STAGES OF POPULISM IN LATIN AMERICA

ETAPAS DO POPULISMO NA AMÉRICA LATINA

ETAPAS DEL POPULISMO EN AMÉRICA LATINA

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ABSTRACT: This article presents three striking moments of populism, in which two ideas deserve to be clarified in more depth: populism developed in Latin America as a possibility of modernization, made possible through the change of axis of the mechanisms of domination, of the old European colonialism, for North American financial capitalism. The other issue concerns the correlation between populism and patrimonialism, in that both bring progress, but "freeze" and become obstacles to new advances, especially with regard to strengthening organized civil society. Therefore, to a large extent, they begin to receive a very negative conceptual and academic interpretation. In this sense, understanding populism means permanently making a historical movement, back and forth, between politics and economics, to understand Latin America's specificities, derailments, and accelerated resumptions of movement in search of an idealized future.

KEYWORDS: Populism. Development. Capitalism. Latin America.

RESUMO*: O presente artigo apresenta três momentos marcantes do populismo, em que duas ideias merecem ser esclarecidas mais a fundo: o populismo se desenvolve na América Latina como possibilidade de modernização, tornada possível através da mudança de eixo dos mecanismos de dominação, do velho colonialismo europeu, para o capitalismo financeiro norte-americano. A outra questão diz respeito à correlação entre o populismo e o patrimonialismo, na medida em que ambos trazem progressos, mas se "congelam" e tornam-se empecilhos para novos avanços, especialmente no que diz respeito ao fortalecimento da sociedade civil organizada. Por isso, em grande medida, passam a receber uma leitura conceitual e acadêmica bastante negativa. Nesse sentido, entender o populismo é fazer permanentemente um movimento histórico, de idas e vindas, entre política e economia, para compreender a América Latina em suas especificidades, seus descarrilamentos e retomadas aceleradas de movimento em busca de um futuro idealizado.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE*: Populismo. Desenvolvimento. Capitalismo. Latinoamerica.*

RESUMEN*: Este artículo presenta tres momentos llamativos del populismo, en los que dos ideas merecen ser aclaradas con mayor profundidad: el populismo desarrollado en América-Latina como una posibilidad de modernización, posible a través del cambio de eje de los mecanismos de dominación, del viejo colonialismo europeo para el capitalismo financiero norteamericano. La otra cuestión tiene que ver con la correlación entre populismo y patrimonialismo, en el sentido de que ambos traen progreso, pero se "congelan" y se convierten en obstáculos para nuevos avances, especialmente en lo que respecta al fortalecimiento de la sociedad civil organizada. Por tanto, en gran medida, empiezan a recibir una interpretación conceptual y académica muy negativa. En este sentido, entender el populismo significa hacer permanentemente un movimiento histórico, de ida y vuelta, entre política y economía, para comprender a América Latina en sus especificidades, sus descarrilamientos y aceleradas reanudaciones de movimiento en busca de un futuro idealizado*

PALABRAS CLAVE*: Populismo. Desarrollo. Capitalismo. Latinoamérica.*

Introduction

While it is not uncommon to differentiate Brazil from other Latin American countries in institutional and historical terms (Rangel, 1981), particularly when emphasizing the revolutionary mystique that permeates various phases of continental formation, the 20th century has brought Brazil closer, and in many respects even equalized it, to its neighbors in the conditions under which it develops its political culture.

In this regard, the theme of populism stands out as a broad and imprecise concept, yet essential for understanding the conditions under which Latin America accelerated its historical trajectory and found pathways to overcome its still predominantly pre-capitalist structure by the early decades of the 20th century.

At the outset, it is important to emphasize that the colonial remnants of the 19th century were mitigated by a new geopolitics of domination, which gradually shifted from Europe to the United States. In this context, the old territorialist form of *colonialism* gave way to imperialism accompanied by more advanced elements of capitalism, including a more financialized form of domination.

