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‘The Crucified People’ in Latin American Liberation Theology: An Expression of ‘Jesuit Populism’?

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

The possible relationship between Latin American populism and liberation theology has received limited scholarly attention. Loris Zanatta, an Italian scholar of populism in Latin America, has recently claimed that there is a strong connection between populism and liberation theology. All populisms in Latin America, he states, have profound links not only to Hispanic Christendom, but also, and more specifically, to the influential presence and work of the Jesuit order in the region (Zanatta 2020). For Zanatta, Latin American populisms are all variants of ‘Jesuit populism’ and liberation theology should be seen as a central part of this populist project in the region. The purpose of this article is to address the possible interconnection by examining the reverse direction of influence or affinity. Focusing on a particular expression coined by Jesuit liberation theologian Ignacio Ellacuría (d. 1989): ‘el pueblo crucificado,’ I ask to what degree this conceptualization could be seen as a ‘populist’ soteriology? The study identifies some apparent structural and ideational affinities. However, the closer reading of the Jesuit liberation soteriology of Ellacuría does not reveal any significant historical or conceptual populist influence. Hence, it is inferred that Zanatta’s claim that Latin American liberation theology should be seen as an ideology of ‘Jesuit populism’ lacks substantiation.

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INTRODUCTION

How should we understand the relationship between the strong presence of populism in Latin America in the twentieth century and the appearance of liberation theology? Could this particular theological movement be seen as religious populism? Loris Zanatta (2020), an Italian scholar of populism in Latin America, claims that there is a strong connection between populism and liberation theology.[1] In fact, in his view all populisms in Latin America have profound links not only to Hispanic Christendom, but also, and more specifically, to the influential presence and work of the Jesuit order in the region (Zanatta 2020: 3–5). For Zanatta, Latin American populisms are all variants of 'Jesuit populism,' and liberation theology should be seen as a central part of this populist project in the region. The purpose of this article is to discuss the possible mutual influence between populism and liberation theology in connection with a particular expression coined by Jesuit liberation theologian Ignacio Ellacuría (d. 1989): *el pueblo crucificado*. Could this be seen as a 'populist soteriology'?

In order to discuss this, I shall first demonstrate that the possible link between populism and liberation theology in the region has been underexamined. Second, I will present a brief historical sketch of Latin American populism and liberation theology. Third, I look more closely at the possible historical and conceptual interdependence between Jesuit liberation theology and populism, in particular applying it to *el pueblo crucificado*.

From the outset, we should note that considering possible causal interconnections between religion and politics may lead to reductionist approaches to religious praxis or theological thinking that should be avoided. Liberation theology is, above all, *theology*. This means that although there are reasons to look for causal relationships between theologies or religious practices and social and cultural phenomena or political practices, the directionality of such causation cannot be predetermined. Religion should not be assumed as primarily epiphenomenal.

Nevertheless, the concept of 'one history' is central to liberation theology and to Ignacio Ellacuría's work. Neither perceives two separate histories—one secular and one sacred. God, for liberation theologians, acts throughout history; the only history there is. Hence Ellacuría called for a 'historization' of theological concepts like salvation/redemption. We should, he stated, 'give historical flesh to God's people, and thus avoid any false spiritualization and ideologization' (Ellacuría 1989).[2] Christian truth is not theoretically demonstrated but made true in history through praxis, in a 'historical verification of Christian salvation (Ellacuría 1991, see also Stålsett 2003: 134–150).' This praxis of 'verifying historically' the truth of Christian faith must not, according to Ellacuría, become a 'sweetening mystification' that would prevent popular political organization and its effective contribution to historical liberation. This shows, particularly in the case of liberation theology, the relevance of examining religion, society, and politics in conjunction.

