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“Speak for Me”: Populist Leadership in Latin America and the Mirage of Horizontal Politics

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Populist charismatic leaders have power to mobilise the people. According to Laclau (1977), the articulation of a populist discourse, where a leader will typically claim to speak on behalf of the people, can provide a valid alternative to an increasingly discordant dominant ideological discourse. Furthermore, and this is particularly true of Latin America, populist leadership has been most successful in political terrains where first, the political culture has traditionally endorsed personalised forms of leadership and second, where political institutions have traditionally been weak. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that the ever-present spectre of authoritarianism continues to undermine the fragile democracies of Latin America. It is also true that such forms of leadership pose serious constraints to the possibility of a shift towards more horizontal organisational forms in politics. But, as this paper argues, there are problems with the assumptions that radical democrats make, particularly in regard to representation and popular sovereignty; furthermore, the fundamental premise that ‘the people’ are able to organise and lead themselves seems unduly optimistic. It is concluded that leadership is essential to the political process, and in particular that populist and/or charismatic leaders are effective agents of political transformation, whilst acknowledging that they can be dangerous to egalitarian socio-political causes attempting to enhance the autonomy of civil societies. These dynamics are illustrated by the ambiguity inherent in the role played by Mexico’s Subcomandante Marcos: whilst he deliberately avoids populist tactics that might undermine the ideals of horizontal anti-hierarchical politics, ironically it is his personal appeal that has been crucial in promoting his political message.

Keywords: populism; populist leadership; radical democracy; horizontal politics; political transformation; Subcomandante Marcos

Introduction

The charismatic populist leader fascinates, mystifies and excites. Populist leaders etch their mark deeply and indelibly on the canvas of national and global history; often colourful and flamboyant, they are successful at forging a bond with their followers that rarely fails to include moral or religious overtones. Populist leaders affirm to be speaking for and with the people; beyond mere representation, they claim to personify the people and to be prepared to faithfully follow something relatively similar to what

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Rousseau referred to as the 'general will'.¹ In the midst of this tumultuous identification and bonding process, institutional boundaries and conventions are often disregarded, if not derided, in favour of unmediated contact with their citizens. The power that such leaders are bestowed with is controversial for scholars of contemporary politics, for a number of reasons. It tends to offend those amongst us who, as good egalitarians, disapprove of power inequalities or imbalances; it upsets the conservatives, for whom power should be treasured but not flaunted; and communitarians are, of course, alarmed by the apparent triumph of any form of rampant individualism. Finally, those who have a religious disposition are dismayed by the claims of some of these charismatic leaders that their great historic mission is entrusted to them by either a god or inevitable destiny for the good of humanity.

Above all, populist leadership is problematic for democracies. Those who believe in representational democracy are faced with the constant dilemma that populist or charismatic leadership solicits when present this context: democracy as a political process implies the underlying and continuous consent of the governed, hence while these democratic leaders are given considerable power by the electorate, they are also meant to be constricted in a number of ways, institutionally and even ethically, in order to be accountable to the people who, in theory, have sovereignty.² Although this tension is to some degree present in any type of leadership within a democratic system, given that leaders are individuals operating in an institutional framework, it is more intense in the case of populist and/or charismatic leaders, since they tend to weaken institutional constraints and captivate the attention and resources of the media, so that the latter concentrates disproportionately on these individuals rather than on the democratic process or on scrutinising the actions of the government.

The situation becomes even more troublesome in democratic formulations that, disillusioned with and hence critical of the representative path, attempt to challenge vertical organisational forms deemed 'insufficiently democratic', seeking to replace them with allegedly more egalitarian and flexible structures. The aim of these

¹ However, as Urbinati notes, for Rousseau reason unifies the citizens rather than a demagogue, therefore it is 'obedience to public reason that makes for political autonomy, to submit to the will of a demagogue would mean the people become slave'. See Nadia Urbinati, 'Democracy and Populism', *Constellations* 5, no. 1 (March 1998): 121-122.

² John Kane and Haig Patapan, 'The Challenge of Dissident Democratic Leadership', in *Dissident Democrats: The Challenge of Democratic Leadership in Asia*, eds John Kane, Haig Patapan and Benjamin Wong (New York: Macmillan, 2008), 10-13.

horizontal forms is to encourage grassroots participation rather than reliance on individuals or elites so that the people would have more control over political outcomes. Robinson and Tormey explain what is being proposed: ‘Instead of seeing plurality and even incommensurability as a threat to the political coherence of the new movements, we should see it as an opening, a possibility for a new kind of politics which not only challenges the oppressive logic of the existing social system, but which also challenges the “necessity” of *any* system of domination’.³ Under these circumstances, the presence of populist and/or charismatic leaders becomes completely antithetical, despite the fact that such leaders often argue that they are more democratic than their non-populist counterparts, precisely because they bypass inept institutions in favour of a more direct link to the citizens, whom they claim to *embody* rather than *represent*.

There is, to be sure, significant discordance between the representational and the radical strands of democracy, a discordance that accentuates the direct or participatory model as the more fragile of the two, with regard to the underlying assumptions that it is predicated upon. While the representative system relies on a limited number of individuals to act as trustee-style representatives of the people and does not demand constant input and engagement by the latter, the direct/participatory model assumes that the people are not only able *and* willing to contribute to the public sphere but also to do so in an egalitarian fashion that shuns any possible contest for power.⁴ Political action, according to this view, should come from below and should not require constant guidance from an individual political figure or from a vanguard elite group dictating from above; at the most, if there has to be representation, it should be delivered via a delegate rather than a trustee. There should be, radical democrats tell us, no vertical hierarchies that perpetuate hegemonic structures; or homogenous entities that impose one identity for all. Evidently, in this scheme any concept of ‘the people’ as a unified entity that does not admit diversity is heresy. Instead, radical democrats insist, there are many voices, none of which is more important than others

³ Andrew Robinson and Simon Tormey, ‘The Conflicting Logics of Transformative Politics’, <<http://homepage.ntlworld.com/simon.tormey/articles/logicsweb.pdf>> (accessed 11 April 2008), 3.

⁴ I will refer to participatory, deliberative and direct forms of democracy as ‘radical democracy’ for the sake of brevity.

and therefore none of which should speak on behalf of all. The outcome would be, as expressed by Marcos, a 'world in which there is room for many worlds'.⁵

In this paper I argue that populist forms of leadership and vertical modes of political organisation are indispensable to political action and furthermore, that they can be effective catalysts of political innovation. Extending this argument, I contend that the premises of radical democracies (upon which their critiques of populist leadership or indeed any type of personalistic leadership are predicated) are not tenable. That is, underlying their contestation of notions of representation and popular sovereignty is the clear assumption that 'the people' are able and willing to politically organise and lead themselves. Even if that was the case, if the people were willing and able to politically organise and lead themselves, would they renounce the universalisation of their political message and the race for political control? And if the answer to these questions was positive, would the resulting 'politics of critical reflection' be conducive to effective and practical outcomes?

By this I do not mean that civil society is doomed to perpetual political apathy, on the contrary, revolutionary ideas, activities and discourses are never confined to selected socio-political spaces. What I am saying is that political activity or change requires leadership (sometimes of the populist flavour) and a degree of vertical or hierarchical organisation, at least at some stages of the process. Also, it is necessary to combine critical reflection with political action, which inevitably means challenging the existing power structures rather than ignoring or attempting to transcend them. Even Robinson and Tormey, referring to Michels' famous argument, acknowledge the difficulties of political formations that are undefined and decentralised:

It is easier to pursue power if the lines of power and accountability are 'clear' with a single leader able to project the message of the party without contradiction or mixed messages occluding the minds of potential supporters or voters. It is easier to maintain power where decision-making is confined to a small numbers of officials. In this sense the quest for 'effectiveness' makes desirable, and under certain conditions, necessitates the elaboration of vertical political structures.⁶

It is perfectly feasible to claim that revolutionary or transformative political causes, by which I mean causes that aim to substantially change the political system, have benefited from charismatic and/or populist leaders or highly symbolic political

⁵ Subcomandante Marcos, 'The Fourth World War has Begun', *Le Monde Diplomatique*, September 1998 <<http://mondediplo.com/1997/09/marcos>> (accessed 2 April 2008).

⁶ Robinson and Tormey, 'The Conflicting Logics of Transformative Politics', 5.

figures like Che Guevara, Nelson Mandela or Mahatma Gandhi, who have been able to formulate an alternative view of how a society should or could be governed in opposition to the status quo. Even Perón's corporatist reforms were innovative and benefited the workers rather than the oligarchy, despite the fact that the underlying agenda did not include empowering the masses. I am suggesting that populist/charismatic forms of leadership are extremely effective catalysts of political change, particularly at specific historical moments when conditions of political crisis or stagnation prevail.