> Central to this understanding is the distinction between "capitalism" and "territorialism" as opposing modes of governance or logics of power. Territorialist rulers identify power with the extent and population density of their domains, conceiving wealth/capital as a means or byproduct of territorial expansion. Capitalist rulers, by contrast, identify power with the scope of their control over scarce resources and view territorial acquisitions as a means and byproduct of capital accumulation (Arrighi: 2013, p. 33, our translation).

This distinction, here reduced to just two terms, enables a comparative analysis of these two forms of domination in contrast with the African continent, where European territorialist colonialism maintained its grip and prevented the overcoming of pre-capitalist structures through populist pathways, as occurred in Latin America.

Thus, a retrospective analysis allows us to contrast populism, even in its varied manifestations within the Latin American context, with the political arrangements and their economic ramifications in the period preceding the Revolution of 1930, when liberalism, federalism, and a strong tendency toward decentralization limited the capacity of the Brazilian state, restricting the implementation of solutions that could transcend its then excessively peripheral condition.

Conceptually, an analogy can be made with Portuguese patrimonialism, which we have previously analyzed in earlier studies (Lima, 2007, 2010). In summary, the Portuguese Crown unified its territory as a consequence of consolidating its independence (1383-85); the state centralized, unified a budget, and concentrated power, which initially served as a valuable asset for expansion through navigation and discoveries. Over time, however, it adopted a role of co-optation through the granting of nobility titles—thus pacifying potentially antagonistic classes, softening conflict, and quelling class struggles. This shift distanced Portugal from the incorporation of elements that could, in essence, be understood as modernity—such as capitalism and democracy, developed earlier in England and France.

The historical trajectory of populism in Brazil followed a similar path: on one hand, it provided the state with the means to centralize power and mediate social relations of production; on the other, it propelled the incorporation and development of a new productive framework, creating broad opportunities for growth and accelerating the historical timeline. However, akin to the framework of the old Iberian patrimonialism, this movement stifled the emergence of a stronger, more organized civil society, while crystallizing regional disparities and consolidating a development model marked by profound and persistent social inequality. This model allowed the state to absorb any possibility of enduring opposition or antagonism, whether through recruitment of civil servants, control over unions, or public policies that historically prioritized the non-poor, followed by the poor, and only recently, and to a limited extent, the destitute (Cohn, 2000).

Thus, what can be termed the first wave of populism, closely linked in Brazil to the Vargas Era and in Argentina to Peronism, was characterized by fostering key drivers of capitalist acceleration through the incorporation of the popular masses, yet always within a predefined sphere of action. Broadly speaking, this sphere included the adoption of relevant demands from the working class and specific demands from sectors of the public service, including the military. In the former case, Wanderley G. dos Santos's concept of "*regulated citizenship*" (1979) remains an essential reference, while the concept of corporatism, widely used in this context, sheds considerable light on the process of recruitment and the structuring of bureaucratic mechanisms through which the state maintains strict control over society.

On the other hand, the development of productive forces finds in the populist ideology an essential vector for its advancement, addressing the challenges of the context, as occurred in Brazil after the 1929 New York Stock Exchange crash. From the following year onward, a provisional consensus was established involving a broad spectrum of predominantly urban and

middle-class support concentrated in the center-south region, the most dynamic area of the country in recent decades. In this context, a perspective emerged of a broad alignment of diffuse yet converging interests around a primary agenda: the more prominent role the Brazilian state should assume in facing the enormous economic and social challenges confronting the world at that time.

The context in which the political phenomena that characterized Latin America and came to be known as populism emerged can initially be understood through two key ideas: one specific to the Brazilian case and another more general from political science. Sérgio Buarque de Holanda's interpretation (1971) in *Raízes do Brasil*, originally published in 1936, suggests that Brazil had an archaic political sphere, resembling colonization of cities by the countryside, as seen in the federalist and *coronelista*[2]), pacts that allowed local power to organize the entire system, imprinting its logic and tying the state's hands regarding broader and more challenging issues beyond the specific interests of the Coffee Complex (Cano, 1998).

