# POPULIST REDEMPTION AND THE UNFINISHED DEMOCRATIZATION OF LATIN AMERICA

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The re-elections of Carlos Menem in Argentina and Alberto Fujimori in Peru, and the unstable and corrupt presidencies of Fernando Collor in Brazil and Abdalá Bucaram in Ecuador, have brought back the discussion on Latin American populism. Contrary to the dominant views of populism as a phase in the region's history, understood either as a transitory stage towards modernization, or as a political phenomenon linked to import substitution industrialization, the re-emergence of populist leaders poses again fundamental political problems. Continuing the unresolved issues raised by debates on classical populism, the questions that need to be addressed from an empirical and normative standpoint are: What is the relationship between Latin American populism and democracy? What is the pattern of incorporation of the popular sectors into the national political community, and how do they differ from the Western experience? And what are the specificities of really existing Latin American democracies?

Differently from the Western pattern of inclusion through the progressive extension and deepening of citizenship rights, the Latin American masses were incorporated by populist appeals to "*el pueblo*" and weak citizenship rights. Citizenship is not the only, or the main, relationship between individuals and the state. The poor and the excluded have been incorporated through charismatic political movements. These movements have used clientelism and corporatism to give resources to the poor, not as citizenship rights, but as personal favors of politicians, or as corporatist concessions to privileged groups. The institutionalization of these two mediations between state and society – weak and incomplete citizenship and strong appeals to *el pueblo* – have produced a specific version of democracy. Guillermo O'Donnell has characterized these electoral regimes, which transform electoral winners into the nation's savior, and which do not respect democratic procedures and civil rights, as "delegative democracies."

This essay is divided into two sections. The first reviews existent theories of Latin American populism, and presents a new approach to its study. This research strategy analyzes the institutionalization of different mediations between the state and society at the time of the transition from "the politics of notables" to "mass politics." The second section studies recently re-established democracies in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, and Peru. These democracies do not respect civil rights, and/or liberal democratic procedures. Differently from the West,

where rights inform practices in everyday life, in Latin America rights do not guarantee protection from the arbitrariness of the state, or access to its resources. Personalized relations of domination continue to link the state to its subjects, producing clientelist political cultures. Discourses on citizenship rights, however, are not completely ignored. They are used by elites to rationalize the exclusion of the masses, and to legitimate their rule. But like in the West, even the rhetorical use of notions of citizenship rights allows the excluded to struggle for these rights. The debates about rights, moreover, imply the possibility and desirability of their implementation. This article has a normative orientation. It aims to understand the workings of democracies based on clientelism, corporatism, and the populist authoritarian appropriation of the people's will to re-think a more democratic and inclusive system based on the rule of law and citizenship rights.

## The Controversial History of Populism

The study of Latin American populism is, almost, as long and as controversial as the phenomenon. The term populism simultaneously evokes the mobilization of the masses by charismatic leaders, and their transformation into actors of the political community. For the left it brings back memories of redistributive social policies, whereas for the neo-liberal right it means fiscal irresponsibility. These tensions and antinomies, between political incorporation and authoritarian manipulation, social inclusion and corporatism, explain the attraction and the repulsion of populism. These ambiguities are also reflected in the difficulties that social scientists have encountered when trying to explain and interpret different populist experiences. Three main approaches to the study of populism can, nonetheless, be differentiated: modernization theory, dependency theory, and discourse analysis. After reviewing these perspectives, I develop an alternative approach to the study of Latin American populism.

Gino Germani conceived of populism as a transitional phase in the modernization of Latin America.<sup>4</sup> Populist followers were analyzed, according to the insights of mass society theory, as "available masses." Because these masses did not have an adequate normative structure to function in a modern society, they were easy prey of populist charismatic seduction. The relationship between democracy and populism, for Germani who studied Peronism, was negative, though transitional. Peronism, and more generally populism, were understood as dangerous deviations from the desired model of Western liberal democracy.

Questioning the teleological assumptions of modernization theory, and its conservatism that reduced populist followers to irrational masses, dependency theorists put forward an alternative structuralist interpretation that gave priority to the study of class formation.<sup>5</sup> For dependency theorists, populism was an interclass alliance of the popular sectors, the middle classes and emergent elites against oligarchic regimes. These socio-political movements are linked to a phase of economic development: import substitution industrialization. National-Popular

regimes through nationalism, state intervention in the economy, and corporatism developed policies that incorporated sectors previously excluded. These regimes, therefore, had an ambiguous relationship to democracy. On the one hand, they were authoritarian, and did not respect liberal democratic norms. But on the other, the content of their social policies was democratic.

