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# Populism and Socio-Political Transformation in Latin America\*

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**Abstract:** Through the concept of «populism» Ronaldo Munck offers a series of approaches to the various methodological and theoretical perspectives that have studied it for decades. The article highlights both the complexity of this concept and its ambiguity.

**Keywords:** Populism; Latin America; Policy; Society.

## Populismo y transformación sociopolítica en América Latina

**Resumen:** A través del concepto de «populismo» Ronaldo Munck ofrece una serie de aproximaciones a las diversas perspectivas metodológicas y teóricas que lo han estudiado durante décadas. El artículo destaca tanto la complejidad de este concepto como su ambigüedad.

**Palabras clave:** Populismo; América Latina; Política; Sociedad.

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Presenting this conversation around populism in Latin America at the University of Granada I cannot but be struck by the timeliness and relevance but also perhaps limits of the concept of populism in Spain. Iñigo Errejón has argued, for example, that the populist discourse unifies very diverse positions and social sectors through a dichotomization of the political field into a 'people' versus the elite, thus capturing if successful the general interest (see Errejón and Mouffe 2015). This was, indeed, the founding political philosophy of *Podemos* from its foundation to the splits and decline it suffered after. It was a Laclau/Mouffe inflected understanding of populism that helped raise *Podemos* from obscurity and launched it onto the national scene. But of course, populism is not a panacea, a solution to all our political woes and a long-term strategy for some kind of radical democratic order. It is not either clear whether *Podemos* was in fact 'neither left or right' as they initially claimed nor who the 'people' (*gente*) they wished to interpellate were. We can also note that this variant of left populism to call it that, did not offer a clear position in relation to the national questions in Spain, namely Euskadi, Catalonia and Galicia. On the other hand, the far-right *Vox* which rose to considerable prominence after the decline of *Podemos*, did so not only in a populist idiom (the right can always learn from events) but also, importantly, based on a clear and unambiguous position against Catalan nationalism/separatism. A left that is not clear on the national question as to what a democratic positioning would be, will always be constrained and limited in my opinion.

### **What's in a name?**

Anyone meeting the word «populism» in the North Atlantic region will assume it has a negative connotation. It may refer, as in «economic populism», to governments that do not exercise financial prudence and just give handouts to the population to ensure their popularity. In other cases –as in «populist politician»– it will be seen to refer to something dark and dangerous, scapegoating minorities or foreigners to gain popularity among the native population. Those who vote for these populist politicians are seen to be affected by some form of «false consciousness» or are, simply, in need of therapy. Those who support economic populism need to be disciplined by the market and a good dose of austerity politics, that will soon bring them down to earth. For my part, I will take the issues raised by populism and populist politics as real and valid. Furthermore, I will not engage in the futile academic game of seeking out what populism «is» but, rather, I will situate populism in its concrete historical context and its geographical one, making clear my remit is Latin America.

Simplifying the vast international literature, we can discern three main perspectives that are relevant to our enterprise. The first lens is a structural one, focused on the socio-economic context of populism. The emphasis here is on the historical pattern of industrialization and the impact that has had on the development of social classes, and the political manifestations of class struggles. There is also a considerable focus on the emergence of new working classes and their entry into the political arena. In later years, it placed more emphasis on the «populist» nature of economic policies where any form of economic redistribution was thus dubbed, to disqualify it among all right-minded people. From a Latin American perspective, this approach could still be valuable in providing a grounding of political processes in terms of the social structures of accumulation. The second perspective focuses on populism as a political strategy and/or as a political style. Quite simply, here, populism is part of a strategy for power, and diverse constructions of «the people» are an integral element of it. It may involve a charismatic figure developing a direct and unmediated relationship with the masses, but that is not always the case. In Latin America there have been salient examples where this is the case- to the extent of becoming a caricature- but the construction of a «people» for electoral and/or social movement purposes may be conducted by political parties as well. A variant of this approach, a minor one in my view, is a focus on «populist» leadership styles, where mass mobilization is fomented through conserved linguistic and dress codes seeking to portray the leader as a person «of the people». This paradigm, taken as a whole, directs our attention to state power and the way in which populism is part and parcel of the normal political process. The third perspective is a poststructuralist one, focused on the discourse of populism, sometimes called an ideational approach. Over and above the socioeconomic and sociopolitical context in which populism emerges, it is always already constructed as an idea or a discourse. It is through this construction that «the people» and, their counterpart, «the elite» emerge. Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser advocate a definition of populism as a «thin-centred ideology», which allows us to grasp the malleability of the concept and the way in which it can be attached to both right-wing and left-wing projects (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 6). Populism, from this perspective, is never «pure» in the sense of having a given ideological content, and it is often «transitional» in the sense that it will either persist or transform itself into something else.

