Latin American Politics: The Foundations of the Populist Turn

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> *The morning sun reverberated from the bronze sword.*
> *There was no longer even a vestige of blood.*
> *"Would you believe it, Ariadne?" said Theseus.*
> *"The Minotaur scarcely defended himself."*
> –Jorge Luis Borges, "The House of Asterion"

This article explores the normative foundations of the contemporary populist turn in Latin America from a theoretical perspective. We argue that the ongoing structural crisis of representative democracy, defined by its inability to identify and respond to growing social demands to provide valuable results for the majority of the population, negatively affects its legitimacy. This facilitates the irruption of a more radical political project, which, in the case of Latin America, is based on a populist discourse. The discussion focuses on the theoretical determination of the arguments used by populism to justify political action.

Keywords: Latin America, populism, institutional transformation, representative democracy, structural crisis, normativity

Este artículo explora los fundamentos normativos del giro populista contemporáneo en América Latina desde una perspectiva teórica. Argumentamos que la actual crisis estructural de la democracia representativa, definida por su incapacidad para identificar y responder a las crecientes demandas sociales de proporcionar resultados valiosos para la mayoría de la población, afecta negativamente su legitimidad. Esto facilita la irrupción de un proyecto político más radical, que, en el caso de América Latina, se basa en un discurso populista. La discusión se centra en la determinación teórica de los argumentos utilizados por el populismo para justificar la acción política.

Palabras clave: América Latina, populismo, transformación institucional, democracia representativa, crisis estructural, normatividad

Introduction

Populism has strong historical foundations in Latin American politics. Social movements such as those led by Juan Perón in Argentina, Getúlio Vargas in Brazil, José Maria Velasco Ibarra in Ecuador, and others represented the so-called first wave of populism in the region in the early and mid-twentieth century (Muno 2019). It functioned as a movement for the reaffirmation of "latinoamericanismo" and anti-imperialism. The second wave, neoliberal and technocratic in character, was situated between the 1980s and early 1990s, led by figures such as Carlos Menem in Argentina, Fernando Collor de Mello in Brazil, Alberto Fujimori in Peru, and Carlos Andrés Pérez in Venezuela. Their governments emphasized economic stability and structural adjustments programs recommended by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, and the liberalization of the economy (Edwards 1995, 2019; Cammack 2000). The third wave started in the late 1990s and continues to the current period (Muno 2019). Clearly opposed to a free market economy and strongly rooted in the left, it favors the protection of domestic sovereignty, criticizes imperialism, and is culturally committed to a Latin American identity in opposition to globalism.

In this article, we argue that the current Latin American populist wave has developed in the context of a complex political process characterized by the presence of grassroots movements and leftist political parties that challenge the traditional conception of representative democracy. Indeed, we perceive an ongoing political discussion between the liberal representative model of democracy and a progressive model of political organization that is not yet elaborated. Despite efforts to define it, populism can be considered a liquid concept (Bauman 2000), given the multiplicity of assessments and the variety of meanings. Perhaps the best way to characterize it is by associating its appeal to the "people" as the fundamental element to justify political action, distributional criteria, and decision-making processes (Gagnon et al. 2018). In any case, we assume here an ideational perspective. Populism, then, refers to a set of ideas that justify political struggle between the people and the elites (Hawkins and Kaltwasser 2017).

In this context, we attempt to study, from a theoretical point of view, the foundation of the contemporary populist turn in Latin America. We explore the endogenous triggers and structural conditions that favored regime change and the replacement of representative democracies with a different model of political organization based on some form of populist ideology in a growing number of countries throughout the region. Certainly, the majority of Latin American governments in power today identify ideologically with the left. They have assumed the rules of the democratic game to gain political power through electoral means; however, they maintain an antisystem narrative that depicts a confrontation between the people and the elites as the

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fundamental force of political transformation, in addition to strong criticism of liberal democracy and traditional political actors.

It is worth mentioning, for example, that contemporary leftist populism in countries such as Venezuela, Argentina, and Bolivia has developed as a strong political movement that, once in office, has used political legitimacy and the authority of the state to advance changes in power distribution, alter administration procedures, monopolize resource distribution, and install strong controls over social and political interactions—all based on a discourse of social claims, equality, redistribution, and justice.[1] We argue that this discourse has a strong populist base that proposes a significant transformation of both the scope of social interactions and the organization of society.

We contend that the third populist wave in Latin America is characterized by complex processes of a transformative nature, among which we identify five. The first is an increase in mass mobilization and mass public discourses that have become the central axis of political action. The second is the development of direct interactions between leaders and the public that have reduced the reach of the political parties' intermediation capabilities. The third is the identification of new "clients" or subjects of political discourse: those excluded by representative democracy, the losers in globalization, and the poor. The fourth is the presentation of social concerns and demands as the main object of public policies. The fifth is the emphasis on nationalism, anti-imperialism and, in some cases, socialism as the main ideological forces in the political discourse.

Following the example of early Latin American populist leaders, the contemporary populist wave in the region assumes a narrative based on the idea of confrontation. It is supposed to embody the sentiments and aspirations of the people and transform them into political discourse. In this way, populism builds its own identity in contradiction to the traditional elites that, according to the argument, avoid the emancipation of the people, thereby affecting their well-being. This populist discourse tells a story according to which the people need to organize as a political force to be freed from domestic oppression and imperialism. It appeals to the mass public as it calls for a political crusade under the promise of a better future.

In this article, we explore the conditions that have favored the current political transition founded on populist discourse. We characterize populism as a narrative that responds to objective conditions related to the weakening of representative democracy due to its incapacity to respond to social demands and expectations in our complex, interconnected, and globalized societies. Our inquiry is theoretical, but

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[1] Outcomes in the cases of Colombia, Chile, Brazil, and Mexico remain to be seen.

it is grounded in the dynamics of the contemporary political process experienced by the region.

