

The Resurgence of Radical Populism in Latin America

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A specter is haunting Latin America: radical populism. Former presidents such as Fernando Henrique Cardoso and respectable media analysts have cautioned us about the dangers of charismatic and plebiscitary domination for democracy. They have warned us of the risks of irresponsible economic policies. A holy alliance is trying to exorcize the ghost of populism that periodically reappears even though its death has been constantly announced and predicted.¹

In contrast to the apocalyptic warnings of the media analysts and politicians we have an accumulated knowledge of populism that can help us arrive to more nuanced conclusions about its relationships to democracy. Over the last three decades we have seen a renaissance of studies. If previous scholarship based on modernization and dependency theories tied populism to specific economic and social forces,² this new wave of research has uncoupled politics from what were understood as deeper structural determinants. Scholars have shown that populism is not necessarily linked to the transition to modernity or to import-substitution industrialization. The unexpected affinities between populism and neoliberalism stimulated research on the politics of structural adjustment under neo-populist leadership.³ More recently, the nationalist and anti-imperialist rhetoric of Presidents Hugo Chávez of Venezuela, Evo Morales of Bolivia, and Rafael Correa of Ecuador have provoked passionate debates on whether or not we are experiencing a rebirth of radical-national populism.⁴

Unsurprisingly, scholars have tended to reproduce the cleavages produced by populist leaders. What for some are authentic forms of expression of the popular will by leaders who empowered those previously disenfranchised, for others are forms of charismatic, authoritarian, and messianic domination. Behind the smoke screen provoked by the praise for national populism or its condemnation we can identify important debates over the meanings and interpretations of democracy. Instead of arguing that populism is the negation or the essence of democracy this article draws on current experiences to explore the uneasy and ambiguous relations between populism and liberal democracy. Populism has been an important democratizing force that has mobilized those previously excluded. It has incorporated common people into the political community. However, the distinctiveness of these processes of inclusion and democratization needs to be specified. What are the forms of political participation and representation privileged by populism? How is democracy understood by the friends and foes of populism? What are the effects of populist rhetoric for the democratization of society? Why do common folk continue to support populist leaders?

In order to address these questions this paper is divided into three sections. The first analyzes the different ways in which populist actors and their opponents have understood democratic participation and representation. The second studies different meanings of the rhetorical category “the people.” The third questions the depiction of populist followers as masses manipulated by demagogues and offers a different interpretation of why common people continue to support populist leaders.

Populist and Democratic Mobilization and Representation

As Nadia Urbaniti has argued “the debate over the meaning of populism turns out to be a debate over the interpretation of democracy.”⁵ For some scholars such as Margaret Canovan populism constitutes the redemptive face of democracy.⁶ Populist discursive glorification of the people, its critique of elites, and its emotional style aimed at ordinary people draws unmotivated and previously excluded people into the political arena. Canovan is undoubtedly right if we accept the populist self-interpretation that democracy entails the mobilization of those previously excluded. Moreover, populism draws on passions, and on the antagonistic dimensions that according to Chantal Mouffe are constitutive of politics.⁷

Latin American populists have privileged notions of democracy based on the aesthetic and liturgical incorporation of common people in mass rallies more than the institutionalization of popular participation through the rule of law. This explains why the heyday of Latin American populism was associated with moments of collective action such as October 17, 1945 in Argentina when crowds took over streets and plazas to show their support for Colonel Perón, who claimed to be the embodiment of their will.

However as critics of populism have been arguing for along time, mobilization and participation in mass rallies do not necessarily entail autonomy. Gino Germani, for instance, contrasted autonomous collective action with populist heteronomous collective action based on the mobilization in the name of a leader instead of on actors’ own interpretations of their interests.⁸ Critics have maintained that populist redemption tends to be based on the authoritarian appropriation of the people’s will. Because populist politicians claim to embody the people, and the people’s will is not expressed through institutional channels, populist regimes have replaced rational deliberation with plebiscitary acclamation. Moreover, due to its Manichean discourse and the resulting polarization of political and social cleavages populist moments resemble situations of war. The foes and friends of populism see each other as enemies and not as democratic rivals who seek negotiations and agreements.