### **Classical Populism**

The study of populism in Latin America is of wider relevance in terms of international debates on populism insofar as «Latin America is the region with

the most enduring and prevalent populist tradition» (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 27). Yet Latin America is most often misunderstood as though «populism» is simply part of the region's DNA. It is remarkable how wrong international observers can get it sometimes. Thus Margaret Canovan, a major scholar of populism, can refer continuously to Peronism as a classic case of «populist dictatorship» (Canovan 1981: 138), despite Perón having won democratic elections in 1946, 1951 and 1973. I will seek to deconstruct populism in its historical context, and not simply contrast it against what it is not, namely liberal democracy. My sense is that Latin America represents a true laboratory to critically deconstruct the phenomenon of populism in all its complexity. I start from the assumption that the emergence of a populist movement is usually related to crisis, whether it be that of the oligarchic state in the case of the classical populism of the 1940s, or of neoliberalism in the case of the left populism of the 2000s.

As Arditi puts it «populism arises as the result of a crisis of representation, as a response to either the incapacity, or the refusal, of elites to respond to people's concerns» (Arditi 2010: 496). A crisis of representation creates a terrain where new identities can be forged, and alliances created to articulate progressive responses to both distributive and representational demands. The crisis that created the conditions for the emergence of classical populism was the crisis of the agro-export-based oligarchic state which, by 1930, was no longer fully functional. Politically, this model of domination had begun to fracture before the 1930s world depression, but it was this international element that sealed its fate. The agro-export economic model had served the dominant classes well from around 1870 to 1914 and the outbreak of the First World War. The Great Crash of 1929, and the depression of the 1930s, acted as a catalyst for the emergence of a new model of accumulation and political control. This was not a sharp turn –and nor did it occur everywhere– but there was a general socio-economic shift and the emergence of new political forces. The *laissez-faire* attitude towards the state – the «night watchman» model (overseer but not player)- was no longer viable.

The ruling classes could no longer say, as a Brazilian minister once put it in the 1920s, that trade unions «were a matter for the police». The need to incorporate the new emerging classes, and to reaccommodate the balance between agrarian- and industrial-based dominant classes, created considerable pressure for regime change. Argentina was, in many ways, the paradigmatic case, of a national-popular reaction to the drawn-out crises of the 1930s, known as the *década infame* (decade of infamy) there. Perón built a «populist» movement, with the active collaboration of the trade unions that were thinking in terms

of a labour party. During the first period of Peronism, 1946–55, workers' share in the national income rose sharply from 41 per cent in 1946–48 to 49 per cent in 1952–55 and trade union organization took a massive step forward, even if those unions were firmly linked to the Peronist state through corporatist structures. Workers achieved a degree of «labour dignity» but they were also expected to deliver better labour productivity. National industrialists were encouraged by the state, but cordial relations were also forged with foreign capital.

Above all, the developmentalist state promoted capitalist expansion, and ensured the stable reproduction of the labour force, through better education and the beginnings of a welfare state, something not considered necessary by the previous oligarchic state.

