

Populism and Brazilian social sciences: theoretical and methodological challenges

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Abstract

Along the way to obtaining the most significant results in the relevant debate, this article provides an analytical, historico-critical, and methodological, though not exhaustive, overview of the uses (as well as the abuses) of the concept of populism in Brazilian social sciences – given that the latter constitute a true laboratory for the Latin American appropriation of *populism*. If, on the one hand, the Brazilian debate incorporates all the strengths and weaknesses of the European and U.S. debates on populism, the adoption of this concept in Brazilian politico-social thinking, on the other hand, must meet some specific needs, starting from the early theories about the 'amorphous' people, between the second half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, going through the analysis of the national-developmental cycle in the 'Vargas Era' (within the period from 1930 to 1964), until reaching the resumption of this concept in the last decades, in order to define the phenomenon named as 'Lulism' and, above all, the so-called 'Bolsonarism,' in the very 21st century.

Key words populism; vargas era; laborism; bolsonarism.

Populismo e ciências sociais brasileiras: desafios teóricos e metodológicos

Resumo

Ao longo do caminho trilhado para obter os resultados mais significativos no debate pertinente, este artigo proporciona um panorama analítico, histórico-crítico e metodológico, embora não exaustivo, dos usos (e também dos abusos) do conceito de *populismo* nas ciências sociais brasileiras – tendo em vista que estas constituem um verdadeiro laboratório da apropriação latino-americana do populismo. Se, por um lado, o debate brasileiro incorpora todos os pontos fortes e fracos do debate europeu e norte-americano sobre o populismo, a adoção desse conceito no pensamento político-social brasileiro, por outro lado, deve atender a algumas necessidades específicas, a partir das primeiras teorias sobre o povo “amorfo”, entre a segunda metade do século XIX e o início do século XX, passando pela análise do ciclo nacional-desenvolvimentista da “Era Vargas” (no período de 1930 a 1964), até chegar à recuperação desse conceito nas últimas décadas, para definir o fenômeno do “lulismo” e, sobretudo, o chamado “bolsonarismo”, já no século XXI.

Palavras-chave populismo; era vargas; trabalhismo; bolsonarismo.

Populismo y ciencias sociales brasileñas: desafíos teóricos y metodológicos

Resumen

En el camino hacia la obtención de los resultados más significativos en el debate relevante, este artículo ofrece un panorama analítico, histórico-crítico y metodológico, aunque no exhaustivo, de los usos (así como los abusos) del concepto de *populismo* en las ciencias sociales brasileñas – dado que estas últimas constituyen un verdadero laboratorio para la apropiación latinoamericana del populismo. Si, por un lado, el debate brasileño incorpora todas las fortalezas y debilidades de los debates europeo y norteamericano acerca del populismo, la adopción de este concepto en el pensamiento político-social brasileño, por otro lado, debe satisfacer algunas necesidades específicas, comenzando desde las primeras teorías sobre el pueblo “amorfo”, entre la segunda mitad del siglo XIX y principios del siglo XX, pasando por el análisis del ciclo nacional-desarrollista en la “Era Vargas” (en el período de 1930 a 1964), hasta llegar a la recuperación de este concepto en las últimas décadas, para definir el fenómeno del “Lulismo” y, sobre todo, el llamado “Bolsonarismo”, ya en el siglo XXI.

Palabras clave populismo; era vargas; laborismo; bolsonarismo.

Populisme et sciences sociales brésiliennes: défis théoriques et méthodologiques

Résumé

En route pour obtenir les résultats les plus significatifs dans le débat pertinent, cet article offre un panorama analytique, historico-critique et méthodologique, mais bien que non exhaustif, des utilisations (ainsi que des abus) du concept de *populisme* dans les sciences sociales brésiliennes – car ces derniers constituent un véritable laboratoire d'appropriation latino-américaine du populisme. Si, d'une part, le débat brésilien intègre toutes les forces et les faiblesses des débats européen et nord-américain sur le populisme, l'adoption de ce concept dans la pensée politico-sociale brésilienne, d'autre part, doit répondre à des besoins spécifiques, à partir de les premières théories sur le peuple « amorphe », entre la seconde moitié du XIXe siècle et le début du XXe siècle, en passant par l'analyse du cycle national-développementaliste de « l'ère Vargas » (dans la période de 1930 à 1964), jusqu'à son arrivée à la récupération de ce concept au cours des dernières décennies, pour définir le phénomène nommé « lulisme » et, surtout, le soi-disant « bolsonarisme », déjà au 21e siècle.