Ernesto Laclau developed a theory of populism based on discourse analysis. To explain the rhetorical appeal to the people, "a concept without a defined theoretical status," Laclau demonstrated how this category is linked to the discursive elaboration of a fundamental contradiction in the social formation: "the people versus the power bloc." The particularity of populism is to be a discourse that articulates popular-democratic interpellations as antagonistic to the dominant ideology. These contradictions, that cannot be processed within the system, imply the possibility of a populist break. That is why Peronism, Maoism, and Fascism are examples of populist ruptures.

Laclau's concern with the possibility and desirability of a populist rupture is explained by his orthodox Marxist understanding of liberal democracy and rights as tools of class oppression. Apart from the undesirable normative implications of his theory, which were corrected in his subsequent writings, Laclau's innovative work on populist discourse was partial. He only analyzed the conditions of the production of discourses, and did not differentiate either between types of political discourses, or the contexts where different speeches were delivered.<sup>7</sup>

I understand populism as something more than a stage in the history of Latin America, nationalist and redistributive state policies, or a form of political discourse. I explore the relationship between leaders and followers, and the specific forms of political incorporation that exist in Latin America. This perspective starts with the contradictory and ambiguous experiences of popular participation in politics. Populism is explained by the "failure of representative institutions like political parties, labor unions, and autonomous social organizations to mediate between citizens and the state." Populist politics are based on all of these characteristics. It is an interclass alliance based on strong political leadership; a Manichaean and moralistic discourse that divides society into *el pueblo* and the oligarchy; clientelist networks that guarantee access to state resources; and forms of political participation where public and massive acts, the acclamation of leaders, and the occupation of public spaces in the name of a leader are perceived as more important than citizenship rights and respect for liberal democratic procedures.

To illustrate my approach to populism, I focus on the Ecuadorian case. I analyze the transition from the politics of notables to mass politics, studying how the different mediations between state and society were constructed. Mass populist politics in Ecuador originated in the 1930s and 1940s under the leadership of José María Velasco Ibarra. He became President of the country five times (1934–35; 1944–47; 1952–56; 1960–61; 1968–72). Unlike classical populist experiences, Ecuador was not at this time experiencing a process of

import-substitution industrialization. Even so, the oligarchical order was in crisis, as in other Latin American cases. Social actors such as the middle class – which had grown as a consequence of urbanization and state expansion – artisans, and a small proletariat were demanding political inclusion.

Velasco Ibarra took politics out of the salons and cafes of the elites and into the public plazas. He toured most of the country delivering his message of political incorporation through honest elections. Velasco Ibarra's followers responded to his appeals by occupying plazas, demonstrating for their leader, intimidating opponents, and – when they felt that their will at the polls had been mocked – staging insurrections and rebellions. Velasco Ibarra did not always respect democratic institutions. He assumed temporary dictatorial powers on several occasions, abolishing the Constitutions of 1935, 1946, and 1970 with the assertion that they limited the general will of the people, which he claimed to embody.

Velasquismo expanded the Ecuadorian electorate from 3.1 percent in 1933 to 16.83 percent in 1968, but most citizens remained excluded through the use of literacy requirements. Despite such a restricted franchise, Velasquismo cannot be reduced to just an electoral phenomenon. It was a broader social and political movement which included both voters and non-voters. The novelty of Velasquismo was to inaugurate a political style wherein mass meetings, crowd actions, and self-recognition in a moralistic, Manichaean political rhetoric became more important than narrowly restricted representative political institutions.

These two distinct forms of political participation – mass mobilization of the *pueblo* and limited citizens' participation in democratic institutions – illustrate how different mediations between state and society have historically been constructed. As in other Latin American countries, citizenship in Ecuador has tended to be restricted and to place priority upon political and social rights over civil rights; hence populism has become the principal link between state and civil society.

Populism is simultaneously a rhetoric and a style of political mobilization. Populist rhetoric radicalizes the emotional element common to all political discourses. It is rhetoric which constructs politics as the moral and ethical struggle between *el pueblo* and the oligarchy. The *pueblo* is negatively defined as all who are not the oligarchy. Given their suffering, the *pueblo* is the incarnation of the authentic Nation – the good, the just, and the moral. The *pueblo* confronts the oligarchy, which represents the unauthentic, the foreign, the evil, the unjust, and the immoral. The inherent ambiguity of these terms means that precisely who is included and excluded by these categories varies across different experiences.