Regarding the second, more general issue, it pertains to the intricate question of the importance of organization, discipline, and rationality in enabling a new political body to form and contest power with real possibilities of winning and imposing the hegemony of a new class. In this sense, the military would be drawn into the political arena to fulfill a different role, that of guarantor of emerging political forces, representing even the demands of the military themselves, who would subsequently act as encouragers and collaborators in the numerous revolutions, coups, and insurgencies that would become recurrent across Latin America from that point onward.

> In underdeveloped countries, reformist militarist parties rely on a segment of the armed forces that rebels against the status quo, with the military adopting a role traditionally held by the bourgeoisie in promoting economic development and social reform. Often the only socially significant group possessing a degree of organization and discipline, the military can offer a combination of modernization and authoritarianism that is essential or at least highly conducive to the development of a backward country (Tella, 1983, p. 348, our translation).

In this regard, it is worth recalling the role the military began to play in the numerous insurrections in Brazil, which in the 1920s would intensify and channel broader societal

[2] However, the concept of *coronelismo* as a systemic element of Brazilian political life only appeared more than a decade later, with Victor Nunes Leal (1986) and his 1953 book.

discontent. The *tenentista*[3] movement played a notable role, directly connected to both the experiences of the Prestes Column (1924-27) and the Revolution of 1930.

Thus, the transformation initiated in 1930 profoundly impacted the structures of a disorganized society, characterized by a political system operated by inorganically structured and regional parties that were unable to incorporate technology and new labor relations, thereby accelerating the "historical becoming". These elements would compose an agenda demanding a profound reorganization of the Brazilian state, made possible through a new pact that included a greater diversity of social classes beyond the formerly hegemonic rural elite. This pact, while not disregarding the interests of the dominant sectors, imposed upon the state a new set of governmental actions, affecting various aspects of the economy, politics, and society.

This period, marking an early phase of populism in Brazil and resonating with similar developments in other Latin American countries, particularly Mexico and Argentina, would come to be known as the "Era of Populism." This moment highlights the multi-class nature of populist actions, although it set clear limitations on the interests of the working class. Leftist analyses emphasize the conciliatory and manipulative character of populism, especially regarding unions, which came to be known as "*pelegos*[4]," acting as mere shock absorbers for conflicts, undermined from within.

In this context, populism as a concept, among its various meanings, derives its most enduring interpretation from its reformist and limiting aspect on the interests of the working class, and the related ideal of complete emancipation, as an inevitable implication of Marxist political economy critique. This gives populism a connotation that makes it a term to be avoided and claimed by no ideological faction since its inception. In the arena of political dispute, it functions more as a label attached to opponents than as a program or worldview capable of shaping a vision of social reality, explicitly acting as a moment of transition.

Thus, the first phase of populism, from the 1930s to the 1960s, is responsible for the most significant theoretical work on the subject, both in terms of its duration and the depth of the changes that occurred. The theme would re-emerge in Latin America during the 1990s, this time without Mexico's involvement but with Argentina and Venezuela taking the forefront, and

[3] *Tenentismo* was a political-military movement, based on a series of rebellions by young low and middle-ranking officers of the Brazilian Army (lieutenants), from urban middle classes, who were dissatisfied with the government of the Oligarchic Republic in the early 1920s in Brazil.

[4] It is the one who pretends to represent the workers but, in reality, seeks to manipulate the masses in order to serve the interests of the bosses.

eventually, Brazil serving as a key example of a new phase in understanding reality through the interpretive lens of populism.

The case of Argentina has older roots, and a concise analysis highlights the scenario beginning with Carlos Menem's election in 1989 and the implementation of the Cavallo Plan in 1991. This plan effectively dollarized the country's economy, initially functioning as an indexation mechanism to curb hyperinflation that affected the Austral, the then-current currency. The plan preserved wages and prices by pegging them to the dollar in strict parity with the new currency, the Peso, whose stability was ensured through the Convertibility Law, a legal mechanism establishing a fixed exchange rate. With complete dollarization, hyperinflation was contained, and the Peso, pegged to the dollar, temporarily increased purchasing power, especially for the middle class. This mechanism, artificially sustained for several years, eventually had severely adverse effects on the Argentine industry.