Mots-clés populisme; ère vargas; travailisme; bolsonarisme.

Introduction

The ambiguities inherent to the concept of *populism* still mark its tortuous and non-consensual path in the field of European and U.S. political theory (Eatwell & Godwin, 2018; Finchelstein, 2017; Mény & Surel, 2000) – since its early theorizations, in the 1950s and 60s (Gellner & Ionescu, 1969), proposed to analyze phenomena caused by 'pathological' tendencies of mass democracy after World War II (Donzelli & Pozzi, 2003) and, therefore, not clearly classified in the categories *fascism*, *authoritarianism*, and *totalitarianism*, until its resumption, in the 1980s and 90s. Populism is thought of within this new circumstance as a multiform and flexible container, capable of capturing the deepest essence of the phenomena (particularly in the right-wing area, but also in the left-wing), provoked by the crises of Western liberal representative democracies, in the context of the 'end of ideologies' opened by the collapse of the Soviet Union.

In short, this is a controversial, ambivalent, illusory political concept, whose appropriation occurs, in many cases, in an ideological way in everyday political language, in spite of the scientific needs for which it was devised.

However, if we restrict the field of analysis to the circulation of the concept in Latin America since the second half of the 20th century, we find that populism was not marked by the same antinomies, detected by European and U.S. social sciences.

Under the push of the methodological and theoretical renewal adopted by the Italian-Argentine sociologist Gino Germani (1969, 1978), populism registered a significant success in Latin American socio-political thought, without, however, having undergone the methodological and theoretical rigor that a robust political theory requires, in many

circumstances becoming a category more ideological than scientific, useful to classify all the crucial stages of Latin American modernization, in continuous oscillation between the non-coincident levels of the concept, the fact, the theory, and the semantics of populist communication.

From this perspective, Brazilian social sciences constitute a true laboratory for the Latin American appropriation of populism. If, on the one hand, the Brazilian debate incorporates all the strengths and weaknesses of the European and U.S. debates on populism, the use of this concept in Brazilian politico-social thinking, on the other hand, needs to meet specific needs, since the early theories about the ‘amorphous’ people, between the second half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, passing through the analysis of the national-developmental cycle of the ‘Vargas Era’ (1930-1964), thought of as a comprehensive industrialization project, a privileged way to overcome underdevelopment, under the aegis of the State (Bielschowsky, 1988) – which, according to many social scientists, marks the starting point of Brazilian populism –, until the resumption of the concept in recent decades, to define the phenomenon of ‘Lulism’ and, above all, the so-called ‘Bolsonarism,’ introduced as a mixture of globalized neoliberalism and authoritarianism, which took part in the right-wing wave at the world level.

In the path taken towards the most significant results of the debate (Ferreira, 2001), this article provides an analytical, historico-critical, and methodological panorama, although not exhaustive, of the uses (and also the abuses) of the concept of populism in Brazilian social sciences. This is an initiative to encourage European, U.S., and Latin American social sciences to collaborate on the common ground of building interdependence networks, which need to be strengthened by means of a social science committed to the ‘transnationalization’ of culture (Costa Pinto & Finchelstein, 2019). From this perspective, the core of analysis no longer lies on the traditional rationale of a ‘center’ that creates ideologies and an exclusively reproductive ‘periphery.’ On the contrary, the objective is creating new transnational spaces for circulation of ideas, interaction, and comparison between phenomena that share the same ideological and political roots.

The ‘amorphous’ people in brazilian national-authoritarian thinking of the early 20th century

The first post-war era was a period of profound transformation for Brazilian society. Although Brazil did not participate in the Great War, the devastating effect of this disruption inaugurated a transition period, culminating in the ‘1930 Revolution’ and the ‘Vargas Era’ between the 1930s and the first half of the 1950s – a period that marks the country’s entry into the 20th century’s modernity (Ferreira & Delgado, 2003).

