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Repensando los populismos en América latina (mediados del siglo XX)

Latin American Populism: Tentative Reflections for a Global Historiographical Perspective

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Résumés

English Español

Latin American populism has usually been considered as an integrationist strategy towards the urban working classes in the context of mass democracy and import substitution



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, the following ones can be identified: support from the tip, nationalism and anti-intellectualism, anti-communism, al change, and corporatism. Recent writings influenced by lespite their different social ontologies, also proclaim Latin nese cases the notion of “political style” prevails over socio- : investigations are often based on national experiences or or three) cases like Peronism and Varguism, or Cardenism. f “populisms” instead of a common understanding of the so This paper aims to review the very question of “Latin nderstanding of a global historiographical perspective. From rgued that historical analysis requires a globalizing critique the often implicit historiographical assumptions. The core on the Western distinction between state politics and civil

sido usualmente comprendido como una estrategia ajadoras en el contexto de la democracia de masas y la e importaciones. Entre sus características pueden ser trabajadoras, el liderazgo carismático, el nacionalismo y el o, la concepción estadocéntrica del cambio histórico y el s derivados de los giros “lingüístico” y “cultural”, a pesar de también reclaman una peculiaridad para el populismo o es la apelación a la noción de “estilo político”, noción que

prevalece sobre las explicaciones socio-económicas. Las investigaciones accesibles están frecuentemente relacionadas con experiencias nacionales o aproximaciones comparativas entre dos (o tres) casos tales como el peronismo y el varguismo, o el cardenismo. Así las cosas, suelen proveer un catálogo de “populismos” en lugar del llamando populismo “latinoamericano”. Este trabajo busca revisar la cuestión misma del “populismo latinoamericano” desde el entendimiento crítico de una perspectiva historiográfica global. Desde este punto de vista complejo se argumentará que el análisis histórico requiere una crítica globalizante de la teoría social prevaleciente y de los, usualmente callados, implícitos historiográficos. El núcleo de la argumentación se focalizará en la distinción occidental entre política estatal y sociedad civil.

Entrées d'index

Keywords: Populism, Latin America, politics, state, civil society

Palabras claves: Populismo, América Latina, política, Estado, sociedad civil

Texte intégral

- 1 The notion of populism has had an extended relevance in the social and historical research about Latin American history during the twentieth century. It remains today in everyday political languages as well as in the conceptual toolkit of the social sciences and humanities. “Latin American populism” as an expression has been extensively used in investigations produced in Latin American countries, the United States and Europe, concerning several political regimes in the subcontinent. In spite of the alleged notion, the concept and its empirical content are far from clear. The use of “Latin American populism” oscillates between too general statements about its common features and an enumeration of national cases. I will develop the hypothesis that a global historiographical perspective can help to grasp the basic dilemmas of Latin American populism. Instead of resolving the challenge of giving a historical definition of my subject I would like to open the discussion for future debates.
- 2 My argument will follow three steps. First, it will develop a theoretical understanding of what would be a global-historical perspective from a Latin American point of view. It will be crucial to inscribe there our proposal of a global historiographical representation of Latin American populism. Secondly, I will show the relevance of a progressivist notion of History as a conceptual framework of sociological and economic theories of Latin American populism. I will emphasize the ahistorical trend of the competing explanations based on the theory of discourse and of the “political style”. Finally I will address the specificity of the regional populism from a global historiographical approach mentioning the critique of the State / civil society divide effective in recent research.



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e disciplinary designations of the search for a method l research. “World history”, “International history”, cted History”, “Histoire croisée”, and others are market. I do not have enough space here to assess the tical debates concerning these different approaches.¹ global history because it shows in a clearer way the the world *via* the constitution of a global market. It build world history upon the expansion of a culture, a This was the main feature of world history’s classic stopher A. Bayly’s work on *The Birth of the Modern* ototype of the new global history.³ In sharp contrast out of the capitalist transformation of the world’s ervative uses a pluralist method that conceives

“capitalism” as a form of exchange expanded all around the world during the last centuries. Unfortunately we stand only at the beginning of a situated reflection on the characteristics of a possible Latin American global history. I claim that it is required to think about the interpretive consequences of a global history of Latin American populism.