The contradictions of this economic stabilization model were evident, as it excessively tied the Argentine economy to the credibility of a strong foreign currency, in this case, the dollar, without promoting the strengthening of the national currency. This arrangement prevented the country from establishing commitments based on its currency, leaving it vulnerable to international crises, such as those in 1995, 1997, and 1998. During this period, it became clear that currency convertibility exposed the Argentine economy to the impacts of global crises. Moreover, most contracts, including service fees and rents, were also dollarized, deepening the country's economic dependency on the dollar (Batista Jr., 2002, p. 84).

Prices were artificially maintained solely by the indexing element, which in this case was the dollar. In the latter half of the 1990s, the model began to show signs of strain; however, amidst the prosperity the country was experiencing, President Menem was re-elected in 1995 with this program of artificial dollarization, which became known as neoliberal. Any efforts to balance the country's budget occurred under conditions of social program cuts and massive privatizations of state-owned companies.

All these elements reflected a political approach that strongly evoked elements of Peronism, not only through the momentary prosperity experienced by the middle and working classes but also through a sense of pride. The newfound access to imported goods—a prominent feature of Argentina's past—once again became a part of families' daily lives.

In summary, the Argentine economic model was extremely popular and led by a populist leader determined to maintain, artificially, economic conditions that favored consumption, generating temporary yet unsustainable prosperity. This fragility became evident as early as the

beginning of Fernando de la Rúa's government, culminating in a profound crisis in the second half of 2001. This period was marked by speculative attacks, the freezing of bank deposits (the "*corralito*[5]"), a drop in GDP, followed by inflation, recession, unemployment, and an economic collapse of nearly 20% in 2002, a figure that would later be matched only by Venezuela in the region. At the time, the left attributed Argentina's economic implosion to neoliberalism, while the center-right argued the opposite: that the absence of genuine state reforms led to a crisis of credibility, rising debt, and ultimately, the collapse of all economic indicators, which culminated between November and December of 2001.

The years 2002 and 2003 were marked by a severe economic crisis in Argentina, with a more robust recovery beginning only in 2004 following the election of Néstor Kirchner. His administration implemented a new heterodox economic policy that included, under a different label, a review of public debt—effectively a default on creditors known as "*Fundos Abutres* (Vulture Funds)". This measure facilitated economic growth due to greater budgetary flexibility but prevented the country from securing new loans to finance its economic restructuring, which henceforth depended on internal efforts. Inflation, which reached an annual rate of 54% in 2019, originated in this period and already indicated a growing issue. Inflation rates began to be manipulated by *Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos de Argentina* (INDEC), while wages needed to be adjusted according to real inflation, unofficially recognized by the government, to avoid loss of purchasing power. This resulted in even further discrediting of the country within the international capital market.

This movement parallels events occurring simultaneously in another of Brazil's neighboring countries, Venezuela, which, since the election of Hugo Chávez in 1999, has undertaken profound changes across nearly all sectors of its economic, political, and institutional life. This transformation, known as *Bolivarianism*, signaled a re-founding of the nation based on a reinterpretation of its national past. The Venezuelan case featured emblematic elements primarily in the realm of politics rather than economic management itself, given that international oil pricing policies largely determined the latter. These policies allowed for a consistent budget that included public expenditures directed towards social program investments, which, under Chávez, provided a broad range of benefits to the lower strata of the population. In Argentina, similar policies also existed, though to a lesser extent, as was the case in Brazil under Lula (2003-2011). However, in Argentina, this process became notably

[5] The *corralito* was a set of economic measures implemented in Argentina at the end of 2001, which restricted citizens' access to their bank accounts to prevent the flight of resources.

associated with the popularized term “subsidized,” referring to those who directly relied on the government’s social investment policies.