The effervescent atmosphere of the 1920s favored the optimal conditions for the emergence of a 'political militant' nationalism, under the push of the needs theorized in many dimensions of Brazilian politico-cultural panorama to create the nation-people, 'rediscovering' the original traits of the Brazilian nation since its colonial matrix.

In addition to the diversity of intellectual biographies and ideological paths, the nation's 'rediscovery' was shared by intellectuals and politicians who were eager to rethink the nation-State bond taking a perspective that is qualitatively different from the 19th century's liberal nationalism (Lippi, 1990).

This does not mean that the nationalist 'rediscovery' was an exclusive landmark of the 1920s. In the wake of literary works by Euclides da Cunha and Silvio Romero, the liberal politician Alberto Torres (1865-1917), early in the 20th century, influenced by the wide circulation of the ideas of Auguste Comte and Émile Durkheim in Brazil, had anticipated one of the central themes of Brazilian nationalist ideology between the two world wars: the deep hiatus between the 'legal' Brazil under the *Constituição da República dos Estados Unidos do Brasil* (*Constituição de 1891, 1891*) – a sophisticated legal work based on the assembly of foreign models belonging to the European and U.S. liberal tradition and, as such, regarded as inadequate to the national historical path – and the 'real' Brazil, tackling deep-rooted social and economic problems and dealing with a people marked by anomie, i.e. absence of solidarity ties, 'amorphous' and completely devoid of minimum requirements for political participation. Without giving up the major principles of liberalism, the remedy for the 'ills of Brazil' – in the opinion of Torres (1978) – was incorporating the people into the nation through organicist nationalism, characterized by increase in the State's power and organization of all the country's economic and social forces.

It is in this context that a nationalist and authoritarian right-wing emerges, shaped around the 'creation' and education of the people by the nation-State.

According to the most convincing results of historiography in this regard (Beired, 1999), the analysis of this phenomenon suggests that we think of it as a field of intellectual and political relations polarized around a set of issues in which traditional long-term themes of Brazilian political thinking, such as the 'absence of a people' (seen as a lack of national consciousness) and the need for a centralized State, are intertwined with the challenges of modernization, linked to the crisis of the Brazilian agro-export model, within the broader context of world crisis of capitalism and the liberal State, noticed as inadequate to manage the great transformations in progress.

This right-wing galaxy is introduced as having a triple face: a) the national-authoritarianism, heir to the Brazilian positivist tradition; b) the Catholic right-wing; and c) the integralist right-wing, which, according to an analysis consolidated in the historical debate, may be the politico-ideological movement closest to European fascism (Trindade, 1974).

Given the impossibility that this study examines the history of the Brazilian right-wing in the 20th century, our analysis focuses on the key features of nationalism and authoritarianism, since the main theorists of this dimension open the theoretical pathway to successive appropriation of populist theories in Brazilian social sciences.

National-authoritarian thinking grounds its diagnosis of society on an eclectic positivism – whose original core lies on the expansion of positivism in southern Brazil in the second half of the 19th century (Love, 1975). Thus: a) the Spencerian theory, the basis of Darwinian social evolutionism, merges with Comte's social organicism; b) the methodology of early theories about the family provided by Le Play's sociological school is linked to Georges Vacher de Lapouge's biological racism and Arthur de Gobineau's racial demography; and c) Gustave Le Bon's crowd theory and Gaetano Mosca and Vilfredo Pareto's elite theory are supplemented by psychology and psychoanalysis (Oliveira Vianna, 2005).

Although with some differences, due to individual politico-ideological biographies, the national-authoritarian dimension – mainly concentrated around intellectuals like Francisco José de Oliveira Vianna, Azevedo Amaral, and Francisco Campos – shares the main idea that Brazil is not ready to a liberal-democratic regime inspired by the Anglo-Saxon model. Also due to its past as a colonized country, the Brazilian people is introduced as 'amorphous,' since the Constituição de 1891 (1891), widening the gap between the country of "utopian idealists" (a category proposed by Oliveira Vianna, 2005, p. 56, our translation) and the real Brazil throws the Brazilian people, uprooted from its clan-based parental ties, in a "phase of profound and general disorganization." The only rational and comprehensive solution to the Brazilian economic, political, and social reality pointed out by this lineage of Brazilian political thinking is the national-authoritarian State.