To disentangle these conflicting interpretations of the relationships between populist mobilization and democratic autonomy I will analyze two examples of what actors have described as authentic forms of democratic mobilization and participation: Bolivarian Circles in Venezuela, and indigenous understandings of true and genuine democracy in Ecuador. As in past radical nationalist-populist experiences, Hugo Chávez has activated the poorest and most marginalized segments of society, which constitute his base of

support. Their mobilization is based on the “myth of the unity of the people . . . under the redemptive figure of Commandant Chávez the current incarnation of the Liberator [Simón Bolívar].”⁹

In speeches and televised talks Chávez has argued that Latin America representative democracy has failed. He has presented an alternative model, a democracy “that promotes participation, and that moves toward [popular] decision making.”¹⁰ Starting in June 2001 in order to promote the revolutionary process President Chávez encouraged the formation of Bolivarian Circles. Their aims were to organize disorganized supporters, and to insert “‘the people into administrating the government’ in order to ‘make participatory and protagonist democracy more effective.’”¹¹ Bolivarian Circles in their heyday counted approximately 2.2 million members, and had an active role in the massive demonstrations that rescued President Chávez when he was temporarily removed from office in April 2002.¹² Until 2004 they continued to have an important role in “organizing common people, channeling demands, and forging ideology.”¹³

Bolivarian Circles have been depicted by Chávez as new forms of genuine democratic grassroots participation, and by the opposition as Circles of Terror who resembled Cuba’s Committees for the Defense of the Revolution. Even though the Circles have decayed in the last years they are an interesting case to analyze the tensions between activation and autonomous participation in populist democracy. In an interesting study Hawkins and Hansen show that mobilization of the Bolivarian Circles is not necessarily based in the “kind of autonomy that democracy requires.”¹⁴ Their study shows that even though Bolivarian Circles do constitute forms of participation for poor people, they often worked as clientelistic networks to transfer resources to neighborhoods where Chávez had supporters. Moreover, they are based on a charismatic mode of linkage that precludes autonomy from the leader.

Other organizations formed under Chavez government have faced a similar fate. María Pilar García-Guadilla argues that new organizations promoted by Chávez such as pensioners, ambulant merchants or peddlers, and those displaced by natural disasters have “tended to make narrow demands that could be resolved on an individual rather than on collective basis and in a clientelist and populist manner rather than through collective negotiation.”¹⁵ However, Steve Ellner has shown how the *chavista* process has encouraged independent and radicalized workers’ action. For instance, during the 2002-03 ten-week general strike against the state oil company (PDVSA) workers restored production levels and “refuted technocratic assumptions by demonstrating the political and technical capacity of non-specialists, at a time when most upper level employees had abandoned work.”¹⁶

Even though conflicts around Ecuadorian democracy have not had the same drama as Venezuelan struggles, three recently elected presidents (Abdalá Bucaram, 1996-97, Jamil Mahuad, 1998-2000, and Lucio Gutiérrez, 2003-05) have been overthrown before completing their terms. As in the past, the military has been the ultimate arbiter of democracy, but unlike in the past, it has not taken power. Following the tradition inaugurated in the 1930s and 40s by Velasco Ibarra’s populism, democracy is still experienced as the occupation of public spaces by people who have been previously

excluded.¹⁷ To illustrate the tensions between populist activation and liberal democratic forms of participation and representation I will focus on how the leaders and intellectuals of the indigenous movement have understood democracy as the occupation of public spaces, and as direct forms of representation of the people's will.

Until 1979 indigenous people were excluded from the vote by literacy requirements. They were also economically and culturally marginalized by one of the most reactionary landlord classes in the Americas. After agrarian reforms that reduced the power of landlords, and with the support of radical priests and leftist activists, they have organized the most powerful indigenous movement in the Americas. Through the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE), formed in 1986, they have staged massive mobilizations. Indigenous protests have not allowed the full implementation of structural reforms, and have promoted important democratic transformations. The public sphere previously dominated by whites and light-skinned mestizos has been democratized. Nowadays indigenous people are presenting their own demands in Congress and in the media. Their struggles also resulted in a new Constitution in 1998 that incorporated collective rights.

The indigenous movement got to power in January 2000 in a coup d'état against President Jamil Mahuad who had presided over a generalized economic crisis and who was charged with deviating state funds to rescue corrupt bankers. After indigenous demonstrators in alliance with junior officers of the army toppled Mahuad he was replaced by the Junta of National Salvation made up of Colonel Lucio Gutiérrez, Antonio Vargas (President of CONAIE), and Carlos Solórzano (former President of the Supreme Court). After pressure by the US Embassy and by the High Command of the Armed Forces, the junta resigned and Mahuad's Vice President Gustavo Noboa was elected president by Congress. During this coup d'état or popular rebellion indigenous people who were not seen as belonging to *el pueblo* became its new incarnation. The *pueblo* became associated with indigenous demonstrators who had taken over highly symbolically charged public spaces such as Congress, the Supreme Court, and the Presidential Palace.