AN UNEXAMINED RELATIONSHIP

Populism is in vogue, in actual politics and in critical theory across academic disciplines (Brubaker 2017; Brubaker 2020; Kaltwasser *et al.* 2017; Laclau 2005; Mouffe 2018; Mudde 2004; Müller 2016; Rosanvallon 2020). Definitions of populism are manifold and, to some degree, internally contradictory, but they generally point to a perceived antagonism between a 'pure,' unified people and particular elites and threatening 'others' (Kaltwasser et al. 2017). The role of religion in historical and contemporary populisms has been underplayed but is now gradually gaining attention (Graff-Kallevåg, *et al.* 2021; Marzouki *et al.* 2016; Courau *et al.* 2019; Schmiedel 2019; Schmiedel and Ralston 2022; Kerr *et al.* 2019; Strømmen and Schmiedel 2020; Zúquete 2017). Both populism and religion thrive in the Latin American region; however, few systematic examinations of the relationship between the two have been conducted. Their possible mutual influences require examination in both directions. On the one hand, religion is a missing factor in populism in Latin America. Neither de la Torres's (2017) chapter on populism in Latin America in the *Oxford Handbook of Populism* nor Conniff's (2012) edited anthology *Populism in Latin America* mentions the word 'religion,' and the role of the church is barely touched upon in the latter. Overall, the study of Latin American religion and religiosities has neglected the populist legacy. For instance, in Prokopy and Smith (1999), the word 'populism' is not mentioned, except a few times in a highly vague, metaphorical sense, and the concept of populism does not appear in Thornton's (2018) broad overview of recent research on Latin American religion.

My interest can be seen in terms of an interdisciplinary academic framework of political theology, of which there are at least two variants. The first is mainly theological and involves reflection on the social and political consequences and demands of a given religious faith. The second is based on political science, law, or philosophy and has emerged from German legal scholar Carl Schmitt's claim that 'all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts' (Schmitt 1985: 37). The legitimization of a given political order or movement is central to this second meaning: 'The famous Schmittian thesis concerning the secularization of theological concepts too implied the mobilization of political theology in the

sense of "reoccupation" for purposes of legitimation' (Arato 2013: 32). The question of whether and to what degree the variety of Latin American populisms can be read as instances of political theology in this Schmittian sense certainly merits further study. Are Latin American populisms, at their core or in their origins, theological?

My primary focus in the following text, however, is on one of the various relevant impacts of religion on society in the region—*la teología de la liberación* (Gutiérrez 1971, Dussel 1981, Ellacuría and Sobrino 1991, Stålsett 2013). A controversial interpretation and praxis of the Christian faith amid social conflict, liberation theology is definitively political theology. It seeks to analyze and critically apply the Christian tradition and lived practice to current conflictual social and political realities. Thus, it inevitably lends itself as a resource for political mobilizations, ideologies, and programs of varying types according to the geographical and cultural context in which it is developed or applied. Thus, it also becomes—wittingly, unwittingly, explicitly, or implicitly—both a critical and legitimizing resource for politics.

Liberation theology has been constantly criticized as a version of Marxism in religious disguise (Congregation, 1990a, 1990b; McGovern, 1989; Milbank, 1993; Novak, 1988; Wenzel, 2008) but little attention has been paid to the possible influence of the populist legacy in Latin America. Given populism's strength and range across the continent, this is surprising. We might expect populism to be considered influential in the emergence of liberation theology and religious practice. Analyzing liberation theology and its main tenets, positions, and praxes through the hermeneutical lens of recent theories on populism, particularly in its Latin American forms, is therefore of theoretical interest. Such an analysis, although an ambitious undertaking, could provide a more nuanced picture of liberation theology's origins, implicit ideas, and future prospects. One way of delimiting this research task for this article was to look for populism in 'the crucified people'—a phrase originally proposed by martyred Jesuit philosopher and theologian Ignacio Ellacuría and further developed by his Jesuit colleague Jon Sobrino at the Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas (UCA) in San Salvador, El Salvador. The idea was also central in some of Archbishop Oscar A. Romero's sermons (Sobrino 1989: 34–35). The phrase 'the crucified people' calls attention to the importance of the 'pueblo' in both populism and liberation theology. Loris Zanetta's (2020) thesis of a particularly influential 'Jesuit populism' in Latin America could lead to seeing this conceptualization as a 'populist' soteriology and, hence, indicative of populist roots for the emergence of liberation theology in general. Before examining this question further, however, I shall discuss populism and liberation theology in Latin America and how they coincide or interact with political history.

