Argentina must mature to overcome the Peronist populist discourse

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Polarization between Peronists and anti-Peronists has long shaped Argentine political debate, creating a persistent ideological and cultural stalemate that has persisted for decades. Since the emergence of Colonel Juan Domingo Perón during the 1943 military coup and his participation in a de facto government as Secretary of Labor, Perón's movement gained popularity and culminated in his election to the Presidency in 1946. Peronism has been one of the most influential and enduring movements in the nation's history. The polarization and division within the political class between Peronists and anti-Peronists is evident in the use of dehumanizing terms for opponents. The term "gorilla," used by Peronists to refer to anti-Peronists, reflects a fascist-style dehumanization, reducing the opponent to an animal figure and denying their dignity.

At the same time, certain anti-Peronist sectors have demonized Peronism as a democratic anomaly, without taking into account the historical reasons behind its popularity. They accuse members of the working-class population who have lost the work ethic, labeling them "planeros" living off social welfare, unwilling to seek employment, and pressuring the government for benefits it cannot sustain —especially during times of fiscal crisis. This

unfairly generalizes the misdeeds of a few and stigmatizes the entire movement.

Neither one nor the other. First, let us analyze the reasons and distortions in the discourse from both sides:

The manipulation of Peronist discourse

While Perón spoke of a "third position," criticizing both capitalism and communism, this was far from a moderate centrist stance; it was a mix of terms and concepts designed to incorporate different sectors of society into his electorate. Perón skillfully appropriated terms and structures from both Marxist and Soviet state-planning language as well as fascist ideologies, and reinterpreted them under a nationalist logic. Both Marxism and Nazism or fascism share a totalitarian vision of the state over the individual. Perón therefore, replaced the idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat or the corporatist fascist ideal —where social interests are harmoniously integrated under state control— with the concept of an "organized community" and substituted class revolution with a popular national mobilization. He used Soviet-style terminology, such as five-year plans, to implement a vision of a centralized, statist economy. This mixture was further complicated when he incorporated elements of the Social Doctrine of the Church (inspired by encyclicals such as *Rerum Novarum* (1891) by Leo XIII and *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931) by Pius XI) through the terms social justice and the defense of worker dignity —concepts that any person of goodwill would aspire to see realized in their country. The problem is that Perón applied it within a framework similar to that of a totalizing fascist state, where the state is the main organizer of economic and social life, granting benefits from above. The Peronist reinterpretation produced a deficient political anthropology, in which the individual is conceived not as an autonomous and responsible

subject, but as a passive recipient of rights granted by those in power. Material equality is prioritized over free and collaborative participation. This departs from the classical notion of justice as giving "to each what is due," substituting merit and responsibility with subjective need, managed by the state. The idea of social justice is thus subordinated to an emotional narrative that replaces critical analysis. Perón also redefined social justice as the provision of what each person needs, rather than what is their due. This formulation is incompatible with the Church's social teaching, which requires freedom, responsibility, and subsidiarity as conditions for authentic justice.

Perón's ability to absorb contradictory discourses and adapt to changing contexts has created profound doctrinal confusion in Argentine political culture. This ambiguity affects not only the political sphere but has also caused real anthropological damage, altering the way Argentine citizens perceive work, justice, social participation, and the role of the state. Above all, the damage lies in the conception and vision of the state's role. The proclamation of social justice —the main banner of Peronism— has established an ideal of a paternalistic state, one from which everything is expected, a "permanent provider father," ultimately producing passive, dependent, and immature citizens. Citizens demand the guarantee of these rights while forgetting that they must also assume responsibilities, forge character, and contribute to the common good so that the social, economic, and political conditions of the country allow the entire society to develop and live in civic harmony.

Peronism has hollowed out another key concept, "social dialogue," using it to justify clientelism, excessive public spending, or authoritarian and extortionary union practices toward businesses or the oligarchy —a term more commonly used in Marxist discourse. This semantic emptying generates

widespread rejection, even among moderate sectors, of any proposal that includes these expressions. The consequence is structural: it prevents the construction of a civic culture based on legality, merit, and genuine solidarity.

The virtue of work has been replaced by a logic of dependency. Solidarity is reduced to party loyalty, and equity becomes the arbitrary distribution of benefits. The figure of the poor is idealized as a victim by definition and is opposed to a supposed oligarchic oppressor, following a binary logic that is incompatible with the Social Doctrine of the Church (SDC).

Perón asserts that the organized community —the "we"— is the supreme order,[1] thus denying the ontological value of the human person as a free and responsible subject. This vision contradicts the Christian personalism of Maritain and Mounier, for whom the state must serve the person, not the other way around.

In a 21st-century version of Peronism, Juan Grabois, in his proposal focused on Land, Roof, and Work (3T), adopts a distributive logic with a strong state imprint. Although he presents himself as a defender of the Social Doctrine of the Church (SDC), his policies have been criticized for violating the principle of subsidiarity, one of the pillars of that doctrine. This principle holds that the state should intervene only when the lower levels of society are unable to resolve a problem on their own. In his book Argentina Humana[2] Grabois proposes a statist and planning-oriented approach, including the idea of a new five-year plan inspired by the Soviet model. He has even promoted occupations of private lands, in a logic closer to communist agrarian reform

1 Juan Domingo Perón, *La comunidad organizada,* Ediciones del Congreso Justicialista, Buenos Aires, 1949.

2 Juan Grabois, *Argentina Humana: Teoría y práctica para la justicia social en el siglo XXI. Un proyecto contracultural,* Sudamericana, Buenos Aires, 2024.

than to the Christian protection of property rights. His vision advocates a redistribution of resources that can foster dependency and clientelism if not accompanied by genuine mechanisms for progressive autonomy.