Populist discourse transmutes politics into a struggle for moral values without accepting compromise or dialogue with the opponent. Populism thus has an ambiguous relation to liberal democratic procedures. While it incorporates people previously excluded from the political system, the moralism, personalism, and authoritarianism inherent in populism simultaneously runs counter to liberal

democratic institutions. Populism is part of the political tradition that George Mosse had called a "new political style," describing movements that have rejected parliamentary government and representative institutions on behalf of a democracy of the masses in which the people govern directly.<sup>12</sup> Populist politics are characterized by personalism and identification with a powerful, charismatic leader. Populist politics are based on crowd action. Crowds directly occupy public spaces to demand political participation and incorporation. At the same time, these crowds are used by their leaders to intimidate adversaries. Mass meetings become political dramas where people feel themselves to be true participants in the political scene.

The continuing inability of liberal democratic institutions to provide a sense of participation and of belonging to the political community have contrasted with symbolic political participation through populist, non-parliamentary politics. The main legacy of populism, then, has been to create a style of political mobilization and a rhetoric that link the state and civil society through mechanisms that do not correspond to the rule of law or to respect for liberal democratic procedures.

The electoral successes of Fujimori, Menem, Collor, and Bucaram bring a new preoccupation with populism, which had been marginalized to historical studies. This category now appears with the prefix "neo," to differentiate neo-populist neoliberal policies from classical nationalist state-based populist policies. Carlos Vilas, for example, explains the electoral success of these new *caudillos* by the "tensions between an economy that excludes, and the need for political integration." In contrast to the strong class identities of classical populism, the erosion of collective identities, as a result of neoliberal economic policies, have resulted in the creation of "available masses" that need to be integrated into the political system. This is the novelty of these new *caudillos* who, in distinction to their populist predecessors, do not develop inclusive social policies, but, like them, have built clientelist networks that guarantee electoral success.

Vilas's structuralist analysis shows the differences between the inclusive policies of classical populism and neoliberal policies that excluded the popular sectors. The problem with his argument is that it reduces populism to state policies. It is also important to study the relationship between leader and followers without reducing it to Germani's questionable notion of "available masses," or to the manipulation by charismatic leaders. Researchers have shown how neopopulist leaders have captured the experiences of economic and cultural exclusion of the poor and the non-white, and their discontent with traditional political parties.<sup>14</sup> Fujimori and Bucaram, for example, have presented themselves as common people who, as descendants of immigrants, have been discriminated against by the well-established elites of Spanish descent. Their movements are alliances of emergent elites with the very poor through social programs that target them directly. These alliances do not include the traditional supporters of classical populism such as the middle class and blue-collar workers. Bucaram, for instance, was elected with the support of an interclass coalition of emergent elites of Lebanese descent and the poor. His oratory and mass acts were based on elements of popular resistance. Through mockery and humor he presented well-established elites, in his words the oligarchy, as the cause of all of the nation's ills, while his figure represented the guarantee of national redemption. Bucaram's articulation of common people's symbolic resistance against everyday forms of exclusion and domination by elites explains his appeal, while his authoritarian appropriation of the people's will poses fundamental dangers to the institutionalization of democracy.

Latin American populist movements have rejected, or not always respected, liberal democratic forms of representation. They have constructed versions of democracy that claim to represent the people's will directly. But *el pueblo* is not just an empirical fact. It is a social relation of positions that, as García Canclini argues, dramaturgically situates certain actors "against the hegemonic group and not always in the form of confrontations." Because *el pueblo* cannot represent and constitute itself as a unitary actor, it always needs elites who can speak on its behalf.

In his reflections on Jacobinism, François Furet argues that the Revolution's claim to legitimacy rested on "the people," a founding principle that was "impossible to embody." Power, therefore, was in the hands of those who claimed to "speak for the people." It belonged to the "individual or individuals who appear to speak on their behalf, who speak in the name of the people and give them their name." Politics was constructed in such a way that there could only be politicians who embody the people's will, or enemies of the people. The people, then, became an ambiguous principle of political legitimacy. On the one hand, politicians had to embody the people, they had to deliver material and symbolic goods, and they also had to stage public acts that expressed the people's will, constituting the people as such. But, on the other, the people's will is represented and expressed as an homogeneous moral-ethical datum that does not admit differences. Politicians' appropriation of the people's will have resulted either in Stalinist totalitarianism, or in populist authoritarianism.