As precisely observed (Lamounier, 1977; Silva, 2004), the diagnosis of the Brazilian reality and the legal remedies proposed by national-authoritarianism constituted the core of a new 'State ideology' as a necessary and specific answer to the issue of organizing power and creating a people, in face of the crisis of liberalism, within the broader context of international crisis during the first post-war period. The main points of this ideology are: a) the State's domination over the market; b) a comprehensive-corporate view of society, of a positivist matrix; c) a paternalistic and authoritarian view of the social struggle produced by industrialization; d) the State seen as a 'benevolent leviathan' that incorporates the working masses; and e) trust in the elites (Lamounier, 1977).

Finally, the significance of national-authoritarianism lies on the ability to conceptualize the State ideology according to its multiple functions of organization, incorporation, education, control, and protection in society.

The concept of 'amorphous people' to seek a national identity, devised by the ideologues of Getúlio Vargas' Brazilian New State, is also appropriated by other lines of Brazilian political thought.

This is the case of the social scientist Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, who, in the classic book *Raízes do Brasil* (Roots of Brazil) (Buarque de Holanda, 1936), reformulated the category Brazilian ‘cordial man.’ In short, according to the author, Brazilian man, born and grown in the latifundian clan-based parental structure, is not compatible with the political regimes of modern European societies. The individualistic and elitist society of liberalism, the class society, or the mass society, both dominated by left- or right-wing totalitarianism, were not the models to follow in order to create the Brazilian nation, still marked by its slave-trade and rural past. Buarque de Holanda (1936) concludes his analysis by arguing that Brazilian social sciences needed to find new categories capable of interpreting the country’s entry into the contemporary world.

Therefore, if we cannot speak of a true theory of Brazilian populism in the 1930s, it is timely to recognize that the theorists of the Vargas State open the way for us to use the concept in the analysis of the 20th century Brazilian modernity-modernization processes.

From ‘authoritarian state ideology’ to developmental national-populism as an explanatory category of brazilian modernization

Given the above, it is necessary to wait until the 1960s to have the first scientifically validated theories of populism. This does not mean that the concept has vanished from the debate. The problem is that, in the immediate post-World War II period, populism is limited to a descriptive analysis of the politico-ideological discourse of reactionary, conservative, and anti-communist liberalism, to discredit the populist political ‘enemy,’ accused of leading Brazil to a catastrophe with its social reform projects. Just think, for instance, of the economist Roberto Campos, exponent of the right wing in developmentalism (Bielschowsky, 1988), who theorizes a ‘provisional’ authoritarian dictatorship – dominated by military men and technocrats, the only depositaries of ‘good’ and ‘rationality’–, given the Brazilian people’s inability to provide itself with democratic-liberal institutions under the guidance of dangerous populist demagogues – in the most derogatory sense of the term – like Getúlio Vargas, João Goulart, Leonel Brizola, Jânio Quadros, and Juscelino Kubitschek, just to mention some of the most famous politicians in Brazilian post-World War II history.

The work of some of the great founders of Brazilian academic sociology in the 1960s and 70s is situated in this horizon of problems, in the midst of military dictatorship. This is a major circumstance in the Brazilian version of the concept of populism.

Given the scientific and political need to interpret, in the heat of the moment, national-developmentalism in the ‘Vargas Era,’ Octavio Ianni (1968) and Francisco Weffort

(1978), dissatisfied in theoretical terms with the categories *fascism*, *totalitarianism*, and *authoritarianism*, think through the concept of populism, freed from its ideological uses and abuses in the 1950s political struggle to be applied as a scientific category in the socio-political analysis of the 'developmentalist cycle' from 1930 to 1964.