4 In order to contribute to that objective, in this section I will summarize some theoretical-conceptual notions I developed in a longer argument elsewhere.⁵ My main point is that we cannot advance in the development of an agenda for future research without a debate about the notion of what we understand under the label of “capitalism”. In this sense, even if the theoretical divergence was not clearly stated when all these works were written, the Hobsbawm-Bayly alternative remains the kernel of the crossroads of the field: is capitalism 1) a system of production producing forms of capital valorization or is it 2) a merchant ideology moved by interests related to different factors among which the economic is just one? Certainly, the disagreement is not related to economicism but to the opposition between a logic of capital permeating the differences (Hobsbawm) and the pluralism of explanations undermining the appearance of a single unification (Bayly). Of course I cannot go further in such a still open-ended debate. Notwithstanding the schematic aspect of the proposal, I will sketch a general chronology of Latin American globalizing streams, in which we can place the emergence of populism.

5 The possibility of a history of Latin American globalizations depends on the validation of a peculiar chronology of Latin American transformations in the *longue durée*, connected to the global movements and distinct from them as well. In my view the periods of global interactions and contacts –conceptualized here as globalizing streams– were five.

6 The *first globalizing stream* begun around fifteen thousand years ago. At that time one branch of the huge migrations departed from Africa around eighty five thousand years before touched the northern lands of North America and started a settlement process all along the continent. During the next fourteen thousand years and more, different social and cultural forms emerged from migration and adaptation to American environments from Alaska to Patagonia.⁶ The historical progressions of these populations differed strongly. They developed techniques of agriculture and cattle raising, built cities and implemented commerce and war. In some cases, as the Aztecs and the Incas, they created kingdoms.

7 The *second globalizing stream*, conceptualized by Immanuel Wallerstein as the entering in the capitalist world-system, took place between the end of the fifteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century.⁷ Its central features included European conquest, land occupation, evangelic acculturation, demographic collapse and exploitation of native labor and primary resources. It was also the period of importation of enslaved people from Africa. The hybrid and complex nature of the

the centuries through an extensive ethnic mixture and classification. Commercial capitalism articulated with the local economies in North America and in Spanish and Portuguese colonies, leading into the two subcontinents that remain with few – until today.

What happened between the explosive cycle of Independence in the nineteenth century and the economic and political transformations of the national nations. The mentioned cycle belonged to the period between 1776 to 1848.⁸ After the crisis of the colonial powers, the local agent in the local situations. The anticolonial movements (the exception being the Brazilian *empire*). New forms of fragmentation of the enormous vicerealties of the

folded from the mid-nineteenth century to the end of the nineteenth century. American countries were usually imagined and shaped by the division of economic production, structuring the economic history of the region until nowadays. The process modified the ethnic classifications and racial



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imagination, however, emphasizing their hybrid demographic configurations.⁹ One of their consequences was the birth of cultural nationalism. It was also the age of the making of social classes strongly interconnected with ethnic and gender hierarchies. During the twentieth century Latin America became the most unequal continent of the world. A long chronicle of authoritarian governments, social revolutions and populisms was the sign of a very complex political history. This political cycle was barred during the decades of 1960, 1970 and even in the 1980 by brutal military dictatorships usually functional to the American and Western European side in the Cold War.

10 The *fifth globalizing stream* matches with the worldwide triumph of capitalism and the expansion of liberal democracy after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the so called real socialism. In Latin America it was first identified with neoliberalism and the Washington consensus.¹⁰ In reality, the neoliberal agenda was introduced by the already mentioned military dictatorships and implemented by democratic government in the eighties and nineties. Towards the year 2000, the neoliberal program was in a profound crisis all over the subcontinent, generating popular mobilizations and reformist alliances. But globalization was not considered as a synonym of neoliberalism anymore.¹¹ Perhaps the current debate in many situations in Latin America is not to reject globalization as such but to discuss *which globalization* is appropriate for a more democratic and fair cooperative international community. The last feature of the fifth globalizing stream is the renaissance of the idea of a Latin American community forgotten after the fragmentation of the colonial space in first third of the nineteenth century.

