published in a collection of essays about Latin American theologies, for example, Scannone wrote that “[w]e must denounce the elitism in the area of knowledge that we now find among the enlightened elites of both the left and the right”

(1979, 201). This would include, for instance, not just the Argentine liberal and conservative constitutionalists who were Peronism's strongest intellectual opponents but also Marxist thinkers. The people theologians argued instead that the church's focus should be upon *el pueblo*: not so much as a class but rather as the master of their own destiny, liberating themselves over time and without recourse to armed struggle.

El pueblo are also understood as a cultural reality and movement that show the church how to live the faith. In this sense, *el pueblo* functions as a type of hermeneutical key that allows us to better understand the truth of Catholic faith. "Either theology," Gera wrote, "is the expression of the People of God or it is nothing" (1974, 93). In this connection, the people are seen as possessing a special type of prophetic charism, one that is theirs by virtue of their membership in the people of God.

But Who Are the People?

Viewed from this standpoint, the *teología del pueblo* allowed the church to underscore its option for the marginalized and poor without taking sides in the interminable conflict between the Left and the Right that dominated Latin America throughout the Cold War, which often erupted into violence. Notwithstanding this neutrality, however, the *teología del pueblo* has its own problems.

In the first place, there are unanswered theological questions. The manner in which the *teología del pueblo* is presented as a type of hermeneutical key, for example, is somewhat reminiscent of the consistent Catholic teaching that the body of the faithful cannot err on questions of faith and morals. "The faithful," however, in Catholic doctrine are not identified with a specific group in a particular place who happen to have a great deal in common culturally. The term refers to the communion of the living faithful and the dead faithful, a group that transcends differences of material wealth, social class, and even historical period.

A second difficulty is that the *teología del pueblo* was conceived in a political culture soaked in Peronism, a movement that also emphasized the importance and insights of "ordinary people" and that was always much more popular among Argentina's poor, working class, and lower middle class than other political movements. In his biography of Pope Francis, Austen Ivereigh points out that "[a]lthough a non-Peronist could in theory support people-theology. Its adherents were natural Peronists. They identified with the popular Catholic nationalist tradition, as opposed to a liberal, conservative, or socialist viewpoint, and saw their task as walking with the Peronists as the expression of the people" (2015, 113). Ivereigh also notes that some people theologians were close to various Peronist movements and that one, Ernesto López Rosas, S.J., even wrote at length on Peronism's Christian values (see, e.g., López Rosas 1975). For people theologians, Peronism was a type of mechanism that gave political expression to the values they associated with *el pueblo*.

Yet, as we have seen, Peronism as a political movement and as a set of specific policies has been a major source of Argentina's economic problems since

the mid-1940s. Even today, plenty of *el pueblo* in Buenos Aires's *villas miserias* maintain saintlike images of Juan and Eva Perón in their houses and apparently do not see the link between Argentina's precipitous decline and Peronist populism, a blind spot evidenced by the fact that many of them continue voting for Peronist parties and leaders.

The problem for the *teología del pueblo* is that it has difficulty criticizing populist movements such as Peronism that make the people their primary reference point because of the special status accorded to "the people" in this theology and the emphasis it places on the people's wisdom. That difficulty underscores yet another difficulty: the *teología del pueblo* embodies the weaknesses of any set of ideas that makes *el pueblo* its main reference point.

Take, for instance, the reality that you are likely to find different views on numerous subjects among any group denoted as *el pueblo*. Recognizing this multiplicity becomes more difficult if millions of individuals are simply placed into one catch-all category. Then there are the questions surrounding who qualifies as a member of *el pueblo*. If *el pueblo* consist primarily of those on the margins of life, as Gera seemed to suggest, what does this imply for those who are not living in a slum? Does their social and economic status mean that they are somehow "nonpeople" or even "antipeople"? To put the matter another way: Do those who escape poverty or leave the slums cease to be part of the people? Moreover, if those who escape poverty are no longer part of the people, as understood by people theologians, then why would one want the people to escape relative poverty and become part of the middle class? It is also worth considering that if societies are to be free, they require not only restraints on elites' ability to run roughshod over everyone else but also acceptance that preserving and promoting freedom, rule of law, and social justice rightly understood actually require *restraints on the will of the people*. Such a notion is hard to integrate into the *teología del pueblo's* understanding of the people, not least because it could be dismissed as elitism.

Another difficulty with the internal logic of *la teología del pueblo* is that although those who live on life's margins often possess insights that escape the attention of elites, it is also probable that some of the ideas flourishing among *el pueblo* are simply wrong in terms of facts or reasonability. Not every thought circulating on what Pope Francis often calls life's peripheries is reasonable or coherent. We know, for example, from the Christian scriptures that large numbers of Christ's first followers came from the margins of first-century Judean and Galilean society. Yet the Gospel of John (6:15) also relates that at one point many of them made the error of wanting to make Christ an earthly king.

It may well be, for example, that some Catholics who qualify, from the standpoint of the *teología del pueblo*, as members of "the people" hold that intentional abortion is sometimes acceptable, despite the Catholic Church's teaching that intentional abortion is never a morally licit choice. Or, in another example, some members of *el pueblo* believe that state collectivization of property is a necessary and even good

goal despite (1) the clear evidence that such a policy invariably ends in tears and (2) consistent Catholic teachings against economic collectivization. With regard to both questions, it is not immediately clear that the *teología del pueblo* has a way of distinguishing the people's insights from the errors in fact, logic, and doctrine that may be circulating among the people.