Peronism is an interesting case study, not least as interpretations of this «populist» movement range from fascist to socialist. It can also, however, be taken as a model for what Garretón et al. call the «statist-national-popular socio-political matrix» that would prevail from 1945 to 1975 across most of Latin America (Garretón et al. 2003: 176). The development model was based on inward-looking, or import substitution, industrialization. The state was very much to the fore in this model, organizing production and the management of the economy while acting as a reference point for all social demands. Social movements were incorporated through varying degrees of corporatism. The old order of an oligarchic state, and a very partial liberal democracy, was replaced by a national-popular discourse – not simply reducible to «populism» – in which the people versus oligarchy became the dominant opposition in society, articulating a «historic bloc» (in Gramscian terms) between national and popular aspirations. While Peronism can be taken as an emblematic case of classical populism, similar political dynamics were at play in other countries, albeit in quite distinctive ways. Populism in Brazil was quite different from that in Argentina. As Cardoso and Faletto put it «the populism of Vargas was a rather vague movement of people's incorporations into the nation. [...] It was less an economic definition of workers' rights which would imply political participation, than a political movement in favour of the 'humble'» (Cardoso & Faletto 1979: 141).

### **Contemporary Populism**

The new post populist hegemonic project of the dominant classes, supported by the international financial institutions, was to create a new matrix of accumulation and political control. Market allocation would be the priority mechanism for the allocation of resources, the state would have a hugely

decreased role, and the system of political representation would be greatly weakened (Garretón et al. 2003: 95–6). Against the primacy of politics as the organizing agent of society, the self-regulating market would become the rational regulator of society. Thus, society was fundamentally disarticulated and restructured in what was known as the «lost decade» of the 1980s. Not only did counter-hegemonic projects fade away, but so did the counterhegemonic imagination. While authoritarianism went deep into society, there were still bonds of solidarity that survived – in trade unions, community groups, women’s organizations, church circles and the new movements of relatives of the disappeared. The 1990s were to see the emergence of a strange hybrid politics that was described as «neo-populist»: populist in form but neoliberal in substance.

Emblematic public figures of the era included Carlos Menem (Argentina 1989–99), Alberto Fujimori (Peru 1990–2000), and Carlos Pérez (Venezuela 1989–93). These leaders, along with others in Brazil and Ecuador, came into office with the full trappings of populism as political style (and promises), but soon reverted to the now dominant economic ideology. They shared none of the structural features of classical populism, and the policies they enacted were the exact opposite of those of classical populism. Torcuato di Tella argued cogently that these nationalist or radical Right forces which ‘are often branded populist should....be put in a different category, because they are not aimed against the dominant groups but rather against the underprivileged they see as threatening’ (di Tella 1997: 190). It seemed that the term «neo-populism» was coined to describe what was essentially a form of *caudillismo* (leaderism) and was soon to fade away in the debates.

On the other hand, there were Marxists for whom this supposed death of populism would turn history back to the true path of class struggle. Thus, Jeremy Adelman boldly proclaimed the emergence of «post-populism» in Argentina, with Menem’s warm embrace of neoliberalism in the 1990s, even tying Argentina’s currency to the US dollar, that had «brought the country full circle – reopening the class nature of the Argentine state which Perón had sought to elide with a populist alliance» (Adelman 1994: 89). Peronism and populism had sought to draw a veil across class rule, and now this was drawn open and the class struggle would resume. More grounded voices, like Sergio Zermeno (1989), had already been forecasting the «return to the leader» as a result of the atomization and anomie caused by neoliberalism.