POPULISM IN LATIN AMERICA

According to Carlos de la Torre (2017), Latin America is the 'land of populism.' He distinguished between three subtypes or waves of Latin American populism: classical (1950s), neoliberal (1990s), and radical (from the turn of the millennium). Towering figures in the first, classical wave of populism were Juan and Eva Perón in Argentina, Getulio Vargas in Brazil, Victor Raúl Haya de la Torre in Perú, and José María Velasco Ibarra in Ecuador. In diverse ways, they helped foster the inclusion of the popular masses traditionally excluded from politics. However, de la Torre showed that once in power, these populist leaders often undermined the institutions of liberal democracy and increasingly controlled social movements and civil society. They also stifled privately owned media. In Conniff's somewhat benign wording, 'Latin American populists promoted democracy, even though they did not always behave in democratic ways' (Conniff 2012: 7). This was also true of the second 'neoliberal' wave of populism in the 1990s, exemplified by people like Alberto Fujimori in Peru, Fernando Collor de Mello in Brazil, and Carlos Menem in Argentina. This unexpected turn can be seen as a clear indication that populism *per se* has no clearly defined ideological content. Neoliberal populism was not inclusive of new political groups, as in the first wave, but swept through nations where people mostly had the right and opportunity to vote and participate in political parties. The populist element emerged most visibly in the critique of traditional political parties and elites, portraying them as uninterested in the needs and desires of the electorate and, thus, enemies of the people. These neoliberal populist leaders strongly opposed the nationalist and statist policies of their classical predecessors, instead opting for free-market-oriented privatization and deregulation in tune with the neoliberal doctrine prescribed by the Chicago School of Economics and consolidated in the so-called Washington Consensus. In reaction to the failure of these neoliberal populists to deliver on their promises, Latin American people again embraced the political left after the turn of the millennium. The governments of, for example, Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Evo Morales in Bolivia, and Rafael Correa in Ecuador can all be seen as rooted in a new crisis of political representation that manifested in widespread popular resistance to neoliberalism. Many ordinary people felt that politicians and neoliberal elites had surrendered national sovereignty to the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the US government. Hence, the time was ripe for political proposals that, building on a core populist antagonistic dichotomy and 'repertoire' (Brubaker 2017), now confronted *other* internal and external enemies of the true, underrepresented common people. Radical populists strongly advocated the interests of the nation-state, promising to build a more multipolar

world. Such multipolarity, however, was paradoxically seen as following from a hegemonic political project led by strong, if not authoritarian, leaders. The case of Hugo Chávez is particularly appropriate here. He frequently presented himself as personally embodying the people: 'This is not about Hugo Chávez, this is about a people,' he once stated, and even more strongly, 'I am not an individual, I am the people' (Løland, 2022). In Brazil, the first presidency of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva is sometimes seen as characteristic of this third populist wave, but this is debatable. Lula's personal style and charisma certainly had populist traits (Bruno 2017, Bruno *et al.* 2017), but his *partido dos trabalhadores* (PT) may more appropriately be described as a traditional labor party, opposed to populist political solutions (Keck 2010).

LIBERATION THEOLOGY IN LATIN AMERICA

Latin American liberation theology emerged in the 1960s. It represented a remarkable shift in the self-understanding of important sectors within the Catholic church, dominant on the continent since the colonization of the 'New World' and justified as an expansion of Hispanic Christendom.[3] After the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), during which the universal Catholic Church committed to a dramatic 'updating' ('*aggiornamento*'), this took on a different meaning in Latin America than in Europe. When Latin American Catholic bishops gathered for the second time as regional leaders in Medellín, Colombia, in 1968,[4] they saw the 'updating' of the church as the necessary self-criticism of its traditional role in oligarchical rule and choosing the poor masses of Latin America as their principal addressees and interlocutors instead. Rediscovering itself as a 'church *of* poor people,' it reshaped itself as a 'church *for* the poor.' Through creative and innovative theological interpretations, this '*opción por los pobres*' (Sobrino 1983a) was now seen as reflecting God's own option through Christ to support downtrodden and oppressed people. God was first and foremost *el Dios de los pobres* (Araya 1983, Sobrino 1983b), and Jesus was *Jesucristo liberador* (Boff 1981, Sobrino 1991, Sobrino 1999). The language of salvation was thus interpreted in terms of and operationalized for the cause of the 'liberation of the poor' (Ellacuría 1989b, Sobrino 1995). Peruvian Dominican priest and theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez is often simplistically seen as the 'father' of liberation theology due to his groundbreaking work naming the movement *teologia de la liberación* (Gutiérrez 1971). During the 1970s, some of the continent's brightest scholars helped the movement mature theologically. Many of them had studied in Europe but contextualized and radicalized theological thinking to realign it with an ongoing struggle for dignity, rights, and social change across the Latin American continent. Liberation theology was practiced with enthusiasm by grassroots communities in both the Catholic Church and Protestant churches. Some researchers have discussed how and in what order lived religion at the grassroots level and intellectual reflection among academic elites influenced each other at the time (Segundo 1990, Boff 1991). The movement certainly seemed to flourish at both levels in the 1970s, gaining considerable impact and fame far beyond Latin America. The strength of its growth and message, however, also made it seem threatening to the Pentagon and the Vatican. Continuing its growth and reenergizing effect in both South and Central America during the conflict-ridden 1980s, liberation theology's primary ecclesial and social settings were the *comunidades eclesiales de base* (CEBs) in Brazil, where poor people, often for the first time, began interpreting the Bible in terms of their everyday struggle for justice (Boff 1980, Cook 1985, Cook 1994, Nordstokke 1996). Global events at the end of the Cold War in 1989, and the murder of six liberation theologian Jesuits in El Salvador, including Ignacio Ellacuría, led to liberation theology facing a crisis (Sobrino 1993a). Popular movements for change in Latin America lost momentum with the globally professed victory of a new neoliberal order (Castañeda 1993). However, this negative turn provided the opportunity for the necessary pluralization and critical revision of certain aspects of liberation theology, and liberation theologians undertook an innovative, radical theological critique of neoliberalism as a religious substitute, in effect, an idolatry (Mo Sung 1989, Assmann 1991a, Assmann 1991b, Stålsett 2008). According to their interpretation, neoliberalism implied a sacralization of the market that sacrificed the poor on the altar of Mammon.