Of course, while populist and/or charismatic forms of leadership have the potential to galvanise political transformation, it cannot be seriously disputed that they also have the potential to undermine the very same causes they so zealously personify, particularly those causes that attempt to disperse power or aim to turn the ideal of the 'sovereignty of the people' into a reality. In other words, as I have argued elsewhere, populist and charismatic forms of leadership are often driven by an inherent tension between the transformative and personalistic dimension.⁷ Nevertheless, the longevity and the persistence of these forms of leadership is especially noticeable in systems where weak institutions are often not able to provide prompt and adequate political responses to changing conditions. For these reasons, the challenge that populist leadership presents to democracies is best analysed in the context of Latin American politics, where the phenomenon of populism takes a remarkably different form to its counterpart in Eastern Europe and North America, where it arises in totally different conditions.⁸ Taggart, for example, argues that in Europe populism is far more fragmented and episodic, and, as Laclau notes, it is often based on issues of ethnicity; most importantly, it has tended to develop in a context of relatively strong and stable party systems.⁹

By contrast, in Latin America party systems and other democratic institutions have traditionally been relatively weak while, paradoxically, civil society has been relatively active, not only in terms of ideas but also in terms of collective

⁷ Daniela di Piramo, introduction to *Gift of Grace: Revolutionising Charismatic Authority in Latin America*, (PhD, Griffith University, 2006), 4, 8.

⁸ Kurt Weyland, 'Neoliberal Populism in Latin America and Eastern Europe', *Comparative Politics* 31, no. 4 (July 1999): 383.

⁹ Paul Taggart, 'Populism and Representative Politics in Contemporary Europe', *Journal of Political Ideologies* 9, no. 3 (October 2004): 270, 276; Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, (London: Verso, 2005), 193.

organisation. The forces that coexist and drive the Latin American political process are extremely diverse and contradictory, resulting in a political landscape that is often dramatic and volatile, characterised by a multitude of revolutions, rebellions and *golpes de estado*, charismatic and colourful leaders, daring guerrillas, extreme ideologies, over-powerful militaries, versatile parties and unstable governments. The fact that civil society in many of these countries is vibrant and dynamic is probably simultaneously a cause of and a response to the frequency of authoritarian and military regimes. Furthermore, Western interpretations of democracy that we normally take for granted are in fact open to debate. For instance, the Cuban and the Venezuelan political systems are regarded by many as blatantly autocratic regimes, while others judge them to be successful examples of direct forms of democracy. Whether the price has been far too high in terms of human rights violations remains a contested matter. Yet, whichever way one chooses to interpret these political phenomena, the fact remains that Latin America is the world's laboratory of experimental and contradictory politics.

While in Europe, in America and even in Australia populism tends to be the transient expression of discontent of one class (for example, Pauline Hanson's One Nation briefly appealed to a section of Australia's rural population), in Latin America it arises as a systemic feature. A number of historical, geographical and cultural factors have coalesced over the centuries to produce *caudillismo*, a loose political system of regional networks controlled by local 'strongmen'. Power was typically concentrated in the hands of individuals or *caudillos*, whilst political institutions never managed to achieve the degree of legitimacy that is expected of Western democracies. After the Independence Wars, when more centralised political systems did develop, the executive rather than the legislative or the judiciary has remained in almost absolute control, with minimal application of the concept of checks and balances. The excessive power of the executive is reflected in the weakness of institutions such as political parties, which in Latin America are a great deal less effective than those of Western liberal democracies and are often based on the figure of a leader rather than on an ideology or a class. The power of the executive is also evident in the way a number of Latin American constitutions contain provisos for the purpose of easy suspension of civil and human rights guarantees.¹⁰ Yet, some of those constitutions

¹⁰ George Pendle, *A History of Latin America* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 127-128.

are far more advanced than those of Western democracies and inclusive of socio-economic rights as well as political and civil ones, once again demonstrating the contradictory currents that underlie the Latin American political process and its institutions.

In the 1930s and 1940s depression hit this continent, reflecting the worldwide trend of the time. The consensus in the literature is that the early modern form of populism (classical populism) arose as a reaction to imperialistic exploitation and the crisis of liberal economics, and manifested itself as an expression of nationalistic sentiment that condemned the export-oriented dependency development model. Sections of the middle classes politically detached themselves from the hegemonic oligarchy and sought multi-class coalitions in order to be able to articulate a program of structural transformation.¹¹ It is therefore fairly safe to state that, *in general*, the preconditions for Latin American early modern populism were urbanisation, industrialisation and disillusionment or the demise of trust in the ruling classes and institutions such as political parties.¹² Modern history confirms that Latin America is nothing if not fertile ground for personalistic forms of leadership and, as demonstrated by Fidel Castro and many others, the presence of a charismatic figure both stimulates and draws strong boundaries that around the extent and the nature of political change.

The first section of this paper locates populist leadership within the broad phenomenon of populism and identifies some of its features. The second section is devoted to a discussion of how populist leadership responds differently to the liberal representative and radical variants of democracy. In the case of the representative variant, the response is the result of disillusionment with the perceived gap between rhetoric and reality; in other words, the issue is one of the limitations of this version of democracy. In the case of the radical variant, populism proposes a different solution to what is essentially (and ironically) diagnosed as the same problem, that is, institutional inadequacy and subsequently, the need to 'democratise' representative democracy itself. The issue here, by contrast, is not one of limitations but of differing logics with regards to the concepts of representation and popular sovereignty and, by

¹¹ James M. Malloy, 'Authoritarianism and Corporatism in Latin America: The Modal Pattern', in *Authoritarianism and Corporatism in Latin America*, ed. James M. Malloy (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977), 9.

¹² Vladimir Tismaneanu, 'Hypotheses on Populism: The Politics of Charismatic Protest', *East European Politics and Societies* 14, no. 2 (2000): 14.

implication, a different set of premises with regards to the fundamental notion of ‘the people’.

Finally, these conceptual observations are illustrated by briefly drawing on the case of Subcomandante Marcos from Mexico’s Zapatista Movement, whose cult status and prominent position as ‘spokesperson’ of a progressive horizontal movement relegate him to an ambiguous political space. Although Marcos can hardly be described as a ‘populist’, he certainly is a charismatic figure and one who has successfully used his personal appeal in politically strategic ways. At the same time, he has been unwilling to use populist tactics and has deliberately avoided the populist style, discourse and technique. It is only by choice that Marcos is not a populist leader: he could have easily been another Chávez. Therefore, by examining the path that Marcos has treaded or the political space he has created (assuming he has succeeded in this endeavour), it is possible to understand the allure and the dangers of charismatic leadership or, indeed, of any type of personalism. At the same time, the limitations of the radical variants of democracy become evident: some of the people might participate in the political game some of the time, particularly where institutions have failed to address their concerns, but this is different to saying that the people can lead themselves as a matter of fact on consistent and continuous basis. In other words, civil society might finally be awake, but it is not ‘out and about doing politics’ and we are left to wonder if the space Marcos has created will be utilised in the manner he envisaged.¹³

Romancing the Masses: the Populist Phenomenon in Latin America

Most scholars of populism are familiar with the difficulties involved in providing a satisfactory definition of the phenomenon. Laclau in *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory: Capitalism, Fascism, Populism*, for example, has been more than eloquent on the various definitional possibilities.¹⁴ The situation has been exacerbated by the fact that populism has taken different forms, from classical (1930s-1960s), to neo-liberal (1970s-1980s) to the contemporary left-wing version (1990s-present day). In preference to type-based taxonomies that never manage to satisfactorily account for

¹³ See Subcomandante Marcos, ‘Ski Mask and Other Masks’, in *Voice of Fire – Communiqués and Interviews from the Zapatista National Liberation Army*, eds B. Clarke and R. Clifton (Berkeley: New Earth Publications, 1994), 58–59.

¹⁴ Ernesto Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory: Capitalism, Fascism, Populism* (London: NLB, 1977), 143-198.

all types of populism, conceptual clarity is best served by feature-based typologies.¹⁵ For example, in 1996 Roberts put forward a typology of populism that included the following features: personalistic and often charismatic leadership; a multi-class political coalition; a top-down process of political mobilisation that either bypasses institutionalised forms of mediation or subordinates them to more direct links between leader and mass; an eclectic ideology characterised by an anti-establishment discourse and an economic project characterised by economic nationalism and extensive state intervention.¹⁶

First, it should be noted that the socio-economic program of the above typology is strongly defined as an ensemble of nationalistic economic policies that have as their centrepiece ISI (import substitution industrialisation). Moreover, this ensemble emphasises state protection and the subsidisation of basic industry, restrictions on foreign investment, regulation of labour markets and the provision of a range of social benefits. In some cases, as in Argentina, this process entailed corporatist multi-class coalitions between the urban working class, the state and the industrial bourgeoisie promoters of ISI.¹⁷ This whole economic project does not, of course, fit either the neo-liberal or the most contemporary forms of populism; most scholars have agreed that populism does not correlate to a specific economic policy or project.¹⁸ Moreover, the limitations of dependency theories as explanations of populist-authoritarian regimes were evident with the collapse of ISI-based economic projects in the 1980s, after the asynchronism-based approach taken by scholars like Germani that links populism to modernisation theory was similarly superseded.¹⁹ All in all, it seems clear

¹⁵ For instance, in *Populism* Canovan offers a type-based typology that distinguishes between populist democracy, populist dictatorship, reactionary populism and politicians' populism; see Margaret Canovan, *Populism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981).