1. Populism as a Political Narrative

Over the last two decades, Latin America has experienced a critical political change. The left has become a hegemonic regional force. By 2022, almost all the governments in the region could be identified as having leftist roots. This does not mean, however, that there is a common identity regarding the political process or even regarding the dimension of the social transformation that leftist discourse raises. Although common forums and joint declarations occur, the progressive proposal is still diverse and at times contradictory. Perhaps it can be said that they all share the idea that social relations within their respective countries have been unfair, since they have generated a very significant number of excluded people, and that it is necessary to incorporate the excluded majority and protect its rights against exploitation by the elites.

Just as there is no common identity, there is no common path. Each country has tried its own formula to promote the transformation processes that the populists propose. In that sense, each process has its own identity. This is how we find ourselves with more radical examples such as those led by Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Evo Morales in Bolivia, and Rafael Correa in Ecuador, alongside others that are more institutional, like that of Gabriel Boric in Chile and of Alberto Fernández in Argentina. We find open authoritarianism in regimes such as those of Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela and Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua, as well as others that are more ambiguous and difficult to classify, such as that of Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico or that of Gustavo Petro in Colombia. Each country adopted an agenda of institutional change based on its own identity, history, and social realities that define the scope of its political process.

Similarly, the very definition of populism seems ambiguous. Despite being a widely-used concept in the contemporary study of comparative politics, little agreement is evident regarding its meaning and implications. Despite the diversity of meanings, a coincidence occurs in considering populism as a political project in open opposition to liberal democracy (Arato 2013; Weinman and Vormann 2021). A dual understanding of the populist phenomenon has appeared. For some, populism represents a deepening of democracy due to its permanent appeal to the people (Canovan 1999; Mouffe 2016), while for others it represents a potential transition toward

authoritarianism (Corrales 2015; Levine 2017).[2] In this article, we contend along with a third group of scholars that populism is a response to the current crisis of representative democracy (Lafont 2020; Waldner and Lust 2018; Zolo 1992). It implies the radical polarization of society, the appeal to the people, and their mobilization in support of predetermined political objectives. Populism can be understood as oppositional to the existing "state of affairs" that characterizes representative democracy, which it considers unjust and discriminatory (Margalit 2019; Young 1990).

In this sense, the populist discourse not only challenges the status quo but raises the demand for its transformation (Abts and Rummens 2007). Although populism is not characterized by strong ideological foundations (Mouffe 2016), it does have an ideational base (Kestler and Latouche 2021) from which it draws the need to emancipate the people from the oppressive forces that limit their development. Based on this, we adopt Cas Mudde's definition of populism "as an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite,' and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people" (Mudde 2004). In this understanding, populism is not an ideology based on solid categories, but instead a series of shared ideas from which political action is constituted. This allows populism to be combined with a series of ideological features (Hawkins and Kaltwasser 2017).

Within populism, many diversities coincide. This common perspective that gives populism its identity is built from what Laclau (2005) calls equivalence chains, within which the demands of the sectors that have been excluded or less favored by the political process are articulated, creating points of coincidence that define the populist identity in opposition to the status quo. These points of coincidence translate into a set of ideas that populism, as a narrative, shares (Ungureanu and Serrano 2018). These ideas acquire a normative character, from which populism makes its own reading and interpretation of reality and justifies political action.[3]

Hence, populism assumes, for example, that politics has to do with the confrontation between the people and the elites that had traditionally controlled the political system (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012).[4] Populism, indeed, characterizes the people as the

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[2] Pappas (2022) for example, defines populism simply as "democratic illiberalism," assuming the possibility of its democratic character, and emphasizing the role that both political parties and leadership play in defining it.

[3] At this point, it is perhaps important to make a clarification. We do not believe that populism is a type of government or a political regime, but we affirm that governments and regimes can be influenced or determined by populism in terms of their ideas and understanding of politics.

[4] Mudde (2004), for example, emphasizes that in the case of populism, the distinction between the "people" and the "elites" is normative.

axis of politics. Political action is, in consequence, viewed as the result of the mobilization of the people in the public sphere. People mobilize intentionally, with the idea of achieving previously established political objectives. Therefore, populism assumes a lack of distributive justice in the context of the societies in which it emerges. Indeed, populism presents itself as a set of ideas from which an alternative form of political organization can be structured. It problematizes the traditional conception of freedom as the lack of external restrictions, defending the more complex vision that our freedom also has to do with the availability of opportunities for development (Sen 1999), permanent political participation, and emancipation.

Populism implies a particular understanding of the historical context and the construction of a confrontational narrative based on a serious critique of representative democracy, whereby it seeks to build an argument that favors the transformation of the political system and its replacement with a new, vaguely defined, conception of society based on a new distribution of power among relevant actors. In its allegations against the concentration of power among elites in representative democracy, populism tends to foster a more intense form of democracy by both increasing popular participation and recognizing the "people" as the fundamental actors in the political sphere. Accordingly, the participation of the people in the political process is crucial as a validating factor.

Contemporary Latin American populists have reached power by democratic means, although this was not always the case. Today's populists in the region have respected the rules of the democratic game and achieved electoral majorities, managed to structure new political loyalties, and promoted new normative perspectives, all of which have had an impact on the construction of new identities and roles for political agents. Under populist precepts, the people are not considered silent majorities whose political involvement is limited to electing representatives. Rather, they are perceived as active subjects within the political process who are expected to be involved in the dynamics of the public sphere. By rejecting revolutionary struggle and the use of force as mechanisms to achieve political power, contemporary leftist movements based on populist ideas are differentiated from former leftist utopia-seeking based on revolutionary uprisings and guerrilla movements with strong ideological foundations, as well as from old conservative movements that favored military coup d'états (Castañeda 2003, 2006; Petkoff 2007).[5]

As previously noted, populism has no consistent ideological coherence (Asladinis 2016; Hawkins and Kaltwasser 2017), and its ideological identity is weak (Canovan

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[5] For this reason, populism cannot be described as necessarily based on authoritarian values. Laclau (2005) himself states that the populist phenomenon can be located at either end of the political game.