If, on the one hand, Ianni (1968) and Weffort (1978) are willing to accept the Brazilian New State ideologues' theory that Vargas' State had created the Brazilian nation, on the other hand, they resume from Buarque de Holanda (1936) the category 'cordiality,' to reaffirm the need to engage in specific readings of Brazilian society, incomparable with European, marked by totalitarian and authoritarian regimes.

Despite the theoretical effort of Ianni (1968) and Weffort (1978), populism would have been left out of Brazilian social sciences without the contribution of Gino Germani. The studies of the Italian-Argentine sociologist provide Brazilian social sciences with the opportunity to legitimize the Varguist, populist, national-developmentalism theory on scientific grounds.

From the studies conducted in the 1940s on and throughout his career as a sociologist concerned with modernization processes, addressed from a structural-functionalist and Parsonian perspective, Gino Germani, as a keen observer of the fascist totalitarianism era and Argentine Peronism, came to the conclusion that, in a comparative analysis between European and Latin American societies, it is not enough to highlight the closeness between the two areas – from this perspective, Mediterranean Europe might have a clear link with Latin American countries –, but, above all, the specific national routes for *desarrollo* or *development*.

However, Gino Germani's scientific sociology also involves analyzing the participation of the masses in national life. The comparison between *fascism* and *Peronism* leads the author to recognize, on the one hand, the novelty of permanent totalitarian mobilization of the masses in Nazi-fascism, but, on the other hand, to admit the impossibility of reproducing in Latin American societies the totalitarian party State, which absorbs the private sphere in the public one, given that Peronism and Varguism were limited to incorporating into the State the working class, which participated for the first time, albeit passively, in national life (Germani, 1978).

Even recognizing the overt influence of the European model, Gino Germani invites his reader to analyze Latin American specificities. This is a theoretical and methodological effort to grasp the exception to the development model of European countries.

If, unlike the European, Latin American liberalism was exclusive, given the absence of a bourgeois revolution, the national populism era inaugurated by Getúlio Vargas and Juan Domingo Perón could only be – this is the point of arrival of his comparative analysis – characterized by a populist policy of including the masses in national life, in spite of its authoritarian and corporate features. Hence the interest of social sciences in analyzing

why Latin American countries chose national-authoritarian populism as the most adequate model to manage the inevitable and necessary entry of their societies into modernity.

On the path opened by Gino Germani, Octavio Ianni introduces the features of Brazilian national populism. According to Ianni (1968), the 1930 'Varguist Revolution' opened the way for a populist democracy era in Brazil. In his opinion, the 'Vargas Era,' although authoritarian within the Brazilian New State period, had inaugurated the mass politics, based on the economic-social model, whose point of arrival was the Decreto-Lei n. 5.452 (Consolidação das Leis Trabalhistas [CLT], 1943) – a very broad labor code, encompassing all the social legislation built during the 'Vargas Era' and still in force today –, which paved the way for the deploying popular democracy in Brazil.

Ianni (1968) argues that the decade from Vargas' suicide to the military coup d'État (1954-1964) is characterized by an economic cycle that breaks with the classic agro-export model, encouraging the import of technology and breaking with the dependence on foreign investments. Industrialization supported by a national-populist political design becomes the decisive point to establish the young and weak Brazilian democracy, in the context of the Cold War and U.S. imperialism in Latin America.

Therefore, it does not seem paradoxical for Ianni (1968) that the major changes taking place in the 'Vargas Era' – even during the most overtly fascist phase of the Brazilian New State – favor the creation of a rather democratic model of Brazil and, consequently, also become the object of politico-ideological struggle between the popular sectors supporting the 'Varguist' and 'populist' presidents and the elites allied with the reactionary bourgeoisie, which leads to the end of the virtuous cycle (1930-1964), interrupted by the military coup d'État.

Following in the footsteps of Ianni (1968), the social scientist Weffort (1978) devises one of the most sophisticated models of Brazilian populism.

According to Weffort (1978), the Brazilian national-populism era is characterized by the participation of popular classes in national life, in the context of the economic, political, and social changes brought about by the early modernization processes between the second half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. The pressure of popular classes is exerted both over State structures – increasing popular participation in politics, especially in the field of social rights – and in the economy, with access of popular sectors to professions and consumer goods from which they were traditionally excluded. Therefore, national-populism was the policy of including the popular classes in an inevitable and necessarily industrial development model, pushed by the charismatic and paternalistic leader (Getúlio Vargas, 'father of the poor and working people'), relying on the support of a socio-nationalist, anti-liberal, and anti-oligarchic political alliance, in addition to being able to lean on the popular sectors that, although in a passive way, participated for the first time in the economic, political, and social development of Brazil.