¹⁶ See Kenneth M. Roberts, 'Neoliberalism and the Transformation of Populism in Latin America: the Peruvian Case', *World Politics* 48, no. 1 (October 1996): 88.

¹⁷ Paul Cammack, 'The Resurgence of Populism in Latin America', *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 19 (2000): 151.

¹⁸ Knight, for instance, objects to the alignment of early populism with ISI, claiming that populism is not simply the political counterpart of ISI. See Alan Knight, 'Populism and Neo-Populism in Latin America, Especially Mexico', *Journal of Latin American Studies* 30, no. 2 (May 1998): 238-9. Similarly, at a later time Roberts argues against the use of specific economic policies in definitions of populism. See Kenneth M. Roberts, 'Latin American Populist Revival', *SAIS Review* 27, no. 1 (2007): 5.

¹⁹ See Guillermo O'Donnell, *Modernization and Bureaucratic Authoritarianism: Studies in South American Politics* (Berkeley: Institute of International Studies of the University of California, Berkeley, 1973); Gino Germani, *Política y Sociedad en una Época de Transición: De la Sociedad Tradicional a la Sociedad de Masas* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Paidós, 1965); Francisco Weffort and Aníbal Quijano *Populismo, Marginalización y Dependencia* (San José, Costa Rica: Editorial

that populism is a dish that can be served with any economic ideology, which means, as Weyland has suggested, that a political rather than an economic approach best accommodates its conceptual flexibility.²⁰

At the time, modernisation and dependency theories had placed considerable emphasis on social classes: populism was generally considered to be the inter-class alliance of popular sectors, middle classes and emergent elites against the oligarchy, as the work of distinguished Argentine scholar Torcuato di Tella revealed.²¹ Roberts follows Germani in emphasising the role of social classes, by stating that populism emerges when ‘substantial sectors of the lower classes are available for political mobilization but are not effectively represented by established parties and do not possess institutionalised forms of political self-expression’.²² By contrast, other studies have attempted to move beyond class. As early as 1977 Malloy pointed out that the new political support base constructed to address the disequilibrium within the old power blocs is achieved by mobilising broad popular support on the basis of citizenship rather than class. Furthermore, De la Torre noted that neo-populist leaders seemed to gather more support from disorganised masses; Menem, for instance, appealed to the people as ‘brothers and sisters’ rather than as ‘workers’.²³

Recent scholarship has not revived ‘class’ as an analytical category, on the contrary, the concept of ‘the people’ seems to have well and truly taken over.²⁴ While there is no agreement as to what exactly constitutes the ‘people’, Taggart has offered the most interesting definition with the metaphor of the ‘heartland’, a retrospective culturally homogeneous construction of the socio-political imaginary. In general, lack of definitional adeptness cannot be blamed for the vagueness of the term, given that

Universitaria Centroamericana, 1977) and Octavio Ianni, *La Formación del Estado Populista en América Latina* (México: Ediciones Era, 1975).

²⁰ Kurt Weyland, ‘Clarifying a Contested Concept: Populism in the Study of Latin American Politics’, *Comparative Politics* 34, no. 1 (October 2001): 9.

²¹ Torcuato di Tella, ‘Populism in the Twentieth Century’, *Government and Opposition* 32, no. 2 (April 1997): 187-200.

²² Kenneth M. Roberts, ‘Populism and Democracy in Latin America’, (paper presented at conference ‘Challenges to Democracy in the Americas’, Carter Centre, Atlanta, GA, 16-18 October 2000), 2-3, <<http://www.ciaonet.org/conf/car30/car30g.pdf>> (accessed 7 May 2006).

²³ See Malloy, ‘Authoritarianism and Corporatism in Latin America: The Modal Pattern’, p. 13 and Carlos De la Torre, *Populist Seduction in Latin America – The Ecuadorian Experience* (Athens: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 2000), 126-127.

²⁴ Margaret Canovan, ‘Trust the people! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy’, *Political Studies* 47, no. 1 (March 1999), 2-16; Cas Mudde, ‘The Populist Zeitgeist’, *Government and Opposition* 39, no. 4 (September 2004): 543; Taggart, ‘Populism and Representative Politics in Contemporary Europe’, 274; Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 67-128 and Koen Abts and Stefan Rummens, ‘Populism versus Democracy’, *Political Studies* 55, no. 2 (2007): 406.

this opaqueness conveniently allows the ‘people’ to be defined according to what suits the agenda of the moment. But no matter how they are defined, the ‘people’ emerge as a virtuous and legitimate entity endowed with ‘common sense’ in contrast to the inefficient, corrupt and indolent establishment or oligarchy and its accompanying bureaucracy.

So far, we have established that a political approach is best and that the following are defining features of populism: the presence of a personalistic and preferably charismatic leader, an entity called ‘the people’ mobilised against the establishment, a corresponding anti-establishment discourse and minimal mediating institutions between the leader and the people. Provided the elements above are included, populism can be considered a movement, an ideology, a political process, a form of political communication, a discourse or a style of leadership. Nevertheless, many scholars have interpreted populism as primarily a leadership style or a political phenomenon headed by a strong leader whose rhetoric or message to the followers will frequently include themes of nationalism, popular sovereignty, political identity, political inclusion and material benefits. The typical populist leader personalises politics and speaks to the people in a direct and passionate manner, appealing to patriotic and self-related values. As Conniff observes, ‘populism, it seemed, was an all-embracing preoccupation with leadership, one that also created a natural resonance among the masses’.²⁵ Often populist leaders are described as charismatic, or at least as possessing a remarkable degree of popular appeal. Canovan, for instance, mentions the emotional ingredient present in populist politics that is typically centred on a charismatic leader and Knight confirms the charismatic element prevalent in populism.²⁶ For Conniff, the fact that the masses trust the leader above discredited institutions indicates that ‘charisma bestowed on the new leader the right to exercise power on behalf of the people’.²⁷ Although leadership is recognised as an important element in populist regimes by most of the relevant literature, some disagree on the extent of its importance²⁸.

²⁵ Michael L. Conniff, ‘Urban Populism in Twentieth-Century Politics’ in *Problems in Modern Latin American History – A Reader*, eds John Charles Chasteen and Joseph S. Tulchin (Washington: SR Books, 1994), 103.

²⁶ Canovan ‘Trust the people! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy’, 6 and Knight, ‘Populism and Neo-Populism in Latin America, Especially Mexico’, 231.

²⁷ Conniff, ‘Urban Populism in Twentieth-Century Politics’, 98.

²⁸ See Roberts, ‘Populism and Democracy in Latin America’, 19-29, for instance, who argues that populism is not simply the result of personalistic trends in Latin American political culture. Di Tella also plays down the importance of the charismatic leader; see Torcuato di Tella, ‘An Introduction to

Whilst charismatic or strong leadership is an essential element, a description of populism as a leadership style is deemed to be too 'thin' a definition.²⁹ After all, it should be remembered that many leaders adopt a populist style; this, however, does not necessarily qualify either them or their regime as 'populist'.³⁰ The adoption of populist tactics by democratic leaders in Western democracies has been particularly noticeable in the last decade or so. It is necessary, however, to distinguish between an 'authentic' populist regime and a democratic regime within which the president or the prime minister adopts populist tactics. For this reason, if one insists on defining populism as a leadership style, a number of other specifications become necessary. For instance, while Knight argues that populism refers to a political style, he does supplement this definition by stipulating the existence of an intense bond between the leader and his followers, usually associated with rapid periods of mobilisation and crisis.³¹ These 'supplementary conditions' would more than likely narrow the qualification of 'populist' to leaders of populist regimes rather than to leaders who adopt populist tactics.

Similarly, definitions that refer to populism as primarily a political process generally include the concept of strong leadership. For instance, De la Torre emphasises populism as a form of political incorporation or a process of inclusion, based on weak citizenship rights, strong appeal of leaders and mobilisation of the people.³² Similarly, Roberts qualifies populism as a as a top-down process of political mobilisation, further specifying that it 'often feeds off a direct (or 'unmediated') relationship between a leader and a largely unorganised (at least initially) mass of followers'.³³ Indeed, leaders are so intrinsic to populism that Laclau assigns them the

the Argentine System' in *Political Power in Latin America: Seven Confrontations*, eds Richard R. Fagen and Wayne A. Cornelius (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1970), 112.