Like many Ecuadorians, indigenous politicians and intellectuals have disdained liberal forms of representation and rule. Echoing leftist critiques of liberal democracy, many indigenous leaders contrasted formal democracy with real democracy based on inclusive social and economic policies. Luis Macas, a historical leader of the movement declared, "democracy lies in justice, in equity, and in harmony," while Antonio Vargas maintained that formal democracy should be replaced by "full democracy."¹⁸ Some of the leaders of the indigenous movement agreed with Gutiérrez' view that true democracy is based on direct forms of election and representation that do not require the mediations of institutions. For instance, he characterized the overthrow of Mahuad as "a sovereign election, a direct election, [and] an election of the majorities."¹⁹ According to Gutiérrez, "sovereignty lies in the people whose will is the basis of authority, and making use of this right. . . without using representative institutions has directly elected its representatives," namely the Junta of National Salvation.²⁰

Indigenous leaders have also claimed that indigenous and non-indigenous politics are fundamentally different. They have argued that the principles of direct democracy, community, respect for others, transparency, consensus, equilibrium, and dialogue characterize indigenous politics. "Participation of the community members in decision making takes place at community council (*cabildo*) meetings. This means that community actions are governed by consent and discussion is held until consensus is reached. . . The best examples of the full expression of collective effort are the various uprisings and marches."²¹

As this example illustrates, indigenous leaders have idealized their communities as institutions free of conflict and domination. Not all voices however are equally valid in community council meetings. Economic, educational differences, the relative power of certain families or *ayllus*, and, above all, gender give authority to some voices in these meetings. Consensus does not always mean the pacific resolution of conflict. Entire families are coerced into acting in marches and uprisings even when they do not support the community's decisions. If they refuse to participate they risk ostracism from their community, they could be fined, or their access to basic services such as drinking water are threatened.

Indigenous politicians and intellectuals, in sum, have tended to privilege populist understandings of democracy as mass rallies and occupations of public spaces. Their glorification of direct democracy in community council meetings has hindered analysis of power relations in their own communities. By privileging communal values over individual rights they have not allowed individuals or families to have the right to dissent, and those who do not follow the mandate of the community council risk different forms of punishment. Their glorification of idealized peasant communities forgets that a large proportion of indigenous people live in cities, and their construct that true Indianness is rural silences alternative constructions of indigenous urban identities. Finally, given their lack of faith in liberal democracy their participation in a coup d'état, and their alliance with a populist nationalist such as Colonel Lucio Gutiérrez was not a surprise because it was framed as a rebellion against an oligarchic and corrupt government.

As David Plotke has argued, populist representation is based on "the unity and total identity between a representative and those who seek to be represented."²² Unlike liberal democracy, which is based on the government of the majority but not in the unanimity of opinions and interests, in populism there are not recognized spaces or institutions to express dissent. Those who do not acclaim the leader could be silenced, or repressed.²³ This imaginary unity between the leader and his followers could lead to authoritarianism, or could end in what Francisco Panizza calls a new version of the negation of politics based on myth of the "unified people at one with its leader."²⁴

Populist representation is based on an extreme personalization of politics. The political field is reduced to a camp where citizens can choose either to acclaim the leader or to be condemned to ostracism as enemies of the leader and hence of the people and of the nation. Personalization transforms leaders into the source of redemption or downfall. Because their responsibility is understood in messianic and millenarian terms, they can only be judged by history and should not be accountable for their daily acts.