Seeing this brief historical sketch of the rise and development of liberation theology in relation to the three waves of regional populism mentioned previously, we see that they, in general, do not seem to concur. In the classical period of Latin American populism, liberation theology had not yet emerged. There were early instances of the Catholic Church seeking to ally itself with populism, as, for example, in the case of the new Peronist regime in Argentina (1946–1955). However, as Conniff (2012) noted, 'the Catholic Church gradually felt that the Peronist culture impinged on its arena and began to distance itself from the regime (Conniff 2012).[5] Sociologist of religion José Casanova (1994), has argued that both Christian Democracy and populism faced crises in the 1960s, making the church distance itself from them and forcing it to 'reassess its state relations and class alliances' (Casanova 1994: 124). This can be seen as laying the foundation for the radical shift institutionally expressed in Medellín in 1968. In other words, liberation theology was born when the church broke its scattered, tentative links to the first wave of classical populism in Latin America and sought

alternatives. The second neoliberal populist movement in Latin America in the 1990s celebrated and promoted the infamous 'end of history' (Fukuyama 1992) that caused a liberation crisis, at the same time unleashing the new theological-economic criticism referred to previously. There was obviously no mutual positive influence; the relationship between neoliberal populism and liberation theology was dialectical and antagonistic. Of course, an important religious driving force in this wave of populism was the remarkable growth of charismatic, evangelical churches—the CEBs and liberation theology's most obvious competitors.

By contrast, the third radical wave of populism could be seen as partly related to a late stage of liberation theology. In the years after 2000, a clearly identifiable and militant liberation theology was no longer evident in most parts of Latin America. However, these radical political projects can be seen as long-term effects of liberation theology. Lula, *if* considered part of this wave, epitomized this positive mutual relationship: the PT's electoral victory was, according to many observers, partly due to the political awareness-raising and mobilization of the CEBs. As Ole Jakob Løland (2017) has shown, Hugo Chávez frequently used liberation theology-inspired metaphors and tropes in his self-presentation and political projects to counter the increasingly sharp criticism from the Catholic leadership, as well as to ally himself with the important tradition of liberationist popular religiosity in the region. However, at the practical as well as theoretical level there are few indicators of any significant mutual influence between the Chávez and liberation theology, beyond this superficial, rhetorical identification.[6]

IL POPULISMO GESUITA

This historical sketch outlines the scarce evidence for any potential link between populism and liberation theology in Latin America. Zanatta paints a different picture, claiming a strong connection between the two: '*La teologia della liberazione [...] fu l'ideologia dei 'populismi gesuiti*', (Zanatta 2020: 84). According to him, all populisms in Latin America are deeply indebted to, and in effect expressions of, Jesuit-led Hispanic Christendom in the region, which he labels '*il populismo Gesuita*' (Zanatta 2020). Zanatta's perspective is macro historical, but his main arguments for the existence of a 'Jesuit populism' primarily relate to form and content. He holds that populism originates in religion and represents 'a religious mode of understanding life and history' (Zanatta 2020: 3). It is an '*immaginario*' that expresses itself in a 'mentality': a moralistic, nostalgic longing for an authentic, natural, and harmonious ideal and idealized community. It is to such a community that populism's root term 'populus' refers, implying protection. It protects *un indentitá primigenia* (a 'primordial identity'). Zanatta continues:

> Populism is therefore the redemptive movement through which the chosen people aspire to rediscover the promised land, where every fracture will be healed and every sin atoned for. Harmony, innocence, unity; more, unanimity: this is how the Kingdom is, this is how God's plan is established. This is the aim of the providentialist spirit with which Latin populisms are imbued (Zanatta 2020: 4).