Finally, the importance of populism theories proposed by Ianni (1968) and Weffort (1978) in the field of Brazilian social sciences and, more generally, in Latin American ones, may be noticed both from a scientific and, above all, a politico-ideological perspective.

Under the scientific profile, it is necessary to register a first major theoretical and methodological effort to interpret the specific national development model in Latin American countries, comparing it with the European one. Under the politico-ideological profile, the theory of Getúlio Vargas as ‘father of the poor and working people,’ the leader who inaugurated the entry of Brazilian popular classes into history, it is key to grasp left-wing populism, modeled around the character of Lula (Lulismo), the ‘people’s child,’ who receives Vargas’ legacy, translating it into a great social inclusion project for the Brazilian people through the Brazilian Workers’ Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores [PT]), in the first decade of the 21st century.

‘The invention of laborism’

The classic populism theories had a strong influence at least until the late 1970s, when there was a new effort to systematize theoretical and methodological issues that were still poorly explored in populism.

In a scenario marked by the slow and gradual transition from the military dictatorship to democracy, also under the push of ‘new trade unionism’ and the resumption of social movements, in the second half of the 1970s, a new generation of Brazilian social scientists is faced with the crisis of the 1950s’ structuralist and functionalist paradigms and the renewal of Marxism itself, dialoguing, above all, with E. P. Thompson’s studies on the English working class (Gomes, 2001; Thompson, 1963).

The reference work of this phase of the debate about populism is, undoubtedly, *A invenção do trabalhismo* (The invention of laborism) (Gomes, 1988). This book aimed to open an interdisciplinary dialogue between sociology, political science, and history, in the light of the new documentary sources available, interpreted from the perspective of recent theories on the international trade union and laborist movement (Gomes, 2001).

Angela Maria de Castro Gomes examines the ‘disruption’ caused by the 1930 ‘Varguist Revolution’ in Brazilian history, rethinking it in terms of a new interpretative model of the Brazilian working class’ history.

If Brazilian Marxism has always depicted the working classes as subordinate and co-opted in all crucial circumstances of national history – at least since Independence, given the absence of a bourgeois revolution that should have led dialectically to the proletariat revolution –, Angela Maria de Castro Gomes, on the contrary, refuses the consolidated reading, introducing, based on a multidisciplinary theory, the working class as an active subject in Brazilian history. The challenge consists in rethinking populism from a new

perspective, detached from the classic theories marked by media manipulation of the masses fascinated by the charismatic virtues of Getúlio Vargas as a leader, as well as by the authoritarian incorporation of the working class into the State.

According to Angela Maria de Castro Gomes, far from being a passive subject in Brazilian history, the working classes interacted dialectically with the Vargas State, even conditioning their political strategies (Gomes, 2001). Finally, national-developmentalism is introduced as an “open field of possibilities” (Gomes, 2001), in which the State, the political elite, the industrial bourgeoisie, and the working class negotiate a new representation way that is less conflictive and more conciliatory, having Brazilian industrialization as a common objective.

The category proposed by Angela Maria de Castro Gomes is ‘laborism.’ This is a new pact between the State and the productive classes since the creation of the Brazilian New State, in 1937. The deepest sense of laborism lies on the link between the State and the working class within a period that begins well before the ‘Vargas Era’ and it ends well afterwards. From a thorough examination of this long period of Brazilian history, the scientist comes to the conclusion that the relation between the State and the labor world has always been marked by struggles, advances, and defeats on both sides and, consequently, it could not be reduced to the populist, passive, mobilization of the popular classes in the State, according to the theory proposed by Weffort (1978).

It may be concluded that, on the one hand, Angela Maria de Castro Gomes’ work had the merit of driving the debate towards a new reflection on populism, the Vargas Era and, above all, the entry of Brazil into the 20th century’s modernity; on the other hand, she addresses two key theoretical and methodological issues.