In fact, after Menem and the collapse of neoliberalism in Argentina in 2001, the one who emerged at the head of a new hegemonic project was a representative of the left Peronism of the 1970s, namely Néstor Kirchner. The «progres-

sive popular» governments post-2000, were born out of the crisis of the neo-liberal matrix, and the search for some kind of post-neoliberal development strategy. They were also, on the whole, part of an intense bout of class struggle and social conflict. In Argentina, in 2002, there was a semi-insurreccional, or dual power situation, for a time, while in Ecuador and Bolivia massive struggles erupted after 2000 around natural resources and indigenous uprisings. What these new governments all had in common was commitment to a form of economic nationalism, and the recovery of the category of *pueblo* (people). Thus, for example, Néstor Kirchner in Argentina «set up a discursive dividing line» (Panizza 2009: 245) between his policies and those of the previous anti-national neoliberalism of Menem and the military, to define his own economic and political project through a reframing of the national-popular politics of the 1940s. The tendency, at the time, was to see a somewhat simplistic divide between a «democratic» left and a «populist» left (e.g., Castañeda 2006), that reflected more the politics of those who proposed it than a real divide in practice.

In a way this pitting of populist against 'anti-populist, mirrored the earlier reaction to Juan Domingo Perón in Argentina, all attention on Venezuela and Chávez was focused on his supposed authoritarianism and charismatic leadership. Venezuela was certainly not a liberal democracy. A new constitution created a new form of direct democracy (imperfect and uneven to be sure) that replaced the «pacted democracy» or *partidocracia* that had preceded Chávez and marginalized popular participation. With his death in 2013, Chavismo sank into a spiral of confrontation and demoralization, showing the weak side of this type of «high intensity» populist regime. However, it acted as a pole of attraction for a continent-wide left revival that, significantly, made strong discursive links with the pre-colonial history of resistance.

While I would argue that the «populist» versus «democratic» left divide is both overblown and politically motivated, we can distinguish between «populism from below» and «populism from above» modalities during the post2000 developments. Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador, all saw significant levels of social activation that placed pressure on the «progressive» governments of Morales and Correa respectively. Their innovative constitutional strategies created a new, more inclusive, and participatory political order. They clashed with the social movements – particularly the environmental and indigenous ones – over the economic model that they followed. Extractivism was seen as simply the modern face of the old pre-1930 «enclave economies», even if the governments were using the income for social redistribution. The economic role of the state increased considerably in Ecuador – from 25 per cent in



2006 to 50 per cent in 2011 signalling a partial return to the national-popular development matrix of the 1950s. While born out of mass upheavals and social mobilization, the progressive governments of Ecuador and Bolivia (in different ways) had to face the problem of how to institutionalize their power base and create a durable hegemonic alliance. As Errejón and Guijarro note, «the allegiances created through the conflict are hard to transfer to an institutionalisation of the new correlation of forces» (Errejón & Guijarro 2016: 34). This was particularly the case in Ecuador, where Correa, with only a weak self-created party base, sought to marginalize the social movements and relied mainly on his own personal appeal.

From 2013 onwards, the demise of the populist-progressive governments that swept across Latin America from 2000 was often predicted, but they have proven remarkably resilient, despite considerable disenchantment. My conclusion is that the neoliberal, market-driven sociopolitical matrix that prevailed in the 1980s and 1990s, has now been decisively superseded. Yet this has not led to the consolidation of a stable new hegemonic order, not least due to internal divisions. It would seem to mirror Gramsci's famous statement that «the crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born» (Gramsci 1970: 276). There seems little doubt, based on our analysis here and the history of recent years, that «progressive populism» will continue to play a role. In its ongoing study we shall have to prioritize the strategic approach, while not neglecting the structural focus on socioeconomic change and the post structural emphasis on discourse construction

### **Post populism?**

We could be forgiven if we concluded that a concept such as populism has become so over-inflated and overdetermined by its critics that it is no longer useful for social or political theory. While a plausible argument, for now I will resist it and argue that 'post populism' means looking for new directions for its study cognisant of the *cul de sac* it now appears to be in, but not jettisoning the concept entirely.