Having thus defined populism as a particular form of religiosity, Zanatta identifies what he sees as the most important common traits ('*tratti genetici*': Zanatta 2020: 6–7) of Hispanic/Jesuit Christendom and populism, including five that he considers particularly significant. The first is 'unanimity,' which means that both populism and Jesuit Catholicism seek to privilege a holistic order that is by essence anti-pluralistic. Second, hierarchy is important: Latin American populism draws from Christendom a strongly hierarchical view of society and its political structure. Although it sees society as an organic whole, not all of its parts are equally important. Third, corporativism is at the core of this political model: rights for all according to which social '*corpo*' they belong. These corporative structures provide identity and protection but also demand loyalty and conformism. The individual is subordinated to the '*pueblo*,' be it the national, neighborhood, or village community. Fourth, Zanatta sees populist Jesuitism or Jesuit populisms in Latin America as promoting a state with a strong moral component and thrust—an 'ethical/moral(istic)' state. Finally, he points out a common tendency to see the people as unjustly wronged or oppressed—a tendency Zanatta denigratingly names '*vittimismo*' (victimhood). Together, these tendencies stem from Jesuit influence and constitute a common thread in influential populist regimes, according to Zanatta (2020). In particular, he highlights Argentinean *peronismo*, Cuban *castrismo*, and Venezuelan *chavismo*, relating them all to liberationist theologies and even seeing them as fundamental to understanding the profile of Argentinean Jesuit Bergoglio/Francis.

The question of possible structural analogies, links, or similarities between populisms and liberation theological tenets is worth examining. In the final part of this article, I shall consider these traits relative to a particular liberation theology of 'the crucified people.'

EL PUEBLO CRUCIFICADO

Ignacio Ellacuría (1930–1989) was a leading liberation theologian (Tamayo-Acosta 1990a, Sobrino 1994); an influential Jesuit scholar, philosopher, and rector of a Jesuit university (UCA San Salvador) who was assassinated, together with five Jesuit colleagues and two coworkers, on the UCA campus on November 15, 1989 (Sobrino 1990, Doggett 1993).[7] He collaborated with his better-known Jesuit colleague Jon Sobrino (both

of them advisors to the now canonized Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero, killed in 1980) to form a novel theological concept, 'the crucified people,' as a central component of a liberation soteriology (from the Greek word *soter*, meaning theological reflection on redemption/salvation).

Ellacuría's systematic presentation of the concept in a groundbreaking 1978 essay highlighted the relationship between the war-ridden context of poverty and injustice in El Salvador and the central Christian story of redemption through the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth (Ellacuría 1978, republished in Ellacuría 1989a, and in Ellacuría and Sobrino 1991). Ellacuría recognized a similarity of context between these two historical poles that he claimed to be hermeneutically significant. Hence, he set out to analyze 'the figure of Jesus and oppressed humankind from that point of view which unifies them: their passion and death' (Ellacuría 1989a: 306). Their sharing of oppression and suffering is the link between them: the crucified people actualizes the historical significance of the death of Jesus, and the death of Jesus points to the 'salvific character' of the crucified people. Ellacuría emphasized that Jesus's death had historical causes. Soteriology has often focused purely on spiritual or theological accounts of the cross of Jesus. However, seen from the perspective of premature, violent death in Central America, it becomes urgently necessary to seek concrete historical causes that may still be operative today, in Ellacuría's view. Crucifixion was not just something that happened to Jesus of Nazareth and other outlaws in first-century Roman colonies; people are still being 'crucified'—persecuted, repressed, condemned, and executed. By 'the crucified people,' Ellacuría (1989a) thus understood:

> That collective body, which as the majority of humankind owes its situation of crucifixion to the way society is organized and maintained by a minority that exercises its dominion through a series of factors, which, taken together and given their concrete impact within history, must be regarded as sin (1989a: 318).[8]