Even when leaders such as Chávez have respected some institutional channels for democratic participation like free and open elections, they have tended to concentrate power and to colonize supposedly independent state institutions. Chávez has been charged with mining the independence of the judiciary, the legislature, and other state institutions that supposedly mediate between the President and citizens.²⁵

In their passionate defense of liberal democracy many of Chávez's foes have idealized the democratic nature of Venezuela's political system before his triumph in 1998. They have overlooked its exclusionary characteristics. As a new wave of revisionist scholarship has shown, after 1958 the left was excluded, and AD (Democratic Action) and COPEI (Christian Committee of Independent Political and Electoral Organization) "shared in the exploitation of the country's oil rent. The revenues obtained from the oil economy initially sustained a vast clientelist and corporatist network of interests that were affiliated to AD and COPEI."²⁶ When this model of development could no longer work and Venezuela entered into a prolonged economic crisis, mechanisms of patronage deteriorated, and traditional political parties "increasingly resorted to violence and electoral fraud in order to maintain authority and dominant party hegemony."²⁷ The conclusion of revisionist social scientists is that what has remained in place in Venezuela's current political system is its exclusionary and antidemocratic nature. What has changed is that it has incorporated the poor but "has created a zero sum framework in the view of government opponents."²⁸

As in Venezuela, in Ecuador the notion of democracy has been used by elites to differentiate those who rightfully belong to the national community from those who are seen as its barbaric exterior frontier. The reactions of the media and of some white politicians to the indigenous and military alliance of January 2000 oscillated between racist-paternalistic views that portrayed indigenous people as naïve masses manipulated by the military, to openly racist charges that "Indians had polluted Congress with their bad odor." White elites continue to see populist followers as uncivilized others, and as folk who are not ready yet for democracy. Their role has been imagined as that of enlightened civilizers who will bring dark and ignorant folk slowly toward democratic participation under their guidance and protection.

Populism and "el Pueblo"

Populism is a political style based on a Manichaean rhetoric that constructs the struggle between the people and the oligarchy as an ethical and moral confrontation between good and evil, redemption and downfall. The term the people, however, is profoundly vague and elastic. In order to disentangle its ambiguities it is important to start with Laclau's observation that the people "as operating in populist discourses is never a primary datum but a construct – populist discourse does not simply *express* some kind of original popular identity; it actually *constitutes* the latter."²⁹ The peculiarity of populist discourse is to frame politics as an antagonistic confrontation between the people and the oligarchy. What needs to be researched is, who is excluded and included in these discursive constructs? Who has created these categories?

And, what are the levels of social and or political polarization produced by populist discourse?

In order to analyze the historical shifts of who has been included and excluded in the category the people, I focus on countries with multi-ethnic population such as Bolivia and Ecuador. In these nations populist rhetoric has historically constructed the people as urban and mestizo (ethnically and culturally mixed folk) who had an antagonistic relationship with the oligarchy. The exaltation of poor and mestizo as the essence of the nation repelled white and foreign-leaning elites who were terrified by populist challenges. The populist creation of a virtuous and mestizo nation, however, excluded those of indigenous and African descent. In order to belong to the people and to the nation indigenous and Afro-descendants were encouraged to adopt national-mestizo values, to reject their cultural specificity, and to whiten themselves.³⁰

During the 1952 Bolivian revolution, for example, the “Indian was erased in favor of a mestizo identity,” and languages of class tried to conceal ethnicity.³¹ In recent years, due to the strength of indigenous organizations, the discursive elaborations of who belongs to the people have changed. Evo Morales and his party Movimiento al Socialismo have replaced “the mestizo as the iconic citizen with the *indígena*.”³² Morales success in the 2006 election is explained, in part, by his ability to articulate anxieties provoked by globalization while presenting indigenous people as the essence of the nation. The new confrontation is between those who have struggled to defend Bolivia’s natural resources – indigenous people – and the oligarchy that has transferred them to imperialist and foreign powers.

Similarly if the discursive confrontation between the people and the oligarchy has characterized Ecuadorian politics since the 1930s and 40s, the social groups assigned to these discursive categories have not remained the same. In the 1930s and 40s the people was conceived by Velasco Ibarra in political terms. El pueblo was a political category whose will was not respected in the polls by oligarchic electoral fraud. This political elucidation of the category el pueblo excluded many of the poor who couldn’t vote due to literacy requirements, as well as indigenous people and Afro-Ecuadorians. Since the creation of the populist Concentración de Fuerzas Populares in Guayaquil in the late 1940s, the category the people was constructed as the urban and mestizo poor who had an antagonistic relationship with the oligarchy conceptualized as a social, economic, cultural, and political category. In these discursive elaborations indigenous people and Afro-Ecuadorians continued to be invisible as distinct cultural groups. Since the 1990s, the leaders of the Indian movement and of Black organizations used the category el pueblo to frame their claims. They demanded their right to belong to el pueblo, at the same time that requested their recognition as a different group, culture, or nationality. During the 2000 coup d’état, when an alliance of the indigenous movement with sectors of the armed forces under the leadership of Lucio Gutiérrez overthrew President Mahuad, the *pueblo* became associated with the indigenous people who occupied Congress and other public spaces. Indigenous people became its new incarnation, and even their “vanguard” in the struggle against corruption, and structural adjustment policies.