2002). It has emerged in reaction to historical trends in which the interests of the people are unattended or dismissed. Populism can be found across the left/right political spectrum, as its fundamental feature is not its conceptual consistency but rather its permanent appeal to the people as a factor of justification, as well as its antagonism toward the ruling and intellectual elites (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012). But even more significantly, populism develops a grammar through which it interprets the world and history in a certain way. Populists claim to protect the "real interests" of the people. In the populist mythology, those interests have been historically distorted or neglected by the holders of political power. Thus, for populists, the exercise of active popular sovereignty becomes the legitimating factor of political action, whereby the people are expected to manifest directly the content of their political preferences and aspirations as they mobilize toward political aims that include, but are not limited to, the exercise of electoral rights and the government by the people.

It is important to note that the mechanisms of intermediation that are so common in representative democracy are replaced with direct communication between the leaders and the public. Populism rejects the role of mediation that political parties and the mass media traditionally play in representative democracy, as they flatten the relationship between leaders and people. Populists expect leaders to interpret the implications of the political moment and offer a political platform that will respond to popular demands (Robinson 1985; Spinrad 1991), hence implying the radicalization of politics and favoring the polarization of society.

People became the central political actors and as such are expected to participate in the political process that will transform the institutional structure and the distribution of justice. Populist actions are based on the idea that the current social structure tends to produce unjust results.[6] It is not by chance that populist discourse is based on the vindication of those who have been traditionally excluded. Even though populism can be characterized as a social aggregation phenomenon, it mainly grounds its actions and its agenda in grassroots movements, popular sectors, and groups that have been hurt by globalization and economic liberalization.

A sense of exclusion is perhaps, at least in the case of leftist populism in contemporary Latin America, the most important integrating element within the limits of political discourse. The people unite, as a collective actor, to demand justice, criticize existing poverty, and condemn social exclusion and exploitation, while asking for recognition as social actors whose interests can materialize only when they come to power. Society is then divided into at least two irreconcilable groups that perceive

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[6] Iris Marion Young (1990, 2000) has proposed a very interesting discussion about the problem of structural injustice and its effects on democracy.

each other as different in terms of their political interest. This suggests a dichotomy between emancipation and domination. In short, each part of the divide is presented as a whole, thus reducing, at least discursively, the heterogeneity and plurality of society.

Consequently, it seems accurate to view populism as a narrative. As such, it is composed of a story or a series of stories that attempt to establish a particular way to understand society. Populism seeks new explanations for the historical evolution of society and a reinterpretation of politics, a new understanding of current affairs, as well as their causes, consequences, and implications (Patterson and Monroe 1998). According to the populist imaginary, society should be characterized by a permanent interaction between friends and enemies, and politics is understood as a confrontation between the people and their historical enemies. Populism, therefore, does not favor dialogue or consensus with the elites. Quite the contrary. Populists perceive the elites as antagonists, whose interests are in direct contradiction to their own. As populism co-opts the public space, the voices of elites fade to the point where they can no longer be heard, or their message becomes distorted (Pappas 2019).

Latin American populism at the beginning of the twenty-first century builds a discourse that responds from the trenches of the left to the crisis of representative democracy. Unlike traditional parties, it distances itself from the idea of seeking consensus and building political agreements to guarantee the governability of the system; rather, it proposes to resolve contradictions through some form, radical or not, of political confrontation. The populist narrative interprets the collective will as unitary and univocal, but not as the result of the aggregation of the different individual wills in a society. Instead, it appears as the representation of the general will raised by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his conception of the social contract as a fundamental republican principle that is associated with the spirit of the nation. As a consequence, populism requires a centralized leadership that controls the political process, interpreting and directing the community, its needs, and its aspirations (Urbinati 2015).

The populist movement develops a unified structure that allows it to guide the mass public toward a previously established political objective. This is essential because populism requires a cohesive perspective on the political process, a commitment to the collective that is supposed to transcend individual interests. A republican standpoint, based on the idea of the general will, assumes that the subjects align around the common interest, which is determined by the confluence of individual desires around the idea of the common good. Furthermore, it expects that those who make up the populist project align their individual interests with the conception of the general will that the populist project adopts. This allows populism to build a sense of unity according to the following premise: those who belong to the people will

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assume the arguments and actions of the common project as their own; as such, they will validate them and work for their materialization. All of this assumes that the populist movement always acts to favor the interests of the people. Once individual interests and common interests are aligned, people's actions are justified by encompassing the interests of all those who identify as part of society interpreted as a political totality.

Contrary to the liberal narrative, populism understands human well-being not as the result of individual effort, but as the result of a social process in which a majority of the people, who do not have access to distributive justice, "push" through a transformative process that validates them as social actors and transforms the collective distribution mechanisms (Young 1990, 2000). This assumes that the initial institutional framework—that is, the one that existed before populism came to power—favors an unequal distribution of costs and benefits among members of society, which, in the long term, will end up affecting the social balance, reducing political stability, and opening the possibility of important changes within the system (Latouche 2019).

The populist discourse appeals to the popular masses, interprets them, and provides them with an organic character that leads them to be qualified as "the people" and to become the "historical subject" of the political process. To this end, populism needs to develop the ability to build a coherent narrative, capable of appealing to the masses and interpreting them, but also capable of being reproduced until it is assimilated and repeated by the group to which it appeals and becomes incorporated into the public conversation. To be effective, the narrative must guarantee an emotional identification with the people, but it must also allow them to see their own interests, values, and expectations reflected in its content. The subjects recognize themselves as members of the mobilized collective while they are building a social identity based on otherness.

2. The Crisis of Representative Democracy

Adam Przeworski (2020) argues that to define the content of a crisis of democracy, one must specify the way that we understand democracy. Political scientists have long distinguished between procedural definitions of democracy, in which elections are central to democratic legitimacy, and more substantive or participatory definitions of the term. In our case, we understand democracy as a complex concept that transcends procedural aspects. Democracy requires, of course, procedures including free and regular elections, the division of power, and the rule of law (Bobbio 1987; Schumpeter 1987; Przeworski 2020). A minimalistic and purely procedural definition of democracy, however, seems insufficient to understand the challenges it currently confronts in Latin America and elsewhere. A more dynamic set of social interactions

in the context of globalization perhaps requires a more complex and comprehensive understanding of democracy (Zolo 1992). Beyond political representation, democracy seems to require a space for social deliberation (Fishkin 2018; Lafont 2020). But even more, democracy requires an adequate normative framework that favors the development of cooperative behavior, fair distribution of resources, and guarantees of rights (Bicchieri 2006, 2017; Brennan and Hamlin 2000). From this perspective, many Latin American states could not be classified as democracies.