While social programs and support for the “subsidized” imparted a strong left-wing identity to the governments of these three countries, it is essential to differentiate them with respect to the initial financial backing provided. In Argentina, resources were drawn from the relative budgetary relief achieved through negotiation and suspension of the country’s public debt obligations. On the other hand, Venezuela financed its commitments almost entirely through oil sales, which benefited from elevated prices during most of Hugo Chávez’s administration (1999-2013). Brazil’s case, in contrast, was associated with a period of high prices for commodities traded by the country (such as soybeans, protein products, and sugarcane-based products), alongside public debt control, rigorous inflation management, and the convergence of these factors, which allowed for economic growth. This growth enabled an increase in the public budget and, consequently, in social investments. A significant portion of these expenditures were returned to the state as taxes on household consumption, which experienced a considerable increase during this period (Mercadante, 2010). In Brazil, there was strict control over the conditions in which the economy was managed, including allocating public spending aimed at social programs.

Distinguishing the particularities of each country’s national context, what united these governments in terms of a new form of populism was more related to the version each created of itself through a reinterpretation of its national past. In this process, the liberating nature of this new wave of leftist governments, with a strong popular bias, was reflected both in social programs and in direct communication with the populace, establishing parallels between the past, present, and future. This formed a coherent narrative readily assimilable by a large part of the population. These were administrations that, on a massive scale, produced what are now recognized as *narratives*, encompassing politics, history, and a new political sociology.

In a strictly conceptual sense, Venezuela took on a distinctly populist character, while Argentina, with more limited institutional resources, confined itself to an economic populism (more closely associated with Menem) and a social populism (with the rise of the Kirchners). As for Brazil, populism was more present in academic research agendas, especially due to suspicions that the Bolsa Família program had a strong clientelist dimension, giving the government and the Workers’ Party a significant degree of maneuverability in direct communication with the populace, focusing directly on citizens’ pockets, though without assigning a specific label like the “subsidized” in Argentina. However, there is no consensus

on characterizing Lula's government as populist, and critics stopped short of labeling it as such. Nonetheless, as the South American continent embraced left-wing policies in a kind of wave, the shadow of populism was present, albeit at varying levels depending on each country's degree of institutional maturity and its corresponding political culture.

Given the various interpretative possibilities that the concept of populism allows in analyzing reality, the present moment once again ties Brazil to an external reality, this time on a broader scale and connected to a historical and political tradition distinct from that of Latin America.

One of the key elements of populism is its personalistic nature, where a political leader can push the institutional model towards an ideological split that diverges from all currently available options: such was the case with Varguism in Brazil and Peronism in Argentina, where definitions between right and left are not clearly established. Meanwhile, Venezuelan Chavismo presented itself under a marked left-wing rhetoric. In the current era, however, *Trumpism* in the United States and *Bolsonarism in Brazil* are unequivocally associated with a broad renewal of the right, which in the last decade has "*come out of the closet*" (Messenberg, 2017), gradually carving out spaces within online niches in a growing movement that, at a certain point, reaches the streets, occupies spaces, defines itself openly around issues that give it a well-defined political identity, and begins to amass significant electoral victories once it finds a personalistic leader to champion its political causes.

The conceptualizations and trajectories of populism described thus far would permit a recourse to the concept of *personalism*, or even to that of *authoritarianism*, both of which have a long tradition in Latin America. These concepts help to understand significant movements within this new right-wing wave, which found its leading spokespersons in Donald Trump and, later, Jair Bolsonaro. However, in Bolsonaro's case, an uncomfortable association with fascism emerges. In this context, it is pertinent to briefly revisit Ernesto Laclau's studies on the subject, aiming to clarify the issue with greater conceptual precision.

For Laclau, a fundamental question in politics is the role of *representation*, especially as an essential element for understanding the various moments and phases of populism. "The function of the representative does not simply consist of transmitting the will of those he represents but of giving credibility to that will in an environment different from the one in which it was originally constituted" (Laclau, 2013, p. 232, our translation). Using the language of new digital media and its relationship with politics, one could assert that Laclau almost presciently anticipates the idea that the new populist leader assumes the role of granting credibility to a

new set of demands from a specific group. However, this leader transcends the boundaries of this initial group, enabling these ideas to break out of the original "bubble" and expand into broader spheres. In a growing movement, these ideas gain adherence until they become majoritarian, thus achieving electoral success.