11 To outline the last two streams I would say that migrations, capitalism and ideas were the three main drivers of late Latin American globalizations. Each one should be studied in the context of global fluctuations of people, of capital, and of cultural hegemonies, in connection with other issues like war and diseases. But the internal dynamics of Latin American history in the long run, the intricacies of its populations and struggles should be considered too. So, the “big questions” of a global history require a historiographical research of the nuances of historical experience.

Latin American Populism

12 I can now discuss perspectives on Latin American Populisms. Let us begin with the two main explanations: on the one hand, social and economic analysis of their conditions and determinations; on the other hand, discursive and political analysis of the divide among the people and the oligarchy or plutocracy.¹²

13 The social and economic explanation usually takes the 1929 crisis as a point of departure to describe the conditions for massive emergence of the working classes in



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is then possible to articulate urbanization, internal
ility, state interventionism in the economy, import
3I), and more specifically political consequences:
rowth, income redistribution, personal leadership,
sive policies and leaderships. Concerning the political
ions in populist regimes, this explanation finds
charismatic leadership and mobilization from the top
otional interpellations, and symbols, designed to
people” against its oppressors. It also presents a
urpasses the scope of the century, implicating new
mo” (clearly present in sociological approaches based
erning the social content or base of populism, the
stresses the importance of internal migrations and
litical experience and organizational skills among the
s differences compared to the old working class,
t, communist or anarchist programs. Thus populism
ous social coalitions, multiclass incorporation of the
s but also middle sectors; the populist alliance is

usually led by leaders of middle or upper strata origins. What is essential to note is the periodization related to this perspective. Because of its articulation with the structural requirements of the ISI the period 1930-1970 appears as the chronological range of the populist stage.¹³

14 Let us now see the main traits of the discursive and political interpretation of Latin American populism. Even if this approach can find precedents in previous times (for instance in the Mexican revolutionary forces of 1910, or in the Argentine *Yrigoyenismo* of the same period) the clearest interpretations take the hegemonic crisis in the thirties as a point of departure. They point to the crucial context of de-legitimation of traditional ruling elites or classes, and consequently the possibility of emergence of an anti-*status quo* leadership against the “oligarchy”, “the politicians” or “imperialism”. They do not deny the relevance of the social and economic aspects, but make the core of populism rest on aptitudes to organize the political field in two halves, the popular and the anti-popular. For this reason the chronological coverage is clearly different from the other explanation. In fact, it can comprehend all Latin American history since independence (the already present notions of “caudillismo” and the “hispanic” and “catholic” heritage are crucial here), but mostly from the 1930’s to our days. In other words, it is possible from this perspective to talk about populism and neopopulism, including Chávez’ and Morales’ political styles.¹⁴

15 Different features characterize these competing perspectives. The main problem about social and economic explanation resides in its top-down conception of politics, where it is not easy to understand the activation of lower classes –even if domination concerning political and social power should not be forgotten–, a crucial aspect of Latin American populism. Moreover, the political realm is considered as a “black box”: we know the inputs and the outputs, but we cannot see the construction of political preferences. The main problem of the “political” explanation resides in the lack of historicity, of contingency and people’s participation. In some cases (clearly in Ernesto Laclau’s book on the “populist reason”¹⁵), Latin American features are melted in the sea of “the political”.

16 Thus, it is not possible to cope with the challenge of global history if we remain attached to the competing explanations for Latin American populism. In the first case because it appears as an effect of structural changes without political singularities; in the second case because it rejects historical particularity.