We could say that in the regional experience, the governments that were established in the context of the democratic transitions of the last forty years of the twentieth century should rather be defined following Robert Dahl's concept of polyarchy (Dahl 1990). Under this minimalist conception, we can qualify a political regime as democratic as long as it holds periodic, free, and competitive elections, allows political participation, and protects civil liberties (Przeworski 2020). This does not take into consideration aspects related to distributive criteria, the quality of political participation, or access to justice.

In this section, we first analyze the case of representative democracy in Latin America based on a minimal definition, and then gradually incorporate some of the other elements described above. The current trend in Latin American politics raises many questions regarding the actual crisis of representative democracy and its lack of consolidation. The electoral results of the last decades tell us about the increasing weakening of traditional political parties, which seems to translate into a loss of confidence among voters and the search for new political alternatives; but they also seem to indicate the presence of a high degree of polarization that makes it difficult to build consensus. Progressive parties and grassroots movements raise the need for changes in the structure of society. The modification of a nation-state's constitution has become a recurring programmatic demand that attracts an important sector in each country, generating a potentially divisive effect.

As it developed in Latin America, democracy was based on the representative model in which strong political parties tended to monopolize political action. The parties were established as intermediation mechanisms that would allow sound communication between the state and society. This produces a clear division between the private and public spheres and an understanding that citizens will dedicate themselves to their own affairs and leave politics to the political parties. In representative democracy, voters choose among professional politicians to represent them through the universal, direct, and secret vote. This limits the direct involvement of citizens in politics, which perhaps is one of the most important weaknesses of this model of democracy, especially in the contemporary context. In a world characterized by increasing complexity and increasing social demands, representative democracy tends to underrepresent the numerous sectors of society whose demands are not

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met by decision-makers or by the traditional political parties. This tends to reduce political support for traditional parties while favoring confrontational populist discourse (Landemore 2020).

This seems to be the case today in Latin America. Representative democracy has been co-opted by political elites that find it very difficult to communicate with the broader public, limiting active political participation to voting (Rey 1989; Scott 1992; Larell 2015; Petkoff 2007). As such, common citizens find it difficult to be regularly involved in decision-making processes that concern their own interests (Guevara 1997; Larrique 2011). Traditional political parties have not evolved to represent the complexities that characterize our modern, diverse, heterogeneous, and globalized societies (Barragan 1998, 2003, 2011; Zolo 1992; Crouch 2004). In fact, elites who form the axis of political action in representative democracies often make decisions that fail to reflect the voices and preferences of important sectors of the society that end up underrepresented (Parker 2006), which seems to be the case in Latin American politics. This process of appropriation of the public space not only reduces pluralism and limits political participation, but also implies the existence of a significant democratic deficit (Crouch 2004).

Representatives are arguably under no direct obligation to reflect their constituents' preferences before they vote on a given issue, voice their thoughts in parliament, or administer public resources. As early as 1774, in an address to his electorate in Bristol, Edmund Burke established that his responsibility as a representative was not limited by the particular preferences of his electors, or what is known as the delegate model of representation. On the contrary, he said that his responsibility was to represent the interests of the British society of his time, understood as a whole. This became known as the trustee model of representation. The problem is therefore apparent. It is relatively easy to represent collective interests when these are marked by cultural homogeneity. But in recent years, social interactions have been characterized increasingly by diversity. It does not mean that the society was traditionally homogeneous, but instead, that the exercise of representation was limited to the interests of particular sectors of the society, mostly the middle and the upper classes.

The historical experience in Latin America shows that the early manifestations of nonconformity, such as the *campesino* movements in Bolivia, Venezuela, or Colombia, or the *descamisados* in Argentina, were strongly repressed by military forces under both authoritarian and democratic governments. The existence of mass media, social networks, and, perhaps, even an international system that values human rights makes it easier for different manifestations of diversity to express themselves in current societies. In this case, the definition of collective interests necessarily is blurred. The complexity of our modern mass societies makes it difficult

to represent the diverse interests that are played out in the public sphere. Lack of representation leads to the inability to respond to the demands of underrepresented groups.

One could say that the very presence of political alternatives, including populism, raised in a climate of social polarization, demonstrates the crisis of representative democracy as a political regime. At this point, society faces fundamental conflicts regarding race, economic development, social inclusion, income distribution, availability of opportunities, recognition, respect, and freedom. Other equally demanding challenges include universal COVID vaccination, climate change, human rights, social media, and individual identity. And all of this is happening in a highly complex, heterogeneous, and changing environment in which multiple identities and aspirations coexist and compete. Failures to respond to the complexity of the social agenda and subsequent dissatisfaction with the work of traditional politicians and parties might explain the arrival of alternatives to democracy and its current crisis. Somehow the complexity of contemporary society has caused democracy to appear deficient and regressive (Isaacharoff 2018; Schäfer and Zürn 2021; Zolo 1992).

Representative democracy requires the delegation of individual political interests and actions to elected public officials. These delegates receive a political mandate that they must represent and follow, but the relationship between elected officials and the general population is, to say the least, problematic. Both politicians and public servants are asked to interpret and respond to the needs and demands of the nation as a whole, functioning as mediators between society and the state, as they are supposed to represent the interests of both. As such, the actions of elected officials are expected to reflect the preferences and aspirations of the citizens. Therefore, at least theoretically, the actions of public servants must replicate the "voice of the citizens" who have delegated the exercise of political action to them. Although it is granted that representatives require autonomy in the exercise of public activities, over-separation between the people and their representatives threatens the coherence of democracy. This is particularly so when the representatives find it difficult to determine the characteristics of collective identity or to define the contents of collective interests. In the context of complexity, it is common for the interests of specific social groups of individuals to be misrepresented (Crouch, 2004; Pitkin, 2004).