²⁹ See for instance Jan Jagers and Stefaan Walgrave, 'Populism as Political Communication Style: An Empirical Study of Political Parties' Discourse in Belgium', *European Journal of Political Research* 46, no. 3 (May 2007): 319.

³⁰ Mudde, for instance, qualifies Blair and a host of other leaders as 'populists'. See Mudde, 'The Populist Zeitgeist', 550.

³¹ See Knight, 'Populism and Neo-Populism in Latin America, Especially Mexico', 226-227. All political systems are, in a sense, in constant crisis, although it is possible to identify historical junctures at which political transformation is the only feasible alternative to resolve a situation of *extreme* crisis.

³² De la Torre's argument is that in Latin America the pattern of political inclusion is not primarily based on citizenship rights as it is in the West, but on populist rhetoric and style of political mobilization. See De la Torre, *Populist Seduction in Latin America – The Ecuadorian Experience*, 117, 141.

³³ Roberts, 'Populism and Democracy in Latin America', p. 6. It should be noted that Knight demystifies the notion of 'unmediated mobilisation', arguing that the simple leader-led dichotomy

status of ‘empty signifiers’, or unifying symbols essential to the construction of a homogeneous ‘people’.³⁴

The characterisation of populism as an ideology deserves attention. If by ‘ideology’ we mean a package of values that integrates the social, economic and political realm, then this is perhaps the weakest and the least popular interpretation of populism in the literature, given the widespread perception that the phenomenon in question *almost* lacks an ideology or that it is ideologically eclectic, imprecise or amorphous.³⁵ As Stanley points out, we are once again in the realm of ‘thin definitions’.³⁶ Although populist regimes have the reputation for being conveniently flexible in terms of both premises and promises,³⁷ I argue that they generally do have a program, even if this program is articulated by a leader as secondary to his personal ascendancy and even if it is accepted by the followers largely (but not necessarily exclusively) as the result of the influence this leader has on them (rather than on its own merits). It is also true that populist programs are amenable to radical change (Peronism under Menem is a good example), but we must not forget that even liberalism is not exactly a consistent or homogenous body of political thought. Nevertheless, the most reasonable avenue in terms of ideology (defined as above) is to refer to populism as a ‘thin-centred ideology’, something that whilst reasonable, is not particularly useful when seeking conceptual clarity.

The meaning of ‘ideology’ acquires more depth in Laclau’s work. In this context, populism is conceived as an alternative discourse that arises in response to the crisis of the dominant ideological discourse as the latter becomes increasingly discordant with and unresponsive to the surrounding socio-political conditions. This idea links discourse to power relations and places leadership in a pivotal position, since

is always transcended in practice, as was clearly the case with Perón’s labour leaders and Cárdenas’ *caciques*. See Knight ‘Populism and Neo-Populism in Latin America, Especially Mexico’, 228.

³⁴ Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 99-100.

³⁵ See David Tamarin, ‘Yregoyen and Perón: The Limits of Argentine Populism’ in *Latin American Populism in Comparative Perspective*, ed. M. L. Conniff (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982), 34; Luis Ricardo Davila, ‘The Rise and Fall of Populism in Venezuela’, *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 19, no. 2 (April 2000): 236; Tismaneanu, ‘Hypotheses on Populism: The Politics of Charismatic Protest’, 11; Luke March, ‘From Vanguard of the Proletariat to *Vox Populi*: Left-populism as a “Shadow” of Contemporary Socialism’, *SAIS Review* 27, no. 1 (Winter-Spring 2007): 64-65 and Conniff, ‘Urban Populism in Twentieth-Century Politics’, 98. The interpretation of populism as an ideology might derive from the North American political tradition, where ‘populism’ denoted a rural-based movement with specific goals. An example is the Farmers’ Alliance that was formed in Texas in 1876.

³⁶ Ben Stanley, ‘The Thin Ideology of Populism’, *Journal of Political Ideologies* 13, no. 1 (February 2008): 95–110.

³⁷ Tismaneanu, ‘Hypotheses on Populism: The Politics of Charismatic Protest’, 13.

populism is the inclusion of the people in a leader's synthetic-antagonistic discourse 'which seeks to confront the power bloc as a whole, in order to assert its hegemony'.³⁸ For Laclau, political discourse is the means to the construction of a political subject and, subsequently, political identity and consciousness. Leaders become a symbolic projection of the national ideal, as well as paternal figures protecting and validating the worth of their people as human beings. What is virtually a dialogue between leader and followers will often result in the construction of a collective identity and a set of common values; sometimes the leader will identify himself or herself as part of this collective identity, as a working-class person of humble origins with strong personal commitment to moral and just causes. In an 'authentic' populist regime (as opposed to a 'pseudo' one), this type of identification is often successful in ensuring a bond with the masses and the needed degree of legitimacy (even if temporary) that arises from the act of 'speaking for the people'.³⁹

This discourse, commonly referred to as Manichean, relies on the imaginary constitution of popular identities in opposition to the established order that is characterised as separate and exclusivist. It thus becomes a dichotomy posing the people (*pueblo*) against the oligarchy or the pro-foreign establishment. Both categories, as noted above, are loosely defined hence remain flexible enough to include whomever these leaders want at specific times, thereby providing a versatility that allows populist rhetoric to successfully adapt itself to different socio-political agendas. The dichotomy of '*pueblo* versus oligarchy' is often radicalised to 'good versus evil' resulting in a moral crusade with strong religious overtones, yet one that offers little faith in the likelihood of negotiation with the opposition.⁴⁰

The anti-establishment, anti-elitist and nationalistic nature of populist discourse not only articulates a critique of a system that is in crisis or even in a state of moral panic, but also promises social regeneration, political integrity and egalitarian justice as solutions to inadequate political practices, all this under the auspices of a devoted, messianic and innovative leader, who will, above all, offer hope and dignity to the

³⁸ Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory: Capitalism, Fascism, Populism*, 196.

³⁹ Canovan, 'Trust the people! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy', 4.

⁴⁰ Messianic overtones are described by Tamarin with reference to Argentina's Yrigoyen (1916-1930), see David Tamarin, 'Yrigoyen and Perón: The Limits of Argentine Populism', 31-45 and by De la Torre with reference to Ecuador's Velasco Ibarra in the 1940s. See Carlos de la Torre, 'The Ambiguous Meanings of Latin American Populisms', *Social Research* 59, no. 2 (summer 1992): 385-414 and Carlos de la Torre, 'Velasco Ibarra and "la Revolución Gloriosa": The Social Production of a Populist Leader in Ecuador in the 1940s', *Journal of Latin American Studies* 26, no. 3 (October 1994): 683-711.

masses. De la Torre, discussing the discursive strategy of populism that transforms political struggle into a struggle for higher moral values concludes that ‘populist discourse and rhetoric radicalize the emotional element common to all political discourses’.⁴¹ Most importantly, as Taggart notes, at the heart of populist discourse lies the idea of a singular but universal version of political truth.⁴²

Whether these ideas of collective identity and inclusion are or whether they ever do become a reality in what could be perceived as the ‘populist illusion’ is a debatable point. What is certain is that Plato and Aristotle’s phobia of ‘irrational masses’ echoes right through the history of Western political thought with the work of scholars like Le Bon, who argued that crowds are social phenomena that display three symptoms: lowering of faculties, intensification of emotional reactions and disregard for personal profit.⁴³ This view of the masses as irrational and open to endless manipulation was taken up by Gino Germani, whose thesis considered a large part of civil society as masses ‘readily available’ to be mobilised and persuaded.⁴⁴ On the other hand, some scholars see the people as proactive in populist movements and challenge these theories.⁴⁵ What is important is whether the people perceive themselves as participants included in the political spectacle rather than mere spectators; after all, if this perception is real to the people concerned it matters little whether it is an objective reality.

Despite the irrational and emotive elements that are undoubtedly present, there is also a great deal of rationality in the motivations of both leaders and followers in populist politics, if I may simplistically define rationality as thought or action motivated by the use of reason and logic. From the point of view of the follower, other than material rewards, there are intangible offerings such as national (and possibly also personal) salvation, a sense of political identity, vindication of suffering at the hands of an exploitative ruling class, and self-esteem for being a participant rather than a victim of the political process. The influence of *Krausismo* on early

⁴¹ De la Torre, ‘The Ambiguous Meanings of Latin American Populisms’, p. 400 and De la Torre, ‘Velasco Ibarra and “la Revolución Gloriosa”: The Social Production of a Populist Leader in Ecuador in the 1940s’, 708-709.