El pueblo, however, does not only have positive images. Elite perceptions have varied from paternalistic to openly hostile and racist.³³ In Venezuela, for example, the benevolent paternalistic image of the *pueblo* as virtuous yet ignorant and naïve masses that were the foundation of democracy changed with the introduction of structural adjustment policies during Carlos Andrés Pérez second administration (1989-93). His government ended the state subsidies, protective barriers, price controls, and wage regulations “that had constituted the populist model of development for half a century.”³⁴ The hike in the price of domestic gasoline in 1989, as Fernando Coronil shows, broke the bond between the paternalistic state and *el pueblo* based on the shared assumption of the birthright of all Venezuelans for oil rents. Massive demonstrations turned into two days of “massive rioting and looting, escalating from neighborhood groceries stores to commercial centers in Caracas and other cities.”³⁵ After these events the people were transformed into “an unruly and parasitical mass to be disciplined by the state and made productive by the market.”³⁶ This rebellion named as the Caracazo or Sacudón conveyed elite nightmares of the savage, uncivilized, disorganized rabble that invaded the centers of civility. These constructions of the rabble as the antithesis to reason and civilized behavior allowed or justified the state’s fierce and brutal repression that ended in at least 400 deaths.

According to Fernando Coronil, common people had a different reading of these events. They viewed elites as “a corrupt ‘*cogollo*’ that had privatized the state, looted the nation’s wealth, and abused the people. . . The people have been betrayed by their leaders and democracy has become a façade behind which an elite had used the state for its own advantage.”³⁷ Given these constructions of the categories *el pueblo* and the oligarchy, Hugo Chávez was able to build himself and to be erected by his followers as the embodiment of the anti-oligarchic popular caudillo.

One of the peculiarities of populism is the discursive construction of society as an antagonistic field where the virtuous people confronts its enemy the wicked oligarchy. The degree of social and political polarization produced by populist discourse and rhetoric allows a differentiation between experiences. In some cases such as in Chavismo as well as in the classical populist experience of Peronism, the Manichean construction of politics ends in a total and fundamental struggle between the people, as a social and political category, and the oligarchy. Chávez’s nationalism, anti-imperialism, positive glorifications of *el pueblo* as *el soberano*, and his use of mass meetings and mobilization, are similar to the radical national populist experience. But most importantly is that his movement has politicized economic, cultural and ethnic cleavages.³⁸ In other cases, for instance Alberto Fujimori in the 1990s in Peru or Velasco Ibarra in Ecuador in the 1940s, the terms *pueblo* and *oligarquía* had political but not necessarily social contents. Political polarization did not lead to social polarization. Finally, there are mixed-cases, such as Abdalá Bucaram’s and Lucio Gutiérrez elections and short administrations in Ecuador. Despite their attempts to bring traditional elites abroad into their neoliberal project, their personas brought political, social, and even cultural polarization. All of their actions, words, and performances were read through class lines and were portrayed by the upper and middle class as the embodiment of the culture of the rabble.³⁹

Populism cannot be reduced to the words, actions, and strategies of leaders. The autonomous expectations, cultures, and discourses of followers are equally important in understanding the populist bond. In order to comprehend the appeal of populism serious attention should be paid to the words, communications, and conversations between leaders and followers. While doing research on Abdalá Bucaram, I learned that followers had different readings of his discourses and performances. Most did not view him as the leader of the poor that he claimed to be. For many he represented an affront to their superiors. Voting for Bucaram was a good opportunity to act on class resentment and even hatred. For brokers his election meant the chance to be closer to the centers of power to gain access to goods, services, jobs, prestige, etc. Others went out of curiosity, or in order to enjoy a free show and have a good time but not because they supported the self-proclaimed “leader of the poor.”⁴⁰