Lefort shows how the roots of totalitarianism are the representation of "The People as One." This enactment negates the divisions and diversities of modern society. Politics becomes the struggle between the unitary people represented by the proletariat, the party, or the Egocrat, against the enemies of the people, "the Other," imagined to be outside society, and who must be eliminated.<sup>18</sup> Authoritarian populism shares this Manichaean representation of politics as the struggle between the people and its leader – who embodies its will – against its enemies constructed as "the Other." But unlike totalitarianism, populist regimes have not completely abolished liberal democratic procedures and the rule of law. Therefore, they have not taken this antagonism to its totalitarian extremes.

## **Democracy Without Citizenship Rights?**

The impossibility to embody the people as One, unless the people is substituted by an autocrat, make us rethink the notion of representation. David Plotke convincingly argues that "representation is crucial in constituting democratic practices." Because, as Norberto Bobbio has shown, direct democracy will not work in complex modern societies, representatives need to be elected. "Deliberations which concern the whole community, are not taken directly by its members, but by people elected for this purpose." A collectivity "authorizes some individuals to speak for it, and eventually to commit the collectivity to what the representative decides." Representatives, for their part, are accountable and responsible for their actions.

To avoid populist authoritarian representation based on the "merging and full identity between a representative and those who seek representation," representation should be based on the principle of nonidentity between representatives and their constituency. In a democracy a substantial number of citizens, directly or indirectly, have the right to be involved in decision-making processes through procedures for arriving to collective decisions that also guarantee the right of minorities to dissent. Because a democracy offers alternatives, it needs to give basic rights to the electors and to its representatives. "It is formal in insisting on the nonnegotiable character of rights and procedures."

Guillermo O'Donnell has shown that newly installed democracies in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador and Peru are different from representative democracies. Delegative democracies do not respect civil rights and democratic procedures. They are based on the idea that whoever wins an election has the popular mandate to govern according to their interpretation of the people's will and interests. The President claims to embody the nation. He sees himself as the redeemer of the homeland. His policies, therefore, do not need to have any link to his promises during the campaign, or with the agreements made with the organizations and associations which supported his election. Because his government needs to "save the country" in a context of economic crises that constrain the institutionalization of democracy, he looks for neo-liberal technicians who can design economic policies to materialize this redemption.

As in the past, all the responsibility to rule the country falls to the President. He is perceived as the source of the country's ills, or of its successes. Because the government needs to save the nation, its actions do not always respect democratic procedures or compromises with the opposition. The opposition also acts without accepting agreements. In the end, as in the past, the military are called in to resolve civilians' problems. That is why, as the Peruvian and Ecuadorian examples show, it is difficult to escape from the populist-military coup cycle. In contrast to the past, due to new international conditions, the ruptures in civilian governments do not put the military directly in charge. In Peru, Fujimori illegaly dissolved the Congress in 1995, and in Ecuador, the Congress semi-legally deposed Bucaram for "mental incapacity" in 1997.

Lefort has shown that "rights are a generative principles of democracy."<sup>24</sup> Rights are not only codified in laws, they are not static, they change historically, and their existence permits the struggle and the creation of new rights. Following

Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato, the following rights that correspond to different institutions of modern civil societies can be differentiated:

Focusing on the institutional spheres of civil society, we can isolate three complexes of rights: those concerning cultural reproduction (freedoms of thought, speech, and communication); those ensuring social integration (freedom of association and assembly); and those securing socialization (protection of privacy, intimacy, and the inviolability of the person). Two other complexes of rights mediate between civil society and either the market economy (rights of property, contract, and labor) or the modern bureaucratic state (political rights of citizens and welfare rights of clients).<sup>25</sup>

In Latin America, while rights which guarantee capitalist relations of production have been institutionalized and are respected, political and welfare rights and the rights which guarantee the institutions of civil society are only selectively respected. As many researchers have shown, the poor do not have the power to exercise their Constitutional civil rights. They are at the mercy of the police and of the influential members of the community. The powerful, in addition to their citizenship rights, are important persons in the community who have the prerogative to be above the law, and/or to manipulate laws for their own interests.

Differently from the West, where laws are viewed as legitimate and understood as universal, in Latin America they are perceived as a mechanism of class rule. The poor need powerful patrons who can protect them from the arbitrary power of laws. Because the powerful offer their protection to the poor in exchange for their loyalty, relations of domination, as in the past, continue to be personalized. Given their daily interactions in personalized relations of domination, the superordinate sectors see themselves as the natural, well-natured, and kindly protectors of the poor. They have the power to construct the desired moral characteristics of their subordinates. If the latter fulfill their expectations and stereotypes, they are rewarded with their love. As Mary Jackman argues, "there is no need to engage in explicit power negotiations with subordinates if one has an embedded, ingrained understanding that the continued exchange of affection is contingent upon the fulfillment of specific obligations."28 The poor and the excluded exchange their loyalty for access to economic resources, and to services to which they are entitled, but from which they are marginalized in their day-to-day lives. For instance, to have access to their right to education or to public health, the poor need a powerful patron who can make a phone call, or write a letter of recommendation.