⁴² Taggart, ‘Populism and Representative Politics in Contemporary Europe’, 279.

⁴³ Le Bon in Serge Moscovici, *The Age of the Crowd – A Historical Treatise on Mass Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 135. See also Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 21-30.

⁴⁴ Gino Germani, *Authoritarianism, Fascism and National Populism* (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1978), 27-30, 179-203.

⁴⁵ See Canovan, ‘Trust the people! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy’, p. 6 and De la Torre, *Populist Seduction in Latin America – The Ecuadorian Experience*, 95-96; 119-121.

populist leaders indicates the desirability of approaching a worldview characterised by ‘harmonic rationalism’ between individual responsibility and social solidarity. Furthermore, from the point of view of the leader and the new ruling hegemony, the masses might become economically more productive if they are given some incentive and might be less inclined to turn into effective opposition if politicised in a controlled fashion.⁴⁶

What do the People Really Want? Populist Leadership and the Challenge to Democracy

Despite its temporary demise in the 1960s, Latin American populism has managed to re-invent itself time after time.⁴⁷ As De la Torre comments, it is indeed a spectre haunting democracy. Its resurgence has caused concerns that processes of installation or consolidation of democracy are being continuously endangered by the often blatant snubbing of political institutions in favour of personalism by both political actors and the people. The late 1970s and 1980s saw populist strategies and leadership styles re-emerge in the neo-liberal context.⁴⁸

Although there are remarkable differences between classical and neo-populism, three elements remained constant: the presence of charismatic (or personalistic) leadership, disdain of institutions like political parties and, most importantly, the appeal to the masses through unmediated means. It is also worth noting that, as Salinas’ PRONASOL Project in Mexico and Fujimori’s poverty relief programs have indicated, gestures of economic paternalism are not incompatible with neo-liberal agendas. Such gestures are, one should admit, very common in many populist regimes, but they are also not uncommon in other types of government, which are usually not adverse to ‘pulling redistributive policies out of the political hat’ just

⁴⁶ See Michael L. Conniff, *Populism in Latin America* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1999), 193-195 and Malloy *Authoritarianism and Corporatism in Latin America*, 12.

⁴⁷ The causes of this demise are often explained in terms of tensions that almost inevitably build up between the entrenched power structures (the landed elite, the Church, the army, traditional parties and business interests) and populist leaders. Moreover, business tends to become more rather than less dependent on foreign capital and welfare programs reach the point of financial unmanageability, given that they can only be politically viable if sustained by real economic growth – something that did not always eventuate.

⁴⁸ Weyland identifies four factors which, he argues, brought forth neo-liberal populism: party weakness, institutional fragmentation (the erosion of mass-based representative institutions built by the first generation of populist leaders), a strong directly elected executive and a monetary/inflationary crisis caused by the deterioration of ISI economics in the 1980s. See Weyland, ‘Neoliberal Populism in Latin America and Eastern Europe’, 389-397.

before elections; all the more reason why populism cannot be reduced to a redistributive policy with detrimental fiscal effects.

Some scholars have rejected the association of populism with neo-liberalism outright, arguing that neo-populists ‘lack the mobilisational and democratising impulses of historical populist figures’.⁴⁹ Cammack, for example, interprets neo-populism as ‘a classical populist strategy turned to a neo-liberal purpose’.⁵⁰ Whether one considers neo-populism as a type of populism or as a distortion of it, populist practices never really presented a serious challenge to neo-liberal policies; if anything, it is argued that they were quite compatible.⁵¹ The populist style of leadership might in fact be regarded as necessary to implement or sell the neo-liberal economic project; charismatic bonds and paternalistic manipulations of public spending become ways of maintaining mass support, while governments relentlessly pursue their neo-liberal agenda. In other words, the neo-populist phenomenon has shown nothing if not the effectiveness and the adaptability of populist leadership and strategy. The coexistence of populist leadership with neo-liberal economic policies strongly suggests that the former remains one of the most politically effective ways to gain mass support, even if this marriage is *temporary* and *precarious*. Even so, caution is recommended in assessing the success level of this union between a populist leader and neo-liberal interests, for there is doubt as to whether populist leaders are all that willing to consolidate neo-liberalism in a consistent fashion or, for that matter, whether neo-liberal democracies are necessarily willing to accommodate the volatile neo-populist style of politics indefinitely.⁵²

Viewpoints that see neo-liberalism and neo-populism as compatible invite further reflection on leaders who skilfully manage to gain and maintain political support, while implementing such idiosyncratic policies. In the Peruvian case, the Fujimori regime showed populist features in the personalism of its leadership, in its heterogeneous social constituency and in the absence of institutionalised forms of mediation between this leader and his followers. Fujimori, who owed his political success to the crisis of Peru’s representative institutions, cultivated the image of a political outsider untainted by previous association with discredited institutions and

⁴⁹ Roberts, ‘Populism and Democracy in Latin America’, 4.

⁵⁰ Cammack, ‘The Resurgence of Populism in Latin America’, 158.

⁵¹ Knight, ‘Populism and Neo-Populism in Latin America, Especially Mexico’, 246-248 and Kurt Weyland, ‘Neopopulism and Neoliberalism in Latin America: How Much Affinity?’, *Third World Quarterly* 24, no. 6 (December 2003): 1095-1115.

⁵² Weyland, ‘Neoliberal Populism in Latin America and Eastern Europe’, 379-380.

that of a leader from and for the common people. While implementing his economic stabilisation plan he cleverly manipulated political and symbolic themes in order not to lose popular support; his slogan ‘honesty, technology and work’ was deliberately apolitical. Moreover, the blend of austere neo-liberal policies and redistributive policies at local level is a good example of how populist economic measures can be incorporated in the neo-liberal macro-economic project.⁵³

Menem is the other obvious example. He cleverly used Peronist symbolism and language to gain support by association and to maintain his popularity. In spite of his adoption of a macro-economic model that was to deepen rather than ameliorate inequalities, he was able to ‘divide and conquer’ the labour movement in Argentina by selecting cooperative unions and by preventing the emergence of a unified labour opposition.⁵⁴ Successful or relatively successful neo-populist leaders such as Menem and Fujimori have been able to effectively gain the necessary institutional support (for instance, from the military) and achieve a certain level of economic stability.

Nevertheless, and this is a point that Raby draws our attention to, neo-liberalism was never really an ideology adopted with great enthusiasm by most Latin American countries.⁵⁵ Most importantly, while populist and popular revolutionary formations have continued to reinvent themselves, democratic institutions have continued to lose credibility. The wave of contemporary populist leaders that succeeded the neo-populist wave can therefore be understood to be a response to the perceived failure of neo-liberal economics *and* orthodox democracy to address social and political exclusion, just as the previous wave had targeted the inadequacies of the ISI model.

Examples of contemporary populist leadership suggest that these individuals, although substantially different to one another, have in some cases far more in common with the classical model than with its neo-liberal variant, although the case

⁵³ See Roberts, ‘Neoliberalism and the Transformation of Populism in Latin America: The Peruvian Case’, 82–116. See also John Crabtree, ‘Populism Old and New: The Peruvian Case’, *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 19 (April 2000): 163–176 and John Crabtree, ‘The Collapse of Fujimorismo: Authoritarianism and its Limits’, *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 20, no. 3 (July 2001): 287–303.

⁵⁴ See Steven Levitsky, ‘Organization and Labor-Based Party Adaptation: The Transformation of Argentine Peronism in Comparative Perspective’, *World Politics* 54, no. 1, (October 2001): 27–56. See also Maria Fernanda Arias, ‘Charismatic Leadership and the Transition to Democracy: The Rise of Carlos Menem in Argentinian Politics’, (Texas Papers on Latin America, paper no. 95–02, 1995) <<http://lanic.utexas.edu/project/etext/llilas/tpla/9502.html>> (accessed 24 April 2008).