Pope Francis and People Theology

It would not be accurate to say that Pope Francis identifies as a people theologian. His respect and even sympathy for this theological outlook is, however, well established. In his time as provincial of the Jesuits in Argentina and as archbishop of Buenos Aires, some of his speeches and a great deal of his practical pastoral work reflected the priorities of the *teología del pueblo*. In the 1970s, for instance, Bergoglio would give retreats in which he sought to distinguish ideologies such as liberalism and Marxism from Christian hope in that the latter is found in the faith of ordinary people (see Ivereigh 2015, 115). In a speech to Argentine Jesuits in 1974, for instance, he urged his fellow Jesuits to put ordinary people first by embracing ordinary people's ideas, hopes, and worries instead of following revolutionary ideologies (see Bergoglio 1982).

In practical terms, Bergoglio sent Jesuits to live in those areas that were especially poor. As archbishop of Buenos Aires, he consistently sent diocesan priests to establish missions in those areas. This endeavor involved not only building churches but also encouraging the development of what might be called "bottom-up" economic development, ranging from building schools and vegetable gardens in the barrios to combatting drug abuse and working directly with groups such as drug addicts and prostitutes (see, e.g., Ivereigh 2015, 180–86).

Strong endorsements of this way of proceeding may be found in the two speeches Pope Francis gave to the first and second World Meeting of Popular Movements. "I have seen first-hand," he stated at the second meeting in July 2015, "a variety of experiences where workers united in cooperatives and other forms of community organization were able to create work where there were only crumbs of an idolatrous economy. . . . Recuperated businesses, local fairs and cooperatives of paper collectors are examples of that popular economy which is born of exclusion and which, slowly, patiently and resolutely adopts solidary forms which dignify it. How different this is than the situation which results when those left behind by the formal market are exploited like slaves!" The speech stressed the importance of rootedness in that which is local and the need for governments to "make it their responsibility to put the economy at the service of peoples" by "the strengthening, improvement, coordination and expansion of these forms of popular economy and communitarian production" (Francis 2015a).

Such language and emphases reflect the *teología del pueblo*. These statements are also accompanied by very critical comments about the formal economy, many of

which are reminiscent of Peronist ideas and preoccupations. Referring at the second meeting, for instance, to “the new colonialism,” Pope Francis commented that “[a]t times it appears as the anonymous influence of mammon: corporations, loan agencies, certain ‘free trade’ treaties, and the imposition of measures of ‘austerity’ which always tighten the belt of workers and the poor.” He also spoke of “the tyranny of mammon,” the manner in which “the unfettered pursuit of money rules,” and how “certain interests” manage “to take over, to dominate states and international organizations.” Then there was the pope’s stress upon the need to look into the eyes of “the endangered *campesino*, the poor laborer, the down-trodden native, the homeless family, the persecuted migrant, the unemployed young person” (Francis 2015a). On one level, the rhetoric of this address reflects the classic Christian emphasis upon the need to encounter Christ in the person of the poor and marginalized. But it is also very reminiscent of Juan Perón, his wife, Eva Perón, and contemporary Peronist leaders.

Conclusion

Much more might be said about the background to many of Pope Francis’s pronouncements on economic matters that have puzzled many in economically developed countries. It is also the case that popes’ views often change as a result of their being placed in a position where they need to transcend the specifics of their background because they are now head of a truly global entity. Moreover, issues or developments may occur that require otherwise unanticipated responses that mark a break from previous patterns of thought. With regard to capitalism, for instance, John Paul II’s first two social encyclicals, *Laborem exercens* (1981) and *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (1987), focused on criticizing aspects of this economic system, though without condemning it outright, as is the case with Catholic teaching about communism and socialism. The collapse of Communist political and economic systems across central and eastern Europe between 1989 and 1990 meant that Catholic social teaching had to engage the question of capitalism’s acceptability in a more comprehensive manner than had been done before.

In the case of Pope Francis, these factors appear, at least for the moment, not to be operative. Although substantial criticisms were made of the economic analysis and language in *Evangelii gaudium* (Francis 2013), the economic claims made in *Laudato si’* (Francis 2015) suggest that these earlier critiques did not result in any significant shifting of the pope’s perspective on economic issues. It is true that Francis has been pope for only a relatively short time (since 2013). Nonetheless, the ideas he has expressed do appear to echo many aspects of the Argentine experience as well as particular theological emphases. It may well be that Pope Francis considers these insights and concerns to be more universally applicable than others may realize. It may also be the case that the pope regards these concerns as important factors operative in the life of Argentine and Latin American Catholicism

that deserve a wider hearing in a church that he and others may believe to be too much influenced by western Europe and the experience of developed economies with regard to economic issues. In that sense, two long-term questions are (1) whether Catholic social teaching and Catholic social thought will more generally assume, under the influence of what Francis emphasizes, a different trajectory and (2) the extent to which these ideas and experiences are indeed universally applicable. The answers to those questions, I suspect, will be found in the next pontificate.

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