One of the main characteristics of the current crisis of representative democracy is precisely the lack of representation endured by important sectors of society, whose interests tend to become invisible in the political system (Landemore 2020). Historically, we can think, for example, of Evita Perón's *descamisados* or Hugo Chávez's "People." The current model of representative democracy seems to involve high levels of dissatisfaction and a significant decrease in popular support (Foa and

Mounk 2016). This is manifested in the reduction of political participation in election campaigns and the influence of traditional parties in the political process (Isaacharoff 2018), an increase in political apathy, less popular support for democratic institutions, and finally, an increase in support for alternatives (Foa and Mounk 2016). Back in 1989, Francis Fukuyama published a very well-known article (later extended into a book) proclaiming the end of ideological conflict and postulating liberal democracy as the only possible formula for legitimate social organization (Fukuyama 1992). This reference is important not because of its accuracy in describing the historical moment—in fact, his prescription was obviously wrong—but because it correctly describes the general mood of that time. For Fukuyama and the many who subscribed to his argument, liberal democracy was a hegemonic model in a context of human cooperation and limited confrontation and was considered the *only game in town*. However, the rapid evolution of diverse antiliberal alternatives and actions, including attacks by terrorist groups in the United States and Europe, and recent events such as the "victory" of the Taliban in Afghanistan and the war between Russia and Ukraine, have reduced the sense of quietness and security that prevailed for a few years after the end of the Cold War, while, at the same time, calling into question the legitimacy of representative democracy as the predominant method of political organization.

Theoretically, representative democracy is ruled by the people, who manifest their preferences by voting. Elected officials are called to represent the interests of the individuals and groups that make up society. Consequently, many have assumed that the model of representative democracy implies a series of promises related to the construction of the liberal democratic social order itself, and also with the possibility of guaranteeing the well-being of the population in the context of collective decision-making processes and regular competitive elections. After all, in a democracy, sovereignty resides in the people (Bobbio 1987). Under representative democracy, authority is materialized through the action of public administrators and by the intermediation of organizations such as political parties, trade unions, and organized civil society, while the actions of individuals are limited to voting (Jörke 2005). One appreciates, however, that suffrage creates an expectancy based on the fulfillment of electoral promises. In fact, majority rule not only determines the identity of the elites in power but also their mandate. Failure to comply with electoral promises tends to increase dissatisfaction with the democratic regime. Moreover, when the promises do not materialize, the result is a democratic deficit, which tends to produce instability (Zolo 1992).

3. The Problem of Realizability

In the last two decades, much of Latin America has fluctuated between radical and representative democracy. To understand this pendulum movement, it seems

necessary to address, from a normative perspective, the problems related to the nature of representative democracy in Latin America. As we have suggested, the evolution of democracy in the region is somewhat limited and unconsolidated (Latouche 2006). In general, we can identify poor institutional development, high levels of corruption, and high rates of social exclusion. In this context, populism has become, often successfully, a strong competitor in electoral processes.

The question then becomes clear: What led people to favor the "populist offer"? By the end of the 1990s, Latin America found itself in a very complex situation. As a response to the so-called "lost decade for development" of the 1980s, it adopted Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) required by the IMF and World Bank as a condition for further loans.[7] These were supposed to guarantee economic growth and development, but those goals were never reached. By the turn of the century, poverty continued to be widespread, and the region was, in general, very much behind its competitors in international markets. Specialization was based on comparative advantage, which forced the region to focus on the exploitation of raw materials and their derived products. This prevented countries from advancing into a competitive process of industrialization, but even more importantly, it changed the nature of social relations in terms of income distribution. It further widened the social distance between those who benefited from the internationalization of the economy—in particular those related to the financial sectors—and workers, in particular blue-collar workers.

A low level of economic growth implied low revenues for the national states, but also higher unemployment rates, which did not correspond to the expectations of the common citizens based on the reforms or sacrifices that they required. According to the official discourse, structural adjustment would cause losses in the short run (often labeled "shock therapy") but in the long run would lead to increases in competitiveness and improvements in the population's quality of life. After a decade of the experiment, however, in general the regional economies performed poorly.

Moreover, the lack of revenues, corruption, and inefficiencies affected the capacity of governments to perform. Public administrators lost their capacity to respond to growing demands from the population and, in general, governments were unable to adapt to changes in the social structure and cope with the expectations of different social groups (Latouche 2019). Throughout the region, although unique characteristics obtained in each particular case, a rapid deterioration of political

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[7] These included cutting public sector employment, subsidies, and other spending to reduce budget deficits; privatizing state-owned enterprises and deregulating state-controlled industries; easing business regulations to attract foreign investment; and improving domestic tax collection.

equilibrium seemed to be directly related to the governments' inability to perform adequately. During the last decade of the last century, many regional governments responded poorly to the needs of the population and were unable to deliver social goods efficiently. According to Castañeda (2006), poverty, inequality, and the inadequacy of the political system made it unavoidable for the left to reach power eventually, as leftists were more willing to recognize the population's social needs.

The disappointing policy performance affected governability, and low levels of satisfaction with democracy reduced popular support for both the government and the political system. It is natural for bad governments to do badly in elections, which results in their replacement. In a normal situation, this does not further affect the structural stability of the political system. But in the case of Latin America, this process has implied the transformation of the game in recent years.

Boyne et al. (2009) have shown a direct, significant, nonlinear negative correlation between low performance and voting support in English local governments. According to this study, people value the perceived responsibility of incumbents and the alleged quality of performance when deciding how to vote. This is consistent with the results obtained by the Berggruen Institute's 2019 Governance Index, according to which the quality of the government, the quality of life, and the quality of democracy show a positive correlation with governance and stability in a thirty-eight-country study.

The Latin American experience seems to demonstrate that a low and worsening level of performance during a long period of time can structurally affect the political system. This has resulted not merely in the alterability of incumbents, but, more importantly, in the deterioration of the institutional framework that supports democratic life. This is crucial when we consider democracy to be more than simply a decision-making process based on "majority rule," but rather a way of life based on a normative construction that favors both cooperative behavior and the materialization of a "life worth living" (Sen 1999).