Ellacuría insisted that the salvation brought by Jesus according to the Christian faith must be historicized—felt concretely in people's actual lives today. According to this view, there has been a soteriological continuation throughout history. To exemplify this continuity and contemporary application theologically, Ellacuría referred back to the influential Deutero-Isaiah theory of four 'Servant Songs' in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), found in Isaiah 42: 1–4, Isaiah 49: 1–6, Isaiah 50: 4–11, and Isaiah 52: 13–53: 12. There is a long tradition of interpreting the disfigured and despised character in the Servant Songs as an agent of salvation in the midst of, despite, and even through suffering and tribulation. According to the Mosaic religious tradition, the servant prefigures the Jewish people. In Christianity, the Servant Songs are seen as prophesying the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth. The novelty of Ellacuría's (and, subsequently, with more detail, Sobrino's) theological reinterpretation of these Songs in the context of the crucified people was maintaining (1) the paradoxical soteriological role of Servant; (2) the collective interpretation of the Servant as a 'people' without neglecting the primary, unique role of Jesus Christ; and (3) the theological-political relevance of this continuity throughout history, relating it to the liberation struggles for justice and liberation in El Salvador in the 1970s. In Ellacuría's work, soteriology was historical, and history was interpreted soteriologically. The connection between the brutal reality of El Salvador and the scriptural chain of interpretations all the way back to the Book of Isaiah is 'el pueblo crucificado.'[9]

ASSESSMENT: IS '*EL PUEBLO CRUCIFICADO*' AN EXAMPLE OF '*POPULISMO GESUITA*'?

Recalling Zanatta's (2020) five traits of *il populismo gesuita*, how could these apply to the concept of the crucified people?

At first glance, one may note certain structural affinities and conceptual similarities. The most striking, of course, is the centrality of the concept of 'the people.' To Ellacuría (1989a), the crucified people were, as we saw, a (particular) collective body: 'the majority' of humankind oppressed by the ways in which powerful elites have structured political reality. In its likeness to Jesus's crucifixion, the people's body—*cuerpo*—is strongly underscored as a representation of unanimity and corporativism that, to Zanatta, are characteristic of Latin American Jesuit populism. As 'the crucified,' the people are portrayed as victims, which fits into Zanatta's label '*vittimismo*.' Regarding the charge of hierarchism, the concept of *el pueblo crucificado* in itself does not necessarily include such any such stratified social structure. However, the historical and practical development of the term is linked to the leadership of Archbishop Romero, who, particularly after he was murdered, was seen as *the* leader, personalizing by his own service and destiny the suffering of the Salvadoran people.

Was there 'moralization' in Ellacuría's definition, too? Ellacuría saw the crucified people as endowed with qualities that had the capacity to bring about redemption (Ellacuría,1989b: 701), and he saw them to a certain extent as carriers of exemplary moral values. Sobrino further developed this idea. To him, the poor and victims are, like the suffering servant of Isaiah and the suffering Christ on the cross, 'light'; they make it possible to see the truth of the world, thus bringing about new possibilities and transformation through their presence and praxis (Sobrino 1993b).

Furthermore, Ellacuría's (1989a) definition strongly relied on the dichotomy between an oppressed majority and an oppressive elite condemned by the religious term 'sin.' In this way, one can perceive a moralizing distinction, or even hierarchy, between the two groups rather than within them. In fact, their place in the hierarchy is reversed by the moralization implied in the definition: the powerful elite minority is 'condemned' to lift up—liberate—the majority at the bottom of society.

These observations could make liberation theology resemble something like a populism in religious garb. However, there are several reasons why the claim of a strong link between liberation theology and populism of the kind Zanatta (2020) puts forward is largely unfounded.

First, the term 'people' has different roots and carries clearly different connotations in the two movements. The 'people of God' became central to Catholic ecclesiology after the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). It is a concept with profound Biblical and theological roots that preceded any notion of 'populism.' The understanding of 'the people' as 'the poor' is a distinguishing feature of liberation theology. Even when Latin American populists became famous for turning the stigmatization of the poor into a virtue (de la Torre 2017), liberation theologians did not appropriate this framing from populist politics, or *vice versa*. In Argentina, there was as already mentioned above a notable *teología del pueblo* that presented itself as a depoliticized opponent of or alternative to the more radical *teologia de la liberación*. This 'people's theology' can be seen in its close relationship with the Peronist regime (Løland, 2022). It was, however, not an ally of liberation theology and did not prosper for long.

Second, despite the clear division he saw between majority and minority and their respective roles and responsibilities in an oppressive situation, Ellacuría (1989a) warned against a simplistic interpretation of the historical causes of oppression. We should not adopt a Manichaean vision of the world, he warned, where one side is purely evil and the other side is purely good; '*no caer en una división maniqueísta del mundo, que pondría a un lado todo lo bueno y al otro lado lo malo*.' To avoid this, he deemed it necessary to study with care the 'subsystems of crucifixion' that in his assessment exist among both the oppressed and the oppressors (Ellacuría 1989a: 320). This approach does not allow for the simplistic 'us vs them'-, or 'pure people' vs. 'corrupt elite'-polarization that characterize populisms.