Associations, democracy and populism: Brazil and Argentina

17 From the liberal democratic perspective, the incompatibility of associational politics was clear in State- or leader-centered Argentina, a hegemonic bibliography related to the “populist” asserted a gap between previous rich associative life, cultural centres, libraries, migrants associations, and associationism after the first Peronism (1945-1955). This was the case of a society oppressed by an authoritarian state. As it was declared impossible and investigation of it remained scarce, rich has shown the richness of associative life during Peronism as an object of political action, but where the political life remained alive. It has also shown the need to understand specific aspects of populist politics. The decline of life in the Peronist years. It implied something very clear: the downfall of associations caused by authoritarianism multiplied and extended in all the country (including the government) was interested in the occupation of civil space as sites of power: unions, branches of the Peronist movement, school cooperatives, libraries, etc. Local demands were articulated through associations: roads, schools, bridges, telephones, sewage,



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football clubs, etc.¹⁶ Comparative research from a global perspective is helpful here: the relationship between associations and populism, or between associative life and non liberal political programs, has been proved in different cases that allow global connections of a deep affinity between mass democracy and associative life, regardless of the ideological assertions about the primacy of the state. However, radicalization of statist programs ends up discouraging or repressing the associations in favor of state power. Populism in Latin America never ended eliminating the associative life because in any case –even the Varguist *Estado Novo*– democratic backing was completely restrained.

18 In Brazil, during the forties and fifties, a rich associative life in working-class and migrant neighborhoods of industrial São Paulo has been researched by young scholars.¹⁷ From this work associative life in the local spaces can be articulated with social and cultural demands, and the political participation. It is not social history separated from politics. On the contrary, local experiences of class and labor realities have complex relations with populist leaders (Getúlio Vargas, Jânio Quadros, Ademar Barros) and the left. In the case of Argentine recent research, these investigations go beyond the autonomy/heteronomy scheme that presided older interpretations.

19 The main theoretical characteristic of these works resides in the questioning of the traditional conceptual divide between the social and the political, or the society and the state. They can be thus related to a general “gramscian” perspective, even if some of the researchers would like to be represented by Gramsci’s ideas and other not. In my own work I have borrowed the concept of “political society” from Partha Chatterjee’s elaborations for the Indian postcolonial situation.¹⁸ I think that it is possible to find a convergence with the new Brazilian investigation on populism. The Western conceptual categorization thus reveals its peculiarity and the use of global references begins to open the agenda for a global historiography. It seems clear to me that the global analysis is not a matter of “scale” because it implies a theoretical criticism of general categories. The problem does not reside in the generality of the concept, but in the homogeneous categorization of the unequal times concomitant in the streams of the historical expansion of capitalism. The dialectic between similarity and difference in historical situations requires a critique of the inherited concepts.

20 I am perfectly aware of the hesitant and incomplete scope of this discussion. It would be possible to expand the references, for instance, to Mexican cardenism, strongly based in the corporative organization of working class and peasantry. It would be worth discussing the associative groundwork that was beginning to be interrelated with Gaitanismo until 1948 in Colombia, because it shows similarities with the cases previously commented, in spite of strong national differences.¹⁹ Something different can be said about the Dominican regime of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo between the thirties and the late fifties, whose hegemony was strongly related to state attitude towards the sugar planters and the peasants. But in this case the peculiarities of the Dominican

of an active civil society. Trujillo’s direct presence in the peasant recognition of social and cultural measures. Turits’ outstanding research on the topic is useful for evidence in the notion of *modernization* to explain the Dominican Republic.²⁰ I think that the premise of stale to study correctly the global place of Latin America implied the unilinear tendency towards a “modern” North American and European imagined model of

of populism in Latin America to face the problems of the first third of the twentieth century and the state. In other words, it seems to belong to the globalizing stream of Latin American perspective in a reductional explanation seems unable to describe the situation. I think that a global historical approach could between the socio-economic and the political-ideological aspects the populist moment in singular streams of global segment of global history. What should never be



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forgotten is that the global historiographical approach is a theoretically informed point of view generated during the last two streams of the globalizing process. In other words, despite the temptation of reifying global history as an objective reality, it is a retrospective reconstruction from the point of view of the current conceptual framework shaped in the context of an actually global capitalist world.

- 22 The global resemblances of peculiar populist realities in Latin America are thus historically situated –undermining the ahistorical consequences of purely discursive approach– but the comparative analysis can provide insights about the singularity of the identificatory processes relating the local cases with other continental experiences. In other words, only a global historiographical perspective is competent to surpass the well-known Scylla of the list of national cases and the Charybdis of a block of undifferentiated populism.

Notes

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