Additionally, Laclau offers reflections on the same theme in relation to fascism, reaching the following conclusions: "But in fascist theory, this balance – between leader and follower – definitively tilts to the other side: the leader must compel his followers to conform to what he does" (Id., p. 234, our translation).

In summary, Laclau's theory of populism takes into account, first and foremost, that a democratic identity is indistinguishable from a popular identity.

> All the components are present: the failure of a purely conceptual order to explain the unity of social agents; the necessity to articulate a plurality of positions or demands, which must coalesce around a central point; and the primary role of affect in consolidating this articulation. The consequence is inevitable: the construction of "the people" is the *sine qua non* condition for the functioning of democracy. Without the creation of a void, there is no "people," no populism, and consequently, no democracy (Id. p. 246, our translation).

He later concludes that "What has changed in democracy, compared with the *anciens régimes*, is that in those regimes, embodiment occurred in only one body, whereas today it transmigrates through a variety of bodies" (Id., p. 248, our translation). It is these bodies, pluralized and with a more concrete presence of "the people," that will occupy an expanded space in politics, conferring a new form upon the model. The leader remains important, as he is the spokesperson and demiurge of a set of concrete, sentimental, and abstract demands; he leads the masses, but when the model hardens, a scenario emerges in which "the leader must compel his followers to conform to what he does" (Id., p. 234, our translation), transforming the model into fascism, or something approaching that scenario.

Laclau's conceptual lexicon is quite particular, and this power struggle and occupation of space receive from the author a theorization on what he calls the "production of the *void*," more commonly understood as *space*, which is permanently occupied, as in the adage of political studies that there are no "empty spaces," given that they are always filled. Therefore,

> The author refers to the "empty signifier" as a (discursive) set that is purely differential, whose totality, in a certain sense, is a part of each "individual act of signification." In other words, empty signifiers constitute a chain of discourses articulated with each other, which, though distinct, unite at a given

> moment, forming a hegemonic totality (unity) (Rodrigues, 2014, p. 767, our translation).

Thus, "hegemony," as proposed by the author, would be: "the operation of assuming, through a particularity, an immeasurable universal meaning" (Laclau, p. 119–120, our translation). It is possible to understand the concreteness of these definitions in the present reality if we analyze more closely what might be termed the third wave of populism.

When Rodrigues (2014) highlights Laclau's notion of the individual act of signification forming a chain of discourses articulated with each other, he provides a clue to understanding an essential aspect of *Bolsonarism*, which may indeed have done precisely this: it unified a series of initially disconnected elements and endowed them with a common meaning, such as the economic crisis under Dilma's administration; corruption specifically associated with the Workers' Party (PT); residual and historical anti-PT sentiment; the Lava Jato operation; the clamor for honesty in politics; the fight against corruption; the struggle against crime; the almost idealized evocation of state efficiency; and the inauguration of a new era of prosperity.

The fact that some of these flags are now being removed from Bolsonaro's banner pushes his leadership to seek new elements to replace them, aiming to maintain an electoral majority: rebranding social programs, pursuing those unwittingly involved in corruption during the pandemic, and fighting quarantine measures to protect commerce. Thus, "vague feelings of solidarity" crystallize into a "discursive identity," and the leader, as spokesperson of a group aspiring to be the majority, will require this group to act as followers and to conform to the periodically renewed demands that take shape as a political agenda and set of struggles. Yesterday's ally becomes tomorrow's traitor; the discourse that once elected him may at any moment transmogrify into an unburied corpse.

Final considerations

In addition to describing three significant moments of populism, the text presents two ideas that merit revisiting at an appropriate time. The first is that populism in Latin America develops as a means of modernization, enabled by a shift in the mechanisms of domination, from former European colonialism to American financial capitalism. The second point concerns the correlation between populism and patrimonialism, as both promote certain progress yet tend to "stagnate" and become obstacles to further advancements, particularly in strengthening

organized civil society. For these reasons, both are largely viewed negatively from a conceptual and academic perspective.

In this regard, understanding populism involves continuously making a historical movement, a back-and-forth between politics and economics, to comprehend Latin America in its specificities and dilemmas, its missteps, and also its accelerated attempts to move toward a more modern future.

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