Like the well-established members of the elite, politicians offer their protection to the poor in exchange for their loyalty, and the poor look for a patron who can deliver. Discourses of love and friendship mask real relations of domination between politicians and the poor. They offer their love to the poor, and the poor have to accept their love on the terms offered by politicians. Their everyday contact with the poor, whom they claim to love, makes politicians believe that

they know their true interests. The destitute, the excluded, and the poor do not have rights, even though there exists legislation that guarantees these rights. Being an important person in the community, or having a powerful patron, guarantee access to these rights from which common citizens are systematically, or, at best, selectively excluded. Clientelism, thus, continues to operate as one of the main mechanisms of political control, and of access to resources.<sup>29</sup>

Everyday practices to escape from laws or to use them strategically for one's benefit schizophrenically co-exist with what can be called an obsession to legislate. It seems that politicians have a need to invent new laws and Constitutions constantly. There is a need to legitimate politics with legislation that will not be respected for long. This ambiguous relationship to laws is a product of Latin America's colonial heritage when laws were "to be obeyed but not executed."30 This preoccupation with laws also demonstrates that the rule of law cannot be totally ignored, and that it might, at some point in the future, regulate social behavior. But before this hope is materialized, what is the function of so many laws? It seems that laws are written in such a way that people cannot obey them, so they will be cast outside the rule of law. Because so many people live at the margins of the rule of law, the destitute and the poor are at the mercy of authorities. The poor need patrons who can defend them. Laws, therefore, serve a double function: they exclude and marginalize most of the population, and they create "natural" leaders, politicians who write these laws, and who can "protect" the poor.

#### Conclusion

This article began with a discussion of the specificity of popular political incorporation in Latin America. Differing from the Western experience where there was a progressive inclusion of popular sectors through recognition of their civil, political, and social rights, in Latin America these rights are used selectively to exclude many. Unlike Western coountries where individual citizens have rights, in Latin America most people have access to state resources not as rights but as privileges, as members of corporatist arrangements or clientelist networks. Because of personalized relations of domination, subaltern sectors have been incorporated through clientelism and populism. By belonging to clientelist and personalized networks, the excluded gain access to the rights to which they are entitled. These political practices, based on relations of domination in everyday life, have become institutionalized in what O'Donnell calls delegative democracies. This type of democracy is not solely the result of democratization under adverse socio-economic conditions caused by dependency and economic crises, as O'Donnell argues. Delegative democracies are also based on political cultures grounded in quotidian relations of domination and accommodation.

The continuous resilience of populism in Latin America should not be a surprise. After all, most people live in poverty and suffer cultural and political exclusions. Populist leaders contine to incarnate the underdog, and to give name to its experiences of exclusion by articulating cultural and symbolic challenges to elites. Moreover, populist movements partially include and "protect" the poor through patronage and clientelist networks. Populist politician's authoritarian appropriation of the people's will and their Manichaean rhetoric of a fundamental ethical struggle between them, as the embodiment of the people, against their enemies, continue to pose fundamental obstacles for the institutionalization of democracy.

The persistence of clientelism, the lack of respect for the rule of law, and the disregard for democratic procedures, does not lead us to a fully pessimistic conclusion. Even the demagogic use of a rhetoric of citizenship rights shows that these cannot be fully ignored, and implies the possibility of implementing practices and discourse based on a system that guarantees fundamental rights. It is important, therefore, to distinguish between democracy understood as practices and discourses that exclude broad sectors of the population, and a normative notion of democracy as an ideal to be attained. But for this new reality to become the norm, everyday relations of domination need to be democratized. Until personalized relations of domination are altered, and citizens begin to be considered as individuals with right and duties, authoritarian populist politics will continue to re-emerge in Latin America.

#### NOTES

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- 2. I use the Spanish term *el pueblo* because its English translation does not capture all of its meanings. In Latin America *el pueblo* does not only refer to all of the members of the nation. It also alludes to the socio-economic differentiation between the affluent and the poor. Finally, it points to relationships of cultural and political oppression and subordination.
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