⁵⁵ Diana Raby, *Democracy and Revolution: Latin America and Socialism Today*, (London: Pluto Press, 2006), 43.

of Lula does suggest otherwise in some respects.⁵⁶ Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2002–present day) is supposedly the first working-class president of Brazil, with a long history of union activism. In 1980 he founded the Workers’ Party (PT) and in 1983 he established the Unique Workers’ Center, a national trade union confederation. His victory in the 2002 elections has been widely interpreted as the consequence of the Brazilian people’s disillusionment with free market policies, as well as a result of his astounding perseverance. Lula definitely fits the profile of a populist leader: born in poverty and relatively uneducated, both his background and affable manner have struck a chord with the millions in Brazil who wrestle with hunger on a daily basis.⁵⁷ The second example of contemporary populism in Latin America took place in Venezuela in 1998, where a number of preconditions were established by desire for drastic change and disillusionment with both the existing party system and high levels of corruption. These preconditions worked in conjunction with Colonel Hugo Chávez’s charisma and appeal to the nationalistic sentiments of the Venezuelan working classes, as well as electoral coalitions with leftist parties finally brought him to victory in 1998.⁵⁸ Davila argues that Chávez, in the traditional populist manner, ‘comes’ to give expression to popular feelings and that ‘reason will never be able to compete with the emotional certainties of the populist leader’.⁵⁹ Unsurprisingly, Chávez’s discourse is based on anti-colonialist appeals and consists of aggressive rhetoric against the old political elite. True to the typical profile of a populist leader, he offers the explicitly messianic message: ‘I declare the Venezuelan people to be God’s people’. Interestingly, his package to rescue the poor recalls the Peronist measures of the late 1940s.⁶⁰ Chávez’s regime is often criticised for lacking a well defined political program, a supporting ideology and a politically conscious social

⁵⁶ See Armando Boito, ‘Class Relations in Brazil’s New Neoliberal Phase’, *Latin American Perspectives* 34, no. 5 (September 2007): 115-131.

⁵⁷ For some comments on Lula’s regime see Wendy Hunter and Timothy J. Power, ‘Lula’s Brazil at Midterm’, *Journal of Democracy* 16, no. 3 (July 2005): 127-139.

⁵⁸ See Tismaneanu, ‘Hypotheses on Populism: The Politics of Charismatic Protest’, 14. The similarities between Chávez and Castro are worth a mention. Like Castro, Chávez tried an unsuccessful coup against the established regime of President Pérez in 1992 and failed; subsequently, he was imprisoned and pardoned. The next step was the transformation of the MBR-200 (Revolutionary Bolivian Movement, founded in 1983) from a military to a political movement that in 1997 became known as the MVR (Fifth Republic Movement).

⁵⁹ Luis Ricardo Davila, ‘The Rise and Fall of Populism in Venezuela’, *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 19, no. 2 (April 2000): 236.

⁶⁰ See Davila, ‘The Rise and Fall of Populism in Venezuela’, 235. See also Ronald D. Sylvia and Constantine P. Danopoulos, ‘The Chávez Phenomenon: Political Change in Venezuela’, *Third World Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (February 2003): 67.

base.⁶¹ Moreover, there are concerns about his allegedly authoritarian tendencies; for instance, his 2000 amendment of the 1961 constitution strengthened executive power.⁶²

One of the most recent examples of this latest form of populist leadership is Bolivia's Juan Evo Morales, who won the presidency in 2005, the first Indigenous president to be elected in the country in almost half a century and the leader of MAS (Movement Toward Socialism), a left-wing party that he founded in 1997.⁶³ Even more recently, in 2007, Argentina's Cristina Fernández Wilhem de Kirchner won the presidency; reminiscent of the charismatic figure of Evita, she leads the Front for Victory, a center left faction of the Peronist Justicialista Party. Finally in Peru, following the Fujimori regime, the charismatic figure of Ollanta Humala erupted from the ashes of the neo-liberal populist model; although not in power, he almost overpowered the factions behind current president Alan García in the 2006 elections.

Populist leadership, as we can see, has adapted with relative ease to both neo-liberal practices and left-wing rhetoric, in the process continuing to eclipse political institutions and blurring ideologies, whilst operating in a democratic context, albeit one that is often more procedural than substantive. In a sense, just as in the case of neo-liberalism, populist/charismatic leadership can serve to 'oil the wheels', so to speak, of the democratic process. In another sense, the shortcomings of *representative* democracy pave the way for the rise of populist leaders, particularly when whole sections of the population are not adequately represented by institutions or when the dominant ideological discourse ceases to be relevant for substantial portions of the population, as Laclau argues. What holds true for all the different guises that populist leadership may take is that access to the political system is often gained in times of change or crisis, for these leaders are an expedient and transient political solution, able to either mobilise or appease the people. Once in power, they transform the political system to varying degrees and, if charismatic, become cult figures who inspire the masses.

Even at the best of times, however, the spectre of authoritarianism remains a present and constant danger in populist regimes. This is particularly the case in

⁶¹ Davila 'The Rise and Fall of Populism in Venezuela', 236.

⁶² See Cameron, M. A. and Major, F. 2001 'Venezuela's Hugo Chavez: Savior or Threat to Democracy?', *Latin American Research Review* 36, no. 3 (summer, 2001): 255–287.

⁶³ See Robert Albro, 'The Indigenous in the Plural in Bolivian Oppositional Politics', *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 24, no. 4 (October 2005): 433–453.

systems where democracy is fragile, democratic institutions are volatile and where the political culture has not nurtured Western-style democratic values. Often, a precarious balance is sought between the values that underlie democracy, that is, the sovereignty of the people, where the people are considered to be of equal political worth – and those values that underlie populist/charismatic leadership, that is, loyalty and emotional ties to an individual whose position in the popular imaginary is cast as the supreme incarnation of the people. If the balance is not achieved, the scales could well tip in favour of the latter, in which case populist/charismatic leadership becomes the preferred antidote to what is perceived as a faltering democratic system.

Crabtree observes that the tension between autocratic and democratic elements could never properly be reconciled in populism. Conniff, on the other hand, argues that populism can be non-authoritarian or can at least be considered semi-democratic, in that it descends from a communal tradition and it does fulfil at least one of the requirements of democracy: the extension of political inclusion to the masses. Several other academics characterize populism as ‘ambiguous’ in this regard.⁶⁴ The main reason for this ambiguity is that populist leaders claim to be more democratic than their counterparts who practice democracy through the mediation of the institutional system.

Unsurprisingly, the debate surrounding the interconnection between populism and democracy has continued unabated, although democracy seems to emerge as the more ‘bruised’ concept of the two.⁶⁵ As Mény and Surel state, ‘[populism]...cannot be described as anti-democratic per se’ and, they point out, the claims of populists are well-founded since in democracy the principle of representation and direct modes of popular expression are not balanced. Papadopoulos similarly argues that the populist

⁶⁴ See Crabtree, ‘The Collapse of Fujimorismo: Authoritarianism and its Limits’, 302-303; the author analyses Fujimori’s regime as an example of a hybrid mix of autocratic and democratic elements. See also Conniff, *Latin American Populism in Comparative Perspective*, 22-23; Yves Mény and Yves Surel, ‘The Constitutive Ambiguity of Populism’, in *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*, eds Yves Mény and Yves Surel (New York : Palgrave, 2002), 1-21; De la Torre, ‘The Ambiguous Meanings of Latin American Populisms’, 412-414 and Roberts, ‘Populism and Democracy in Latin America’, 3, 13.

⁶⁵ For some literature on this debate see Urbinati, ‘Democracy and Populism’, 110–124 ; March, ‘From Vanguard of the Proletariat to *Vox Populi*: Left-populism as a “Shadow” of Contemporary Socialism’, 62-77; David R. Howarth, ‘Ethos, Agonism and Populism: William Connolly and the Case for Radical Democracy’, *The British Journal of Politics & International Relations* 10, no. 2 (May 2008): 171-193; Mudde, ‘The Populist Zeitgeist’, 542-563; Benjamín Arditi, ‘Populism as a Spectre of Democracy: A Response to Canovan’, *Political Studies* 52 (2004): 135-143; Benjamín Arditi, ‘Populism, or, Politics at the Edges of Democracy’, *Contemporary Politics* 9, no. 1 (2003): 17-31; Abts and Rummens, ‘Populism versus Democracy’, 405-424 and Tjitske Akkerman, ‘Populism and Democracy: Challenge or Pathology?’, *Acta Politica* 38 (2003): 147–159.

principle is consubstantial with democracy.⁶⁶ But to debate whether populism is democratic or not is indeed to miss the point, for the complexities of the debate derive mostly from the diverse and incompatible definitions of democracy rather than from populism itself. As Canovan sagaciously pointed out with her redemptive/pragmatic model, the ambiguities of populism are more a reflection of democracy's own inherent tensions and contradictions than a problem peculiar to populism itself.⁶⁷ One of the peculiarities of this debate is that most of the discussions about whether populism is democratic concentrate on representative democracy or tend to treat democracy as a single coherent ideology.