What about the salvific role of the people, then? As we have seen, Zanatta (2020) emphazises the centrality of the salvation narrative in religious populism. In specific ways, the crucified people does play a redemptive role, according to Ellacuría, Sobrino and Romero. What is original in the soteriology of the crucified people is not its focus on salvation in history, but the particular role assigned to poor people in the historical process of liberation/salvation. This, admittedly, opens up the possibility of mutual interactions and/or competitions of liberation theology with both populism and Marxist-inspired ideologies.

In the concrete context in which Ellacuría developed his thinking, however, the latter was clearly the most relevant. It was the encounter with various versions of socialist political theory and praxis in the Salvadoran context that brought out his nuanced appraisal as well as critique from a theological point of view. The context of political antagonism that characterized the Jesuit community in El Salvador was one of the longest-lasting military dictatorships of the twentieth century. The regime increasingly used repressive methods against a growing rebellion that drew its ideological inspiration and support from varying forms of existing socialism in Latin America at the time. The radical novelty within the Catholic Church in Latin America was in approaching these opposition forces 'from below' with sympathy, identifying in them poor people's just aspirations for dignified living conditions. This was done by the Jesuit order under the leadership of Pedro Arrupe as well as by the Salvadoran church under the leadership of Mons. Romero. This positive approach did not in any way mean a submissive or uncritical alliance, as is clearly seen in Ellacuría's political writings (1993) and actions as the rector of UCA. Similarly, it can be seen in Romero's pastoral letters, in which he also warned against a possible idolatry of the political party. Ellacuría explicitly discussed themes such as Marxism and revolution and how they related to liberation theology (Ellacuría 1970; 1984; 1993), pleading for nonviolent practices in the face of oppression (Ellacuría 1990; 1993). He returned to El Salvador in the midst of the November 1989 FMLN guerilla offensive with dedication and in the hope of serving as a mediator between the warring parties. That offer, tragically, was violently rejected by the battalion that, on orders from superiors high up in the government, killed Ellacuría and his colleagues in the early morning hours of November 15, 1989.

In sum, whilst recognizing the justice and capabilities of poor people struggling against poverty and oppressions, Ellacuría and liberation theology drew the salvific role of the people from theology, not ideology. In Ellacuría's theology, there was no treatment of or reference to populism as such. In all his efforts to make religious language and action as relevant as possible to the political liberation of the oppressed and marginalized, his writings remained theologically founded and framed. Although it was certainly fundamental for liberation theology and Ellacuría that faith was lived 'politically' in a concrete commitment to transforming unjust structures, populism did not appear anywhere in his writings to be relevant for the actualization of such a commitment.

CONCLUSION

Is there any significant connection between populism and liberation theology in Latin America? Is the claim of a 'populismo Gesuita' in Latin America warranted when analyzed in terms of liberation theology and *el pueblo crucificado*? Rather than aiming to reveal Jesuit influences on populist movements, I have endeavored in this article to seek out implicit populist tropes and distinguishing marks in a key concept of liberation theology, asking whether the soteriology of the crucified people is, in any meaningful way, populist?

At first glance, some aspects of 'the crucified people' seem to align with the criteria put forward by Zanatta (2020). Traits of unanimity, hierarchy, corporativism, and the envisioning of a 'moral' state are notable in liberation theology. There is, in the concept of 'the crucified,' also a focus on the perspective of the victim—something that Zanatta denigratingly named '*vittimismo*.' However, analyzing Ellacuría's soteriology, later developed by Sobrino, in closer detail and in its proper context, these apparent similarities must be deemed superficial. Historically and empirically, there is no solid foundation for seeing liberation theology in general, or the crucified people in particular, as expressions of populism, or *vice versa*. The central ideas of this innovative theological conceptualization were drawn from classical Christian theology. In their soteriology of the crucified people, Ellacuría and Sobrino presented a sophisticated scholarly argument based on historical and contemporary theological sources. Furthermore, besides the notable exception of some aspects of Hugo Chávez's self-presentation (Løland 2017), there seem to be no significant links between this theology and concrete populist projects. I have also pointed out elements of this theology that distanced it from such populist projects as they manifested in practice.