The first issue is that Angela Maria de Castro Gomes thinks of Brazilian history from a solely national perspective. She does not take into account, but marginally, that the ‘Vargas Era’ is characterized by a strong influence of the Italian fascist corporatist model (Gentile, 2014). And, furthermore, purified from its rather overt totalitarian features – this is the second issue –, the authoritarian regime of the Brazilian New State may be depicted as the beginning of a pact built under the aegis of Vargas as ‘father of national developmentalism,’ opening way, then, for a revisionism of the ‘Vargas Era’ within the last thirty years (Romani, 2015).

Right-wing populism and left-wing populism: from Collor to Bolsonaro, passing through Lula

During the transition from dictatorship to democracy, the history of uses and abuses of the concept of populism was enriched with new content. In the wake of this new era of

thinking through Brazilian populism, it is worth mentioning some factors, albeit briefly: the end of the bipolar world has a major reflex in the contemporary socio-political debate, since it decrees the 'end' of the 20th century's ideologies and, consequently, invites us to rethink the traditional categories of right- and left-wing in the light of new political phenomena seemingly incompatible with them (right- and left-wing populisms), the crisis of democratic representation in the 20th century, and the new ways of personalizing politics (Manin, 1995), which, if facing some resistance among social players and traditional politicians in Western countries, with more consolidated liberal and democratic institutions, in the Brazilian case, on the contrary, it faces no obstacle, given the weakness of still very young democratic institutions, also taking considering the peculiar arrangement of 'coalition presidentialism,' inaugurated in 1946 and resumed by the Constituição da República Federativa do Brasil (Constituição Federal [CF], 1988) after the military dictatorship (Abranches, 2018).

This is the case of the Fernando Collor de Mello administration, which lasted only 3 years – from 1990 to 1992 –, coming to an end through an impeachment inquiry (Sallum, 2016). The victory of a political 'outsider' (Collor) in the presidential elections may be the result of a system change – from dictatorship to democracy – which breaks with the traditional social and political balance.

Democracy is accepted by all the forces in dispute, but the economic development model sees, on the one hand, Collor as the head of a trans-classist, 'non-partisan' social movement, proposing reformist and liberal policies and uttering an emotional discourse, which ignites the people in the name of 'us, citizens of good will' against 'them, citizens of bad will,' and this group is represented, on the opposite side, by old and new parties, allies in the rearrangement of a rather distributive national-developmental project.

The 1989 Brazilian election campaign is a laboratory for analyzing some of the central themes of the representative democracy crisis and the success of populism in recent years. Collor's populism was already polarized around the personality of a leader who, in the name of anti-politics, creates a fideistic relation with his voters, who respond to opinion polls. The political space, traditionally occupied by the parties, responsible for leading Brazilian masses from the military dictatorship to democracy, becomes a scenario where the populist leader Collor stands out, supported by the 'non-partisan' arrangement of a new political movement, through the Brazilian National Reconstruction Party (Partido da Reconstrução Nacional [PRN]).

Collor's impeachment, in 1992, is underpinned by widespread popular mobilization, led by the main parties in the transition to democracy.

The Collor case shows, once again, the polymorphic, flexible, and ultimately ambiguous nature of the concept of populism, since it is used as a scientific category to describe the features of Collor's right-wing populism, however, at the same time, once again, as well as

in the 1950s politico-ideological struggle, was a weapon for the parties that oppose Collor, contemptuously defined as ‘populist,’ a dangerous demagogue, an enemy of democracy.

Associated for a long time with a descriptive trend of populist traits, including the personalization of politics, in recent years this concept has gained predominance – reconfirming its flexibility – and it is applied in the analysis of phenomena more compatible with the classic processes of representative democracy, based on the values of freedom and equality. This is the case of ‘Lulism,’ regarded as a populist democratic project, focused on the charismatic figure of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Singer, 2012).