I would start with the lucid and succinct summary by Jaques Rancière that: 'Populism is the convenient name under which is dissimulated the exacerbated contradiction between popular legitimacy and expert legitimacy.... This name at once masks and reveals the intense wish of the oligarch: to govern without people, in other words, without any dividing of the people; to govern without politics' (Rancière, 2007:80).

It is not our purpose here to produce a «Latin American» theory of populism. However, it is necessary, I would argue, to have a grounded theory to

underpin our analysis of «classical» and «contemporary» populism in Latin America. From the 1950s–60s structural functionalist approach, we can focus on the changing social patterns that preceded the emergence of populism. Then, from the 1960s–70s structural dependence paradigm, we can have a systematic focus on the «compromise state», underpinning populist regimes. Latterly, it is the figure of Ernesto Laclau that dominates, from a Gramscian phase in the 1980s–90s, to a more formal discourse theoretic approach in the 2000s.

Ernesto Laclau's work (1977, 2005) has attracted a lot of attention and has been taken up by many of the global theories of populism. In the Latin American context, it was appreciated, but also heavily criticised, for what some saw as his filo-populism orientation in his open support for existing populist governments in Argentina and elsewhere. In theoretical terms, as Francisco Panizza argued, «populism cannot be understood, as Laclau claimed, in purely formal, ontological terms» (Panizza 2005: 197). Certainly, populism is about the construction of political frontiers, an articulation of the people vis-à-vis the elite. Populist discourses – around the sovereignty of the people – are not autonomous but draw meaning from other discourses, such as those of democracy, justice and rights. Put most simply, «if populist discourses convey meaning and values, they are not an ideology» (Panizza 2005:197).

One of the critiques of Laclau that I would like to take up here in conclusion is that of Samuele Mazzolini (2020) which basically calls for a «re-Gramscianization» of his approach to populism. Whereas, in his earlier work, Laclau had equated hegemony with politics, in *On Populist Reason* he shifted to a position that «populism is the royal road to understanding something about the ontological constitution of the political as such» (Laclau 2005: 6). At best, we can say that Laclau puts populism and hegemony on the same plane. In practice, when Laclau engaged with the left-of-centre governments in Latin America, he prioritized the populist movement and the successful contesting of elections. He focussed less on the struggle for hegemony by the left, and the way in which social movements were co-opted by the «progressive governments» of the early 2000s (see Munck 2015). As Mazzolini puts it, «Populism can ensue in a new hegemonic order, but it is far from settled that it will. The question is what decides if it will» (Mazzolini 2020: 770).

If we can 'go back' to hegemony as a frame to understand populism, we can also argue for going 'beyond' hegemony as Tim Appleton (2023) does building on the notion that 'there is no such thing as society' or the impossibility of society. The argument for hegemony mistakes the emptiness of society

for its fulness according to this argument. Be that as it may, we might consider the value of a 'post hegemony' take on populism.

We can argue that the theory of ideology and contemporary political discourse need to abandon discredited representationalism conceptions of truth and reality; they need to move beyond objectivism and rationalism. What Lacan formulated from his 1955–1956 seminar is today a commonplace in social theory, epistemology and the study of ideology. Within such a framework, 'reality' becomes the ideological representation par excellence. Ideology is not a dreamlike illusion that we build to escape insupportable reality; in its basic dimension it is a fantasy-construction which serves as a support for our 'reality' itself.

In brief in terms of our alternative ways forward to critically engage with populism, a Lacanian conception of populism enables us to examine the structuring of signifiers that comprise the discourses that define society for us. The symbolic and the imaginary aspects of discourse, and what enables challenge and change. How does the identification/interpellation loop work? What role does desire, affect and emotion play in this interpellation? We can draw out the consequences of this concept for contemporary political theory: the question of how to define 'left' and 'right'; the question of popular enthusiasm and affect; 'truth' versus 'post-truth'; the question of leadership; populism and nationalism; and the relation between populism and political parties.

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