In the case of El Salvador in 1970s and 1980s, it was, as noted previously, not populism that was on the horizon but popular mobilization inspired by various versions of socialism and communism. Ellacuría, Sobrino, and Romero recognized the validity and legitimacy of the mobilization and concerns of these groups, while cautiously maintaining the distance between the church and these social and political groups as well as recognizing their internal diversity.

So, what remains of Zanatta's bold contention? Although engagingly provocative, my analysis shows that Zanatta's claim of liberation theology being an expression of Jesuit populism in Latin America and beyond does not stand up to scrutiny, neither historically nor conceptually. Despite some striking rhetorical affinities, such as for instance 'people', 'poor' and even 'redemption', these affinities cannot be seen as revealing any significant degree of interdependency or causation. Although Zanatta's book legitimately raises a fruitful question concerning the interaction of politics and religion, or more concretely populism and theology, in Latin America, his study fails to convince. There is, in fact, an inherent logical circularity in the relationship between Zanatta's definition of populism and Hispanic/Jesuit Christendom. As evidenced clearly in the quotation I presented on p. 5 above, his definition of populism (Zanatta 2020: 4) not only *relates* populism and religion; it clothes it? in religious phrases and depends on religious language ('redemption,' 'promised land,' 'sin,' 'the Kingdom,' and 'providentialism'). Thus, he is unavoidably drawn into circular argumentation, making his presentation of the strong link between populism and liberation theology proclamatory rather than explanatory. Populism is, according to Zanatta, the kind of politics that emerges from Hispanic, Catholic religion or, correspondingly, counts as populism *as far as* it reflects these religious ideas. This tendency is made explicit when Zanatta highlights an otherwise common trait in many definitions of populism—that it acquires enemies. Again, Zanatta (2020) hurries to frame this in religious, particularly Christian, terms: the enemy of populism is 'like the Devil in relation to the Kingdom of God' (2020: 5). In the contemporary political reality of Latin America, however, Zanatta apparently finds the enemies of this populism to be less 'spiritual,' framing them in terms of modern individuals, enlightened rationality, liberalism, and capitalism.

In this way, then, defining Latin American populism according to the *tratti genetici* of Jesuit influence, Zanatta 'proves' populism to be influenced by Jesuit spirituality and practice. However, his circular logic invalidates the proof.

NOTES

1 "La teologia della liberazione [...] fu l'ideologia dei 'populismi gesuiti'," Zanatta 2020: 84.

2 English translations from Spanish and Italian in this paper are mine.

3 The ecumenical roots of Latin American liberation theology should be noted, though. See, in particular, the early work of Brazilian theologian, pedagogue and Presbyterian pastor Rubem Alves, Alves, R. A. (1969). *A theology of human hope*. New York: Corpus books.

4 Medellín was the second Episcopal Conference of Latin America. The first one was in Rio de Janeiro (1955).

5 There are, however, links between Argentinean Peronism and expressions of a 'theology of the people', 'teología del pueblo' with affinities to liberation theology, see, e.g., Salinas, A. (2020). *La teología del pueblo y la teoría populista: una comparación entre Scannone y Laclau*. Colección (Pontificia Universidad Católica Argentina Santa María de los Buenos Aires. Instituto de Ciencias Políticas y Relaciones Internacionales), *31*(2), 41–71. https://doi.org/10.46553/colec.31.2.2020.p41–71 . The revival of Peronism in the 1970s and the radicalization of Argentinean Catholicism, for instance through *El Movimiento de Sacerdotes para el tercer mundo*, are also relevant here. On the distinction between *teología del pueblo* and liberation theology, and their respective influences on Pope Francis, see discussion in Løland, O. J. (2022). *The political theology of Pope Francis: Understanding the Latin American Pope*. New York: Routledge.

6 Although at times compared to Chavez, the interesting case of the presidency of Fernando Armindo Lugo in Paraguay (2008–2012) is clearly different. Lugo was definitely formed by liberation theology, but his political profile did not show the characteristics of political populism.

7 See https://www.plazapublica.com.gt/content/133-anos-de-condena-excoronel-por-el-asesinato-de-5-jesuitas-en-el-salvador.

8 English text taken from Ellacuría and Sobrino (1993: 590).

9 Within the theological context, Ellacuria's and Sobrino's development of this *topos* can be seen as drawing on, contextualizing, and radicalizing the German political theologian Jürgen Moltmann's groundbreaking book *Der gekreuzigte Gott* (1973; in English, *The crucified God* (Moltmann 1973, Moltmann 1974).

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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