Today, democracies typically are not removed by armed revolutions or military coups (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). Instead, their dismissal results from endogenous conditions that favor substitution by alternative political regimes. Conversely, contemporary democracies find it difficult to deal with the challenges and difficulties that come from inside the democratic system. They are rarely overthrown by violence, but instead are gradually replaced by elected officials who to a certain extent obey the rules of the democratic game in a context of institutional fragility. According to Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018), this is possible when democracy has low levels of popular support, less mobilization in favor of the system, and high levels of dissatisfaction with its performance. Conversely, strongly legitimated democracies

are not easily dismantled. They tend to have the mechanisms and strength to defend their institutional framework and to prevent structural challenges to their survival.

This could lead us to conclude that a democratic system will struggle to withstand crises when that system: does not allow its citizens to participate in politics beyond elections; responds mainly to the interests of the elites; allows the existence of significant social differences among economic sectors; reduces opportunities for self-realization for numerous citizens; or permits major differences in the distribution of costs and benefits between social sectors. Even more, one could say that from a normative perspective, in order to survive democracy needs to develop a strong institutional setting and also to provide individuals with acceptable living conditions, fairness, equality, and opportunities for self-realization. According to Hélène Landemore, three conditions show that a crisis affects the stability of representative democracy: (1) the progressive reduction of electoral participation; (2) the growing incapacity of mass political parties to represent diverse and complex interests; and (3) the growing polarization of contemporary societies (Landemore 2020).

This seems to be precisely the situation in Latin America today. Representative democracy has been unable to consolidate either the democratic process or democratic institutions. Indeed, Latin America has been unable to reduce inequality and social exclusion or poverty. The transition from representative democracy to populism seems to be marked by economic crisis and the lack of economic and institutional soundness. It is worth noting that the latest wave of populism was preceded by numerous protests against the SAPs by different democratic governments.

It is not unexpected that many of the organized groups that protested against economic liberalization during the 1980s and 1990s ended up serving as platforms for the populist movements that emerged at the end of the last decade of the twentieth century and later came to power through elections. One of the most powerful critiques of representative democracy in Latin America points to both the separation between elites and common citizens and problems with the distribution of costs and benefits among different social groups (Guevara 1997; Latouche 2007).

The state requires resources in order to respond to social demands and provide public goods. Without resources, the capacities of the state will necessarily decline, along with its ability to cover its citizens' needs. All of this seems to respond to the postdemocratic evolution of the political regime as well as to its lack of democratic consolidation (Jörke 2005; Bobbio 1987; Crouch 2004), which implies the hegemony of the elites and the monopolization of benefits and supposes the existence of a weak institutional framework and the impossibility of providing distributive justice (Garzón Valdez 1999; Belloso Martí 1999).

The recent crisis of representative democracy in Latin America is related, then, to its lack of realizability in two fundamental spheres. On one hand was its inability to properly represent the contradictory interests of differentiated social groups, which reduced the availability of opportunities and favored social exclusion. On the other was its inability to efficiently cope with the economic crises that the region experienced during the 1980s and 1990s. The crisis of the 1980s revealed the failure of the import substitution policies of the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC),[8] and the crisis of the 1990s was a consequence of the impact of macroeconomic adjustment policies required by international lenders and their extremely high social costs.

The continuation of the crises and government incapacity increased voters' dissatisfaction with and mistrust of the democratic political system, thus opening the door to the populist alternative. As traditional democracy has weakened, progressive movements increased their influence in decision-making processes and institutional design and attained the presidency in a significant number of countries, while the influence of traditional political parties significantly lessened. Indeed, a permanent political crisis based on economic failure, social exclusion, inequality, and corruption, among other factors, has affected the credibility of the democratic system and, consequently, its ability to receive popular support (Álvarez 2021). By 2022, almost all the countries of Latin America had populist governments.[9]

4. On the Justification of the Populist Narrative

We have argued that populism is a form of discourse that rose and persists in the context of the gradual deconsolidation of representative democracy. Moreover, we understand populism as an attempt to build an alternative narrative for power distribution, social relations, and dominance, while seeking to justify its own irruption in the political arena in terms of political participation, social recognition, and distributive fairness. This produced a confrontation with liberalism and, in particular, with the neoliberal doctrine and structural adjustment programs advanced in Latin America during the 1990s under the regulation of the World Bank and the IMF

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[8] Created in 1948, ECLAC promoted the creation and protection of domestic industries to replace the dependence on imported goods. These import substitution industrialization (ISI) policies were designed to promote development by making local economies and their nations self-sufficient.

[9] The characteristics of left-wing governments in the region vary from case to case. For example, Venezuela and Nicaragua can be characterized as highly radical in the process of institutional change and power accumulation, while Brazil under Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff and Argentina under Alberto Fernández underwent more moderate processes, and Bolivia under Evo Morales and Ecuador can be situated in between. This point is discussed in depth in Levitsky and Roberts (2011).

(Edwards 1995). This does not mean that populism builds upon a forceful ideological conception; in fact, it does not. But certainly, common codes and categories are used to justify its entrance into the political arena and its actions in this context (Asladinis 2016).

In the case of Latin America, the common element is its reaction to neoliberalism. It is important to note that after the so-called "lost decade for development," the region adopted a liberalization program that implied free trade, free competition, the privatization of state-owned companies, the reduction of state bureaucracy, and the dismantling of social programs (Agarwal and Sengupta 1999). In general, these actions imposed major pressure on society and negatively affected the living conditions of the most vulnerable population sectors, while further increasing social inequality (Larell 2015; Thomson, Kentikelenis, and Stubbs 2017). It is no coincidence that it was precisely the affected sectors that eventually became both the fundamental supporters of populism in the region and its main "clients."

Electoral procedures have been insufficient to guarantee the realization of democracy despite their importance as a legitimating mechanism. In the Latin American experience, populism in power developed under the influence of charismatic leaders who managed to concentrate power and confront political opposition (Kestler and Latouche 2021). This has produced a strong reaction that is manifested in public outcries and permanent political confrontation. Populism both generates and requires political polarization to survive. Often, it has led to transitions toward autocracies or at least toward the "hybridization" of the political regime. Populism in power seeks to maintain the structure of democracy while suppressing the traditional liberal structure of the political regime (Pappas 2019). This tends to produce a transformation of the society's institutional structure, based on a distribution of power that generally favors the grounding of the populist project.