Peronism has co-opted unions, social movements, and media outlets, creating a cultural hegemony that marginalizes any alternative discourse. From a Christian perspective, this constitutes a betrayal of the Social Doctrine of the Church (SDC), which prioritizes freedom, participation, and dignity above all. Professor and Catholic Action member Carlos Sacheri warned, in general terms, against the political instrumentalization of SDC language and specifically criticized Peronism for its populist and clientelist use of it. Sacheri became a martyr defending truth and Christian values; despite receiving multiple threats, he chose not to remain silent out of fear and was assassinated by the guerrilla organization ERP on December 22, 1974.

In these eighty years of the Peronist movement, despite the confrontation between Perón and the Church in 1955, the use of Christian values in political discourse persisted. Despite the secularist measures of 1954–1955 —such as the elimination of religious education in public schools, the legalization of civil divorce, the proposal to remove religious holidays, the expulsion of priests and bishops considered opponents, and the prohibition of religious processions (such as *Corpus Christi)*— which were experienced as an ideological attack on Catholicism, Peronism continued to appeal to religious language. After the failed bombing of Plaza de Mayo by certain military sectors, groups identified with Peronism —whether unions or other state-mobilized actors— attacked and burned several historic 18th-century churches, including San Ignacio de Loyola, Convento Santo Domingo, Iglesia de San Francisco, La Piedad, Santa Catalina, and El Salvador, as well as Catholic buildings such as the metropolitan curia,

destroying images, relics, and historical archives. The Federal Police, under Peronist control, did not act to stop the attacks, and Perón himself never explicitly condemned the events, attributing them instead to the "indignant people." There was a separation between Peronists and the more conservative sectors of the Church. However, starting in the 1970s, groups such as the Theology of the People and the Movement of Priests for the Third World —later reprimanded by Pope John Paul II for confusing Marxist concepts with those of the Social Doctrine of the Church— reestablished links between Catholicism and Peronism.

Despite these ups and downs, many Peronist activists who are believers and practicing Catholics remain in the movement even after the conflict and all these events, due to its manipulative discourse using the principles of the Social Doctrine of the Church (SDC) and the absence of another strong political space that exposes this instrumentalization and truly promotes those values.

On the other hand, the anti-Peronist discourse has often failed to offer an emotionally compelling alternative. While Peronism speaks in terms of belonging and collective epic, its opponents tend to appeal to technocratic or cold languages. This reinforces the affective identity of Peronist voters, who feel attacked by a distant elite: liberals, conservatives, republicans—anyone who points out Peronism's faults or seeks to expose its distortion of universal truths and values is perceived as misleading and manipulating the people.

Moreover, anti-populist sectors often reduce the Peronist phenomenon to corruption or clientelism, without understanding its symbolic and cultural dimension. This attitude prevents the construction of an alternative narrative that combines social justice with republicanism, and community with freedom.

Overcoming Peronist populism requires more than a technical critique: it demands a profound cultural renewal. It is necessary to rebuild political language on clear ethical foundations, recover the authentic meaning of social justice, and revalue work, responsibility, and the common good. A new emotionally compelling narrative is also needed —one that can engage the popular sectors without falling into populism..

Benedict XVI warns in Caritas in Veritate that state aid must not replace personal responsibility. The paternalistic logic of Peronism ignores this teaching, turning citizens into clients and the state into a dispenser of favors. It is through the empowerment of citizens —not through manipulation by populists, whether left or right— that these deeply rooted obstacles in Argentine political culture can be overcome.

Argentines must be freed from this polarization and reclaim the fundamental values that Peronism has distorted —values that are universal and should not be the exclusive discourse of any political party:

- The person as a subject of rights and duties, enjoying freedom as a pillar of human dignity —not subordinated to an organized community, a movement, or a leader, absorbed into a whole called the "people."
- Social justice understood as the balance between responsibility and the common good, not as the redistribution of political power.
- The organization of society in a participatory, democratic, and horizontal manner, not vertical under a leader or exclusive to a movement.

It is essential that all political forces in the country, regardless of their ideologies or sectoral interests, be able to reach a basic consensus around certain fundamental principles that guarantee human dignity. These principles —such as respect for individual rights, equality before the law, freedom of conscience, and social justice— constitute the foundation upon which any democratic and pluralistic society is built. Only when this minimum agreement on the centrality of the human person and the principle of subsidiarity has been consolidated will it be possible to open the legitimate and necessary debate on the focus and orientation of public policies. Without this common framework, political discussion risks becoming purely tactical or partisan, drifting away from the common good and fostering social fragmentation.

For this reason, it is imperative to restore the Christian anthropology of the subject: a vision of the human being as a free, creative, and dignified person, prior to and above the state. Only in this way can a democracy be recovered in which the citizen is once again a protagonist, not merely a client.