Leaders and Followers

Despite the increasing number of studies that have shown that the descriptions of the informal sector as disorganized are misleading, many sophisticated works on current populism continue to reproduce these images. Kurt Weyland, for example, has argued that the relationship between populist leaders and their followers is “uninstitutionalized and fluid.”⁴¹ The endurance of views of populist followers as disorganized masses reflects dominant views of populism as extraordinary phenomena. Normal politics based on organization has been contrasted to disorganized populist politics produced by rapid social change, crises, and other social breakdowns that supposedly lie at the roots of populism. Without denying that populism sometimes emerges in conditions of crisis, populism also arises in normal times, and in some nations such as Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela has been a recurrent feature of politics. “Populist movements – not to mention regimes – are thoroughly mundane, even conventional; they do not belong to an extraneous political universe, requiring exceptional analysis or categorization.”⁴²

In contrast to the myths of the disorganized poor, ethnographic research on their strategies of survival and on their politics has demonstrated high levels of organization, and strategic capacities to negotiate with the state and with political parties.⁴³ Because many of the poor occupy land to build houses, and/or sell in the streets breaking city ordinances, they live in conditions of marginalization, and at the border of illegalities. Organization is hence a necessity. In John Cross’s words, “organization is necessary for internal regulation in the absence of legal norms. Land invaders must divide land into lots. . . . Street vendors must at least tacitly recognize the ‘right’ of others to specific locations as well as cooperate in building up their market zone.”⁴⁴ Organization also helps avoid the regulatory control of the state, and later on to negotiate the process of regulation with the state.⁴⁵ State agents also promote organization because it is easier to negotiate with a recognized representative of a group than with a whole array of leaders.

Guillermo O'Donnell and his collaborators have shown that in recently reestablished democracies, with the exceptions of Uruguay and Chile, civil rights are not respected.⁴⁶ Many common people are economically and legally poor. They live under conditions of material and legal deprivation, and in environments of dire violence and insecurity. Because their constitutionally prescribed rights are not respected, the poor rely on politicians and their networks of brokers to have access to a bed in a hospital, a job, or information on where to go and on whose name request a favor. Brokers are the intermediaries between politicians and poor people. They hoard information and resources and are connected to wider networks and cliques of politicians and state officials. Unlike impersonal and objective rights, favors create long-lasting personalized obligations. The distinction between formal and informal organizations is blurred. Formal bureaucratic rules work together with personalist cliques and networks of friends who dispense "favors," including corruption. In situations where social reproduction and even survival is contingent on belonging to personalized networks, is very difficult to sustain the image of the lonely poor actor.

Because the poor can choose to leave a broker and join a different network, brokers' positions are unstable, and the poor can not be seen as a manipulated and captive voting base.⁴⁷ The poor can exit a network, they can also choose to not vote as the broker requested, or might feel compelled to repay a favor to the broker. The notion that clientelist exchanges are just conquests of votes is simplistic. If the poor can choose to leave brokers, brokers can also leave their patrons and join another political party. The unreliable nature of political support gives certain advantages to the poor. For the system of exchanges to work, politicians have to at least deliver some resources. They also need to maintain a name and a reputation that can be used by the poor in order to deal with the gatekeepers of their constitutionally prescribed rights.

Because the informal sector brings to the minds of scholars images of disorganization, they have not researched how populist parties are organized. Many have contrasted formal-bureaucratic party organizations with populist "unmediated relationships with atomized masses."⁴⁸ Since organization is assumed to resemble Weber's ideal-typical characterization,⁴⁹ the absence of bureaucracy presumably means the absence of organization altogether, and the reign of charismatic domination. Populist parties do not fit well into these descriptions. The Peronist Party is organized through a series of informal networks that distribute resources, information, and jobs to the poor.⁵⁰ In conditions of poverty and marginalization participation in problem solving networks allows access to resources. Involvement in these networks also generates and reconstitutes identities. The resilience of Peronism among the poor is partially explained by the party's networks.

Even outsiders who claim that they were elected due to their unmediated relationships with followers owe their elections to political organizations. Chávez, Gutierrez, and Correa got to power not only due to the nature of their anti-establishment rhetoric. They won elections because of the support of well-organized left-wing political parties, and social movements.⁵¹

Conclusions

Populism has had ambiguous relationships with democracy. On the one hand, it is a form of protest and resistance to modernization projects that in the name of supposedly universalistic and rationalist projects have excluded the poor and the non-whites, who have been portrayed as the incarnation of barbarism. Against exclusionary projects, populism has vindicated the worth of the poor and the excluded. Instead of being considered obstacles to progress, they are constructed as the essence of the nation. But because “the people” is a discursive elaboration of politicians, it is important to analyze who is included and who is excluded in these constructs. The category of “the people” is constructed by leaders who claim to embody it. This authoritarian appropriation of the people and their values has had contradictory meanings. On the one hand populism has restored and valued the cultural worth of common people. But on the other, leaders have appropriated the meanings of the popular and tried to impose their versions of popular authenticity.