Populism, however, in the context of Latin America's current political evolution, cannot be considered an imposition. After all, it has achieved and maintained power through electoral methods that respond to voter preferences. The argument for populism is based on two practical conceptions. One is the idea that in a democracy, the people's sovereignty must be manifested beyond the electoral process. Second is the idea that people must be emancipated from any structure or mechanism that restricts their "natural freedom."

At least in terms of its rhetoric, populism speaks of freedom, albeit not in liberal terms, but from a conception that seems to draw on the thesis of Rousseau's social contract. From the populist perspective, individuals must speak for themselves as active members of society. In this regard, populism supposes direct interaction between the leaders and the mass public. Intermediation is considered unnecessary

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because it is viewed as a mechanism that does not reflect the will of the people, but instead the will of the elites. Populists use these arguments to justify their exercise of power, whereby they seek to recover the "original conception of democracy," according to which, the democratic process is grounded in the direct action of the members of the *demos*. But even more, they assume the mobilization of the masses to be a mechanism for the justification of political action.

Despite distortions and authoritarian trends in the recent evolution of populist regimes in Latin America, it seems crucial to observe the content of the populist political and social discourse in order to understand it as a political phenomenon. The crisis of representative democracy not only reduced the strength of the political regime and its constitutive elements, but also affected the soundness of the arguments that traditionally have been used to justify the representative model, such as the division of power, alternation in power, and rule of law. Thus, while populism cannot be considered a strong ideological construction, as some authors suggest (Urbinati 2019; Mudde 2004; Canovan 2002), it certainly is a "discursive frame" (Asladinis 2016). As such, the populist framework not only includes conceptual elements in its justification, but also a particular notion of the individual as a political actor, and its own understanding of freedom and political participation.

Populism is a reaction against the perception that representation has taken individuals away from the public space. Representative democracy can recognize the existence of multiple political parties and associations, but not the presence of the people acting in their own interests without appealing to intermediation mechanisms. According to its rhetoric, *populism is about giving power back to the people*. The populist argument states that elites have removed the people from the democratic equation, which tends to invalidate the principle of equality that characterizes liberal discourse (Chávez 2004). The presence of free and equal individuals as a requirement for justice (Rawls 1978) is, for populists, insufficient to determine the quality of representative democracy. Populists argue that the measure of political freedom is necessarily associated with the possibility of active political participation. In fact, according to populist discourse, the very existence of limits for political participation reduces the number of opportunities available to those who are excluded. This defines a narrative according to which people must free themselves from their oppressors to live a life in which they can flourish under the protection of the general will manifested in popular action.

Populism works permanently to intensify the confrontation between the elites and the people (Charaudeau 2019). This does not seem very difficult to do when power and resources do not easily circulate among the different sectors of society. Limited mobility and few economic opportunities erode the foundations of representative democracy by increasing its internal contradictions (Pitkin 2004). Populists view the

world as a place full of conflicts. According to the populist narrative, a lack of consensus leads to strong political disagreements between the people and the elites that have traditionally exploited them. The people need to be emancipated to reach their full potential and to be free. This is made possible by deepening the historical confrontation between the people and the elites. The people are perceived as a political aggregate whose main objective is its own emancipation. Populists argue that their actions are justified as long as they are trying to get back to the root of democracy, to recognize the people as political actors, and to interpret political mobilization as the guiding principle of political action.

Populism, as a narrative, requires the construction of political identities. These are subjects who are represented by political discourse and are considered interlocutors. This requires not only the determination of collective aspirations and expectations but also the direct involvement of the subjects with politics. The people mobilize because they are perceived as the very soul of the political community. They are, in general, a group of good people who define their collective identity against those whom they consider, rightly or wrongly, their oppressors. Populists present the people as pure, resourceful, and good, in opposition to the corrupt elites who exploit and take advantage of their purity, goodness, and integrity, while appropriating the product of their labor, lowering their aspirations, and destroying their dreams (Arato 2013).

These utopian visions give a dichotomous character to the interactions between the various social sectors that make up society; for the populists, conflicts of interest acquire an exclusive character that cannot be resolved through negotiation or the search for consensus. We must remember, after all, that narrative can be used as an extraordinarily strong mechanism for constructing social justifications. Political narratives require, first, a plausible and coherent understanding of the story, which then becomes and is considered common knowledge. Second, it is necessary for the mobilizing story to be validated by a large and influential number of individuals so that it can be considered by society as a reflection of its reality. In other words, it is about validating the premises established by political discourse, as well as a series of identifiable argumentative patterns that provide an attractive interpretation of the particularities of a historical situation and that imply its interpretation from a particular point of view (Lamarque 1990). The populist political narrative, then, tries to find an explanation for the living conditions and general situation of the people based on the existence of a common enemy whose actions contradict the interests of the mass public.

The narrative of populism stigmatizes the difference between social groups. The "other" is considered different, distant, and in general, dangerous. The populist narrative assumes, to a greater or lesser extent, a political perspective according to

which the existence of the "other" threatens the very survival of a primary political community. Populism builds its argument from the logic of contradictions: the existence of elites endangers the survival of the people in its purest form. Once the people have developed the ability to speak with "their own voice," have a permanent presence in the political sphere, and are supposedly capable of building their own destiny, the elites that seek to prevent their survival must be defeated.

Populism does not necessarily care about the validity of its political statements, but it does care about its credibility, as if it were an act of faith. The idea of truth acquires a political character that becomes associated in a pragmatic way with the "political necessity" of the moment, and not necessarily with the logical sense of the arguments or their adherence to the facts. For populism, political truth does not necessarily go through convergence, dialogue, contrasting points of view, or the construction of agreements between political actors. On the contrary, it understands that truth can be established or revealed even before its discovery, which constructs the "populist truth" based on the values accepted by populism as valid.

Populist discourse requires, then, a "leap of faith." It hopes that this will be accepted as reliable, even if it suggests a reinterpretation of historical facts previously accepted as valid by society and the scientific community, the reinvention of symbols, the change of identity of the heroes, or a "convenient reading" of reality. In this, populism seems to have its roots in devotion and not necessarily in a reasonable political construction. Faith, after all, does not need to be explained, nor does it require a rational justification. Populism is surrounded by an unbridled passion for the values and ideas it professes (Walzer 2002). The stories that sustain political discourse are presented as self-validating and unquestionable; populists assume that they reflect the true dimensions of political reality. Therefore, populism cannot be considered a pluralistic doctrine.