First, with regard to representative democracy attention should be paid to the much contested concept of representation, simply because it is understood differently in populism than it is in democracy. As Plotke argues, representation in democracy is a relational concept that entails non-identity and symbolic rather than natural connections; only in authoritarian contexts do concepts of representation claim to fully merge a representative and the represented.⁶⁸ Populist leaders, however, and rightly so, are suspicious of the idea of representation and see themselves less as representatives than as the actual voice of the people; they claim not to *re-present* but rather, to *be* the supreme embodiment of the people, of their wishes, interests and dreams. This provides them with a claim of legitimacy that often serves to justify authoritarian modes of governance and simultaneously, it presents a problem to those who wish for the *liberal* ideals of democracy to remain untainted. The authoritarian penchant that most populist leaders either possess from the start of their regime or acquire in time is most evident in their intolerance towards political dissent or opposition and more or less covertly in their infringements of human and individual rights. This state of affairs is aggravated by the manner in which these leaders disregard processes of negotiation with the opposition (which are, after all, essential in democracy) and justify their imposition of ideals and policies in the name of the 'common good' or the 'national interest'. Yet populist leaders claim that dissent

⁶⁶ Mény and Surel, 'The Constitutive Ambiguity of Populism', 5 and Yannis Papadopolous, 'Populism, the Democratic Question, and Contemporary Governance', in *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*, eds Yves Mény and Yves Surel (New York : Palgrave, 2002), 58.

⁶⁷ Canovan, 'Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy', 2.

⁶⁸ David Plotke, 'Representation is Democracy', *Constellations* 4, no. 1 (1997): 24, 28.

undermines the mandate from the people and authoritarian tactics have been known to be necessary to defend democracy itself.⁶⁹

While democratic regimes headed by populist leaders seem to be forever treading the fine line between authoritarianism and democracy, a certain logic can be found in this marriage of representative democracy and populist leadership, so much so that it makes sense to speak of a degree of compatibility between them, whereby the latter has the power to mobilise people or favourable public opinion in support of government policies. There is, however, no equivalent ease between radical democracy and populist leadership. Radical democrats agree with populists that institutions are not adequate as mediatory instruments, but their critique extends to the philosophical and political implications of the concept of representation.⁷⁰ One solution, strongly advocated by Tormey and Robinson, is to move beyond representation (considered a gateway to totalitarianism) altogether.⁷¹ This critique has given rise to a interesting debate. Thomassen, who disagrees with Tormey and Robinson, puts forward a case for the inevitability of representation, which he understands as transformative and continuously challenged. His arguments range from a Derridean deconstructive approach (the distinction between making present and standing for) to a realistic assessment of the limitations of *immediacy* and *presence* and, by extension, of the politics of horizontality and equality. Taking the Zapatistas as an example, Thomassen argues (correctly in my view) that the black mask of the Zapatistas is not a transparent medium but that it is itself a filter, one that possesses its own particularity. Going further, the author states that ‘political leadership is constitutive and necessary in the sense that, without some political leadership—without someone representing and articulating the collective identity, which does not emerge of its own—there would be no collective agency to counter the persons and institutions that currently rule the world’.⁷²

⁶⁹ See John Kane, ‘Ninoy and Cory Aquino’, in *Dissident Democrats: The Challenge of Democratic Leadership in Asia*, eds John Kane, Haig Patapan and Benjamin Wong (New York: Macmillan, 2008), 158-161. The author comments that ‘It was ironic that Cory’s principal actions to reestablish democracy were not themselves noticeably democratic’.

⁷⁰ See Gideon Baker, ‘Revisiting the Concept of Representation’, *Parliamentary Affairs* 59, no. 1 (January 2006): 155-172 and Simon Tormey, “‘Not in my Name’: Deleuze, Zapatismo and the Critique of Representation’, *Parliamentary Affairs* 59, no. 1 (January 2006): 138-154.

⁷¹ Andrew Robinson and Simon Tormey, ‘Beyond Representation? A Rejoinder’, *Parliamentary Affairs* 60, no. 1 (2007): 127-137.

⁷² Lasse Thomassen, ‘Beyond Representation?’, *Parliamentary Affairs* 60, no. 1 (2007): 116, 121.

But if the normative notion of representation is repudiated by radical democrats, the populist idea of *empathetic* representation is downright abhorrent to them, as it is considered a straight route to vertical (hence oppressive) organisational forms. Radical democrats wish for more than a set of abstract procedures and civil-political rights: they wish to curb the oppressive influence of the majority over minorities. Hence we understand radical democracy to be about the freedom of the ‘peoples’ to shape their political destiny and their autonomy to speak for themselves at all times in terms of the particular rather than the universal. Liberal representative democracy allows minorities to dissent, but it does not (indeed, it cannot) guarantee the triumph of the particular over the universal. Populism, more offensively, is about the appropriation of the people’s will by the leader and the representation of that will as a ‘homogeneous moral-ethical datum that does not admit differences’.⁷³ In this case, those who are critical of the concept of representation and propose more direct, deliberative or participatory or any of the myriad of democratic formations that present an alternative to representation, are going to find it very difficult to reconcile populist/charismatic forms of leadership to horizontal political configurations and grassroots political practices, despite the fact that both approaches are critical of orthodox democracy and its blind faith in institutions. In other words, whereas in representational democracy a populist leader serves to highlight the inadequacies of the institutional system (including its impersonal nature), in relation to participatory forms of democracy populism effectively *appropriates* the central claim of popular sovereignty: the people matter and the government should follow their voice(s).

The democratic claim of popular sovereignty or the ‘will of the people’ deserves further attention, given that it is problematic in the radical scheme for it implies unity and singularity. It might be true that the ‘will of the people has to be a mediated and ongoing construction which necessarily escapes final determination’, but as Abts and Rummens admit, even in the radical variant popular sovereignty needs to be *unified-in-diversity*.⁷⁴ And, as Panizza points out, if ‘the people’ is a contested entity, then the will of the people and popular sovereignty are also provisional concepts that cannot appropriate the locus of power Lefort refers to as the ‘empty place’ indefinitely.⁷⁵

⁷³ Carlos De la Torre, ‘Populist Redemption and the Unfinished Democratization of Latin America’, *Constellations* 5, no. 1 (March 1998): 90.

⁷⁴ Abts and Rummens, ‘Populism versus Democracy’, 416.

⁷⁵ Francisco Panizza, ‘Introduction’, in *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, ed. Francisco Panizza (London: Verso, 2005), 29.

What logically follows is that if the non-certainty or the temporary nature of power is what defines democracy, then democracy is not about popular sovereignty at all, but about the possibility and the opportunity of filling the vacuum on transitory basis rather than about the certainty of the people's will being enacted.

Furthermore, the concept of popular sovereignty is problematic for radical democracies because they reject universalism in favour of the political coexistence of particularities. In this case, 'will of the people' translates to 'wills of the peoples', but as Laclau has most persuasively argued, 'no particularity can become political without becoming the locus of universalising effects'.⁷⁶ Once any particularity takes this position, it is 'doomed' to become a hegemonising force or 'hegemonic terrain' or, at least, it is compelled to enter the contest for hegemony against other particularities in the universal, the empty arena where the struggles that give it its temporary content are played out.

Populist logic, by contrast, requires the closure of the empty place of power, but the following proviso might be added: closure of the empty place of power *in favour of the people*. The appropriation of popular sovereignty by populist leaders is well illustrated by leaders like Chávez, who while regularly accused of authoritarian and anti-democratic behaviour, has repeatedly and emphatically defended his actions as democratic, including decree power.⁷⁷ This brings back memories of the way Castro defended himself when accused of authoritarianism and violation of human rights. He not only denied authoritarianism charges, but also defended his highly personalistic style of leadership as a practical approach of continuous presence and direct contact with the people. This contact, he argues, allowed him to conduct genuine or direct democracy, with popular sovereignty being manifested at any and all times.⁷⁸ The denial of discordance in the coexistence of various forms of popular participation and corresponding charismatic/populist leadership in Cuba and Venezuela has been reiterated by Raby, who seems to accept Castro's critique of liberal-democratic elections and, in particular, Cuba's system of municipal assemblies and people's

⁷⁶ Ernesto Laclau, 'Identity and Hegemony: The Role of Universality in the Constitution of Political Logics', in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, eds Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 2000), 56-57.

⁷⁷ British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), 'Venezuela Democratic, Says Chávez', 20 January 2007, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/6281417.stm>> (accessed 31 March 2008).

⁷⁸ See Castro in Edward Gonzalez, *Cuba under Castro: The Limits of Charisma* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), 52 and in Tomas Borge, *Un Grano de Maiz – Conversación con Fidel Castro* (Mexico D.F.: Tierra Firme, 1992), 106-109.

councils as instruments of direct democracy (Poder Popular), although she does acknowledge its limitations.⁷⁹ Similarly, the author endorses Venezuela's local public planning councils (CLPPs), the highest organs of popular participation.