Populist representation is based on the identity of the people, seen as a unity with one voice and interest, with the leader embodying national and democratic values. In this identification of the people as one with the egocrat there are no institutional and legal spaces to present the diversity of interests of modern societies. Those who are not included in the leader’s vision of the people their values are either belong to the anti-nation or do not exist in these constructs. Those categorized as the oligarchy or those who are not imagined as part of the people lack institutional spaces to express their voices and their dissent. They do not have rights, because those who are against the leader are considered to be enemies of the nation and of the people, whose goals and values are those of the leader.

Even though populist discourse and representation can have authoritarian elements, populism is lived as profoundly democratic. Populism mobilizes passions and incorporates those previously excluded. However, populist mobilization does not always respect the norms and institutions of liberal democracy because its norms and procedures are seen as impediments to the expression of the authentic and homogenous will of the people, which is in fact none other than that of the leader.

Populism is not an historical aberration or a deviation from universal patterns of modernization. More likely, as recent scholarship has argued, populism is constitutive of democracy.⁵² On the one hand, as Kurt Weyland has argued it is a strategy that leaders can use to get elected and to rule.⁵³ On the other hand, it is built on emotions and the differentiation between “us” and “them” that characterize politics generally.

The resurgence of national populism is not a surprise. The new wave of populist leaders such as Hugo Chávez, Evo Morales, Ollanta Humala, Rafael Correa has rejected the neoliberal policies of their neo-populist predecessors. They have also rescued old nationalist banners. Populism has historically arisen as a response to the exclusion of many from the polity. The persistence of social and economic exclusions exacerbated by neoliberal economic policies, and, in particular, the difficulty of the poor in accessing their constitutional rights, explains its resilience. Even though the concrete

manifestations of populism and the levels of polarization it entails vary in different experiences, populism continues to be a recurrent feature of democracies where common people's rights are not enforced or respected.

NOTES

1. See for instance the special issue on populism in *Letras Libres* 7, no. 75 (2005).
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4. Steve Ellner, "Revolutionary and Non-Revolutionary Paths of Radical Populism: Directions of the Chavista Movement in Venezuela," *Science & Society* 69, no. 2 (2005): 160–90; Teodoro Petkoff, "Las dos izquierdas," *Nueva Sociedad* 197 (May-June 2005): 114–29; Carlos Vilas, "la izquierda latinoamericana y el surgimiento de regímenes nacional-populares," *Nueva Sociedad* 197 (May-June 2005): 84–100.
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6. Margaret Canovan, "Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy," *Political Studies* 47 (1999): 2–16.
7. Chantal Mouffe, "The 'End of Politics' and the Challenge of Right Wing Populism," in Francisco Panizza, ed., *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy* (London: Verso, 2005): 51.
8. Germani, *Política y Sociedad*.
9. Nelly Arenas and Luis Gómez Calcaño, "Los Círculos Bolivarianos. El mito de la unidad del pueblo," *Revista Venezolana de Ciencia Política* 25 (January-June 2004): 6.
10. Hugo Chávez in Edgardo Lander, "Venezuelan Social Conflict in a Global Context," *Latin American Perspectives* 32, no. 2 (2005): 31.
11. Hugo Chávez in María Pilar García-Guadilla, "Civil Society: Institutionalization, Fragmentation, Autonomy" in Steve Ellner and Daniel Hellinger, eds., *Venezuelan Politics in the Chávez Era. Class, Polarization, and Conflict*, (Boulder: Lynn Rienner, 2003): 192.
12. Kirk Hawkins and David Hansen, "Dependent Civil Society: The Círculos Bolivarianos in Venezuela," *Latin American Research Review* 41, no. 1 (2006): 103.
13. Arenas and Gómez Calcaño, "Los círculos bolivarianos," 6; Hawkins and Hansen, "Dependent Civil Society," 103.
14. Hawkins and Hansen, "Dependent Civil Society," 127.
15. García-Guadilla, "Civil Society," 193.
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