Populism constructs its conception of society as absolute and indisputable. This perspective implies a teleological understanding of politics (Arato 2013) in which the engine is not God but the people. The populist assumes that the voice of the people is the voice of God, without stopping to consider from where it comes and who interprets it. After all, the people are the embodiment of the nation, which necessarily implies a certain degree of political radicalization. In this narrative, people are considered victims of exclusion and, sometimes, of segregation and violence against which they have a natural right to rebel (Urbinati 2015; Bertram 2004). Consequently, the recovery of rights is possible only through a conflict of claims that may be more or less intense, depending on the particular circumstances, but that is inevitable. It seems clear that populism requires tension, controversy, and even confrontation with at least one other competing political option to create its own character and identity in polar opposition to "the other."

Conclusions

The advance of populist-based political alternatives in Latin America in the last twenty-five years seems to have been driven by the weakening of the institutional structure that supported representative democracy. As the chosen equilibrium became unstable, the political system faced several significant problems. It became incapable of guaranteeing the long-term well-being of the population, as economic crises affected the operability of public administration. It became increasingly less able to respond to demands and provide solutions to public dilemmas regarding not only the provision of services and social goods but also the redistribution of the costs and benefits among different social groups. Populism responded to this "crisis of representation" by offering an alternative to traditional parties and to the "traditional way of doing politics."

In the last two decades of the twentieth century, a growing percentage of the population fell below the poverty line in Latin America. Increasing inequality in the distribution of income, rising unemployment, and the deterioration of living conditions increased the population's dissatisfaction with governmental performance. The Latin American experience shows that people do not mobilize to defend the political system when they perceive that it is not responsive to their aspirations and needs.

The substitution of representative democracy was not perceived as problematic for the majorities that favored the populist formulas in different electoral campaigns throughout Latin America. The countries that took the populist route were, in general, experiencing a normative crisis as the social equilibrium broke, and elites and political parties were rejected by the voters. Governments maintained order by the use of force. Protests and demonstrations were common as the people expressed their dissatisfaction with and resentment of political parties and their public officials. Social order underwent several changes, with new and more active actors making demands for structural changes that went unanswered by decision-makers. We must not search for the roots of populism only in the rise of charismatic leaders and of popular discourse accepted by mass publics. Structural causes, associated with poor performance, corruption, inefficiency, and the general lack of realizability, seem crucial for understanding the recent rise of populism in Latin America.

Evidence suggests that democracies struggle to function in the presence of excessive inequalities and privileges. The social equilibrium becomes unstable when the needs and demands of the majorities are overlooked by the administrations. Populism developed as a discourse that appealed to the masses and endorsed their aspirations. Populist rhetoric is based widely on the idea of granting emancipation to those traditionally excluded. Whether it is achieved belongs to a different debate. Here, we have merely outlined the basis of the populist narrative and its arguments.

We can consider populism a strong political project opposed to the status quo. It is based on the idea that the masses historically have been oppressed by elites who are portrayed as their traditional antagonists. Populism relies on a series of stories or interpretations of reality that, rather than interpreting it, raises the need to transform it through popular action. Populists consider the people, interpreted as a totality, to be the historical subject of the collective project. Thus, they operationalize the idea of the people through popular mobilization in favor of demands for the excluded sectors of society.

Even though the populist movement tends to be multiclass, it considers the popular sectors as its main source of support and sustenance, since they are, after all, the sectors least served by representative democracy. They are characterized by discontent—and even more, resentment—toward a political class that has failed to pay sufficient attention to their aspirations and needs. This explains the construction of a common identity between the populist leader and the popular sectors. The first is considered a subject of the people and of the collective that is, or has been, alien to the traditional political game. The leader, moreover, is someone who comes to claim the rights of the majority that has been subjected to mistreatment by the elites who have limited the majority's development and well-being. Populism assumes that the elites have appropriated wealth, that the distribution of costs and benefits among the members of society is unfair, and that opportunities for achievement among the popular sectors are, frankly, scarce. Under these premises, populism characterizes representative democracy as a structurally unfair system.

According to this narrative, the objective of populism is to guarantee popular emancipation. To achieve this, it proposes a confrontation with the elites that have traditionally managed and benefited from political and economic power. Populism responds not only to the crisis of representative democracy but also to structural conditions of injustice that, according to its narrative, have characterized the political system under representative democracy.

Populism seeks to achieve power in order to transform society, but for populism, it seems difficult to build consensus. This has to do with the origins of the populist narrative. When considering the construction of politics as an exercise in contradictions in which the elites and the popular masses are considered historical enemies, with opposing and exclusionary interests, it seems logical to think that the possibility of generating constructive dialogue and cooperative spaces between the parties in conflict is limited. Populism conceives of public space as a closed preserve in which the populist message has a preponderant and often hegemonic character. The nature of populism is, after all, antiliberal, which makes it difficult to reach agreements with its opponents through rational negotiation processes.

Instead, populism tries to recognize the will of the people as its justification mechanism. This is interpreted from Rousseau's idea of the general will, and as such, it acquires a teleological character that does not allow it to be questioned or subjected to discussion. After all, the will of the people is interpreted as the will of God, which cannot be questioned. The populist narrative is validated by the political mobilization of the people in the public square, by the acclaim of political speeches, and by election results. This causes the institutional mechanisms associated with the operation of the rule of law to be somehow despised.

Populism tends to overflow institutional limits. It is a disruptive system that tries to define its own institutional structure and, in general, involves the transformation of the political regime. Populist leaders tend to be charismatic. They interpret and represent the voice of the people, and they direct the masses toward very well-defined political objectives associated with the accumulation of political power. Populism tells a story of struggle and emancipation against forces that oppose the liberation of the people, of elites that limit the potential of the people to reach their real potential, and of heroic actions of the people in favor of their own salvation. These stories are not always based on the truth, but they are always based on a particular and plausible interpretation of the facts.

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