Concluding Remarks

It cannot be denied that populist leaders often become authoritarian and despotic; as they claim to speak for all citizens there is little regard for various procedures that ensure checks and balances. It is also true that populist leaders mistrust initiatives that empower citizens and that encourage their autonomous initiatives; as Ardití states the 'ambivalent oscillation between the independent action of the people and the instrumental appropriation of that action furnishes populist representation with a convenient alibi'.⁸⁰ Finally, it can also be stated that as rational deliberation is replaced by emotive acclamation the autonomy of the people is compromised. This leads us to conclude that, as Marcos himself has recognised, any individual who has influence over others must or should know when to retreat.⁸¹ In other words, populist and charismatic forms of leadership should be transient rather than long-term presences in the political system. There are various reasons for this, including the frequent inability of these leaders to respond to changes in objective conditions once they are in power as well as the reality that no individual can represent the will of the people over a prolonged period of time, nor should they seek to do so, not least because the popular will is not a fixed formation. Cuba is a case in point, where the connection between Castro and the Cuban people has changed dramatically since 1959.⁸²

The other side of the coin is that to the radical democrat, the ability and the willingness of the people to lead themselves and each other is a given fact, an assumption that is rarely questioned. History does not in practice support these premises, for horizontal forms of political organisations have not been prevalent in nation-states. Similarly, political philosophy from Aristotle and Plato to Freud and Le Bon has not placed much faith in the ability of 'the masses' to do without individual

⁷⁹ Raby, *Democracy and Revolution: Latin America and Socialism Today*, 121-131.

⁸⁰ Benjamín Ardití, 'Populism, or, Politics at the Edges of Democracy', 22.

⁸¹ Marcos in Subcomandante Marcos in *El Sueño Zapatista – Entrevistas con el Subcomandante Marcos, el Mayor Moisés y el Comandante Tacho, del Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional*, Yves Le Bot (Barcelona: Plaza and Janés, 1997), 366-368.

⁸² Richard R. Fagen 1972 'Mass Mobilisation in Cuba: The Symbolism of Struggle', in *Cuba in Revolution*, eds R. E. Bonachea and N. P. Valdés (New York: Anchor Books), 219.

leadership. Moreover, there is substantial evidence of the pivotal role played by specific individuals who, at crucial historical moments, have been able to invigorate the people and trigger political change. Various scholars take this position. Mudde, for instance, argues that ‘The current heartland of the populists does support democracy, but they do not want to be bothered with politics all the time.... True, they want to be heard in the case of fundamental decisions, but first and foremost they want *leadership*. They want politicians who *know* (rather than ‘listen to’) the people, and who make their wishes come true’.⁸³ Furthermore, as Raby points out, the relationship between masses and leader is dialectical: ‘the leader cannot take the people where they do not want to go and he cannot operate outside possibilities that were already part of the existing social structure and cultural heritage of the original movement’.⁸⁴ If we may make the leap from populist to charismatic leadership, this dialectic echoes a central element of Weber’s analysis of charismatic authority: the charismatic leader has to be recognised by his followers in order to achieve any degree of legitimacy.⁸⁵

As Thomassen has stated, the trouble with the post-representational position is that it is ‘vain’ and therefore potentially dangerous because it overlooks the role of political and intellectual leadership in formulating who we or others really are.⁸⁶ In the case of loose networks like the anti-globalisation movement, despite the autonomy of each group, there are political figures like Marcos that emerge to successfully articulate the common concerns. Marcos, contrary to what Tormey and Robinson claim, *is* showing the way, even if he is ‘creating political space’ rather than imposing a precise project with regards to how this space should be used.⁸⁷ Nevertheless, he is a cult figure, the white charismatic spokesperson of an Indigenous movement that professes to subscribe to and practice horizontal politics. Understandably, his role is not just ambiguous, it is downright controversial. Elsewhere, I have noted that Marcos continuously treads the fine line between personalism and the effort to ‘democratise’ his own charismatic authority.⁸⁸ His attempts to avoid the stigmas of ‘Latin America

⁸³ Mudde, ‘The Populist Zeitgeist’, 558.

⁸⁴ Raby, *Democracy and Revolution: Latin America and Socialism Today*, 253.

⁸⁵ Max Weber, *Max Weber on Charisma and Institution Building – Selected Papers*, edited and introduced by S. N. Eisenstadt (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 49-50.

⁸⁶ Thomassen, ‘Beyond Representation?’, 124.

⁸⁷ Andrew Robinson and Simon Tormey, ‘Beyond Representation? A Rejoinder’, 131.

⁸⁸ Di Piramo, conclusion to ‘Gift of Grace: Revolutionising Authority in Latin America’, 294.

caudillo' and 'Marxist vanguard' are evident in several of his statements.⁸⁹ The creation of a masked and hence 'faceless' public personage is the antidote to personalism, an effort to separate Rafael Sebastian Guillén from the public figure 'Subcomandante Marcos'; the latter allows Marcos to act as a mirror on to which ordinary Mexicans and others can see themselves (rather than him) and by identifying and reinventing themselves, they are thereby better equipped to strive for intellectual and political autonomy. Even if we forget about Marcos and focus on the Zapatista leadership, it is possible to glimpse elements of vanguardism. In his interesting analysis of the movement, Mentinis remarks that the Zapatistas themselves in their quest to unite and include various sectors have silenced radical voices such as those of the EPR.⁹⁰

The existence of a 'spokesperson' showing the way coexists in the Zapatista Movement with the deliberate lack of definition and organisation that form the trademarks of horizontal politics. In effect, this means that effective political action is continuously being obstructed by the preoccupation with creating 'space' for critical reflection, in other words what Robinson and Tormey refer to as 'zones of encounter', where political dialogue is 'not permitted' to coalesce into something more substantial.⁹¹ The Other Campaign, for instance, was still extremely vague with regard to any political direction. Marcos states:

...fundamentally, it will be the people from the bottom that will be able to take charge of it, organising themselves another way. The old recipes or the old parameters should serve as a reference of what was done, but not as something that should be re-adopted to do something new.⁹²

⁸⁹ See Subcomandante Marcos, 'Ski Mask and Other Masks', 58; Subcomandante Marcos in *El Sueño Zapatista – Entrevistas con el Subcomandante Marcos, el Mayor Moisés y el Comandante Tacho, del Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional*, Yves Le Bot (Barcelona: Plaza and Janés, 1997), 156, 366-368; Subcomandante Marcos, *Shadows of Tender Fury – Letters and Communiqués of Subcomandante Marcos* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1995), 57; Subcomandante Marcos in *Yo Marcos*, Marta Duràn de Huerta (Mexico D.F.: Ediciones del Milenio, 1994), 16 and Subcomandante Marcos in Medea Benjamin 'Interview: Subcomandante Marcos', in *First World, Ha Ha Ha! The Zapatista Challenge*, ed. Elaine Katzenberger (San Francisco: City Lights, 1995), 70.

⁹⁰ Mihalís Mentinis, *Zapatistas: The Chiapas Revolt and What it Means for Radical Politics* (Pluto Press, 2006), 119-121.

⁹¹ Andrew Robinson and Simon Tormey, 'Horizontals', 'Verticals' and the Conflicting Logics of Transformative Politics', in *Confronting Globalization: Humanity, Justice, and the Renewal of Politics*, eds Patrick Hayden and Chamsy el-Ojeili (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 218.

⁹² Subcomandante Marcos and the Zapatistas, *The Other Campaign* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2006), 155.

That ‘something new’ was not specified. A couple of communiqués issued in February and in May 2006 are particularly interesting, in that Marcos does admit that rebellion alone achieves nothing and that they (the Zapatistas) and civil society need to organise themselves.⁹³

These observations do not mean one should give up the idea of a vigorous civil society, of autonomous thought, of the flight from the universal or even the hope of a world where power as it has been conceived throughout history will be redefined as something other than relations of domination, something like the Zapatistas’ concept of ‘leading by obeying’. Nevertheless, we need to acknowledge that vertical politics will more than likely always be politically expedient. After all, populist charismatic leaders begin as inspired agents of change, with political programs that are responsive to the conditions of society at that particular time. In other words, they are, in a sense, the creation of the people.⁹⁴ We also need to acknowledge that only a portion of civil society is sufficiently altruistic and willing to take the challenge and in many ways, what is the burden of political action. And those who do want to do so may well wish to change the world the old fashioned way, that is, by unapologetically taking power.

⁹³ See Subcomandante Marcos in Hermann Bellinghausen, ‘La Rebeldía Sola no Alcanza Para Nada, hay que Organizarse, Insta Marcos’, *La Jornada*, 12 February 2006, <<http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2006/02/12/014n1pol.php>> (accessed 4 April 2008). See also Subcomandante Marcos, ‘El Elemento Extra: La Organización’, interview by Sergio Rodríguez Lascano, director of *Rebeldía*, 14 June 2006, http://jcm.companeros.org/index.php?Itemid=0&id=22&option=com_content&task=view (accessed 8 April 2008).

⁹⁴ Irvine Schiffer’s work is the inspiration behind this comment, although in my view the extent to which the leader is the creation of the people is more limited than in his. See Irvine Schiffer, *Charisma: A Psychoanalytic Look at Mass Society* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), 18-19.