‘Lulism’ – as Lula himself claimed in many circumstances – is neither right- nor left-wing, and it can both consolidate tradition and provide major changes, as evidenced during his first presidential term, under the sign of maintaining the neoliberal order of Collor and Fernando Henrique Cardoso (FHC), in order to deploy progressive and reformist social policies, aimed at fighting poverty, misery, and inequality and boosting the domestic consumer market, in the context of the international economic crisis in the first decade of the 21st century.

Lula’s stronghold is a generic concept of ‘people,’ in which the great layers of the urban proletariat and sub-proletariat of the great Brazilian metropolises can meet.

From the 2002 triumph to the 2016 crisis, Lula has absorbed the PT in his charismatic character, up to the point that one of the main elements of Jair Bolsonaro’s right-wing populist triumph in the 2018 presidential elections was a rejection of Lula and the PT, depicted by Bolsonaro’s rhetoric as a symbiotic association.

If ‘Lulism,’ within the scope of left-wing populisms, polarized Brazilian society around a dialectics of ‘petism x anti-petism’ – its version of ‘we,’ i.e. depositaries of ‘good,’ versus ‘them,’ depositaries of ‘evil’ – consequently, Jair Bolsonaro may also be interpreted as an equal and opposite reaction to ‘Lulism’: populist, ‘anti-petist,’ right-wing oriented.

However, it would be simplistic to think that the phenomenon called ‘Bolsonarism’ is limited to this. The Jair Bolsonaro’s triumph, in addition to the usual ingredients (indignation, anti-politics, rejection of traditional representative channels, personalization of politics, charisma, etc.), properly described by means of the concept of populism, is the product of a specific feature of the Brazilian right-wing: tension between liberalism and authoritarianism (Gentile, 2018), which marks all Brazilian modernization throughout the 20th century.

Neo-liberal institutes linked to international networks, Pentecostals, traditional players of Brazilian politics since the 1970s, evangelicals, and new active movements converge with the ‘Bolsonarist’ populist right-wing, above all on the social media – Revoltados Online, Nas Ruas, Vem Pra Rua, Movimento Brasil Livre (MBL), and some neofascists –, paving the way for Bolsonaro’s victory, since the June 2013 demonstrations, passing through Dilma Rousseff’s impeachment, in 2016, until the 2018 elections.

Relying on the support of his ‘guru,’ Olavo de Carvalho, a theorist of the revolt against left-wing intellectuals, who are concentrated in Brazilian universities, Bolsonaro’s right-wing is organized around a politico-ideological platform whose main features are anti-petism, anti-Bolivarianism – reviving the 1950s anti-communism –, praise of the military dictatorship, and even denial of its authoritarian nature, anti-politics, expressed in the moral discourse of indignation against systemic corruption, conservatism (i.e. defense of the traditional family and patriotism), war against crime, opposition to adopting racial- and gender-based quotas in universities and, to top it all, a minimum State, market society, freedom of business, and the end of the welfare State – central elements of neoliberal thinking.

Conclusions

We may make the following points about the validity and usefulness of the concept of *populism*. It represents, at least seemingly, a way out of the taxonomic difficulties inherent to describing a set of functional traits of populist phenomena – charismatic leadership, personalization of politics, appeal to the people, etc. –, but it must be emphasized that this does not explain their genesis, nor, to paraphrase Max Weber, adequately captures the parliamentary mediation processes in face of conflicting interests in a complex society, since a populist charismatic leader goes from the electoral campaign, characterized by the communicative and media-based codes of the ‘anti-political’ discourse, to the Presidency of the Republic.

In this regard, the Brazilian laboratory, in addition to reproducing the lights and shadows of the European and U.S. debates on populism, has an aspect as significant as poorly analyzed concerning the conceptual genesis and the historical path of populism, designed as a model to give responses to specific historical conditions in Latin American countries, facing the challenges of the creation of the nation-State and the modernity-modernization processes.

Having this privileged observatory as a basis, we may notice the usefulness of the concept, in spite of its widely detected ambiguities, in the analysis of political typologies that, like fascist movements, but not comparable to a classic fascist regime (just as in the case of the Bolsonarist right-wing), are born to provide the masses with responses, looking for new ‘post-democratic’ political subjects, capable of protecting and representing the masses in face of the classic liberal-representative democracy crisis.

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