

From totalitarianism to populism: anti-liberal enemy in the right- wing discourse

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Abstract

This article examines the concept of 'populism' in the light of its neoliberal opponents' discourse. The heuristic scope of the term, which its current political use has been devaluing, both in lay and scientific debates, is put into question. Starting from Quentin Skinner's theory, we propose a political reading of the concept and postulate that its use (and, therefore, the content assigned to it) teaches us much (or more) about the person, movement, or party using it than about the party or the person that it designates. The anti-populist discourse is at the same time a rejection of the people/ethnos (nationalism as the essence of populism), a denial of the people/démos (populism as a pathology of democracy because it establishes the tyranny of majority against the elite), an accusation of the people/pléthos (the fragile mass manipulated by a leader and the intellectuals), and a critique of the 'idolatry of State' on the part of populists who oppose economic liberalism in the name of an obsessive egalitarianism. We conclude that 'populism' is a 'kampfbe-griff' (a 'battle concept'), as totalitarianism once was and it may be seen as a continuation of Cold War anti-communism.

Key words populism; anti-populism; neoliberalism; democracy; anti-liberalism; mario vargas llosa.

Del totalitarismo al populismo: el enemigo antiliberal en el discurso de derecha

Resumen

Este artículo examina el concepto de “populismo” a la luz del discurso de sus oponentes neoliberales. Se cuestiona el alcance heurístico del término, que su uso político actual ha ido desvalorizando, tanto en los debates profanos como en los científicos. Partiendo de la teoría de Quentin Skinner, se propone una lectura política del concepto y se postula que su uso (y el contenido por ende que se le da) nos enseña tanto (o más) sobre la persona, el movimiento o el partido que lo usa que sobre el partido o la persona que designa. El discurso antipopulista es a la vez un rechazo del pueblo/etnos (el nacionalismo como esencia del populismo), una negación del pueblo/démos (el populismo como patología de la democracia porque establece la tiranía de la mayoría en contra de la élite), una acusación al pueblo/pléthos (la masa frágil manipulada por un líder e intelectuales) y una crítica a la “estadolatría” de los populistas opuestos al liberalismo económico en nombre de un igualitarismo obsesivo. Se concluye que el “populismo” es un “kampfbegriff” (un “concepto de combate”), como lo fue otrora el totalitarismo y puede entenderse como una continuación del anticomunismo de la Guerra Fría.

Palabras clave populismo; antipopulismo; neoliberalismo; democracia; antiliberalismo; mario vargas llosa.

Do totalitarismo ao populismo: o inimigo antiliberal no discurso de direita

Resumo

Este artigo examina o conceito de “populismo” à luz do discurso de seus oponentes neoliberais. Questiona-se o escopo heurístico do termo, que seu uso político atual vem desvalorizando, tanto nos debates leigos quanto científicos. Partindo da teoria de Quentin Skinner, propõe-se uma leitura política do conceito e postula-se que seu uso (e, portanto, o conteúdo atribuído a ele) nos ensina muito (ou mais) sobre a pessoa, o movimento ou o partido que o utilize do que acerca do partido ou da pessoa que ele designa. O discurso antipopulista é, ao mesmo tempo, uma rejeição do povo/etnos (o nacionalismo como essência do populismo), uma negação do povo/démos (o populismo como uma patologia da democracia porque estabelece a tirania da maioria contra a elite), uma acusação do povo/pléthos (a massa frágil manipulada por um líder e os intelectuais) e uma crítica à “estadolatria” dos populistas que se opõem ao liberalismo econômico em nome de um igualitarismo obsessivo. Conclui-se que o “populismo” é um “kampfbegriff” (um “conceito de combate”), como o totalitarismo já foi e pode ser entendido como uma continuação do anticomunismo da Guerra Fria.

Palavras-chave populismo; antipopulismo; neoliberalismo; democracia; antiliberalismo, mario vargas llosa.

Du totalitarisme au populisme: l'ennemi antilibéral dans le discours de la droite

Résumé

Cet article examine le concept de « populisme » à la lumière du discours de ses opposants néolibéraux. La portée heuristique du terme, que son usage politique actuel a dévalué, tant dans les débats profanes et scientifiques, est remise en question. Partant de la théorie de Quentin Skinner, nous proposons une lecture politique du concept et postulons que son utilisation (et, par conséquent, le contenu qui lui est attribué) nous en apprend beaucoup (ou plus) sur la personne, le mouvement ou le parti l'utilisant que sur le parti ou la personne qu'il désigne. Le discours antipopuliste est à la fois un rejet du peuple/ethnos (le nationalisme comme essence du populisme), un déni du peuple/démos (le populisme comme pathologie de la démocratie car il instaure la tyrannie de la majorité contre l'élite), une accusation du peuple/pléthos (la masse fragile manipulée par un leader et les intellectuels), et une critique de « l'idolâtrie de l'État » des populistes qui s'opposent au libéralisme économique au nom d'un égalitarisme obsessionnel. Nous concluons que le « populisme » est un « *kampfbegriff* » (un « concept de bataille »), comme le totalitarisme était et peut être compris comme une continuation de l'anticommunisme de la Guerre Froide.

Mots-clés populisme; antipopulisme; néolibéralisme; démocratie; antilibéralisme; mario vargas llosa.

Introduction

The term *populism* started a peculiar adventure: it has become a popular word. This word, which belonged to a university-based language, is now used in political and journalistic controversies through expressions such as 'populist temptation' or 'populist danger,' which might mean anti-democratism or pseudo-democratism. It can reach the level of unfair treatment and even insult when using as a synonym for 'fascist' or 'demagogue.' However, in the history of populisms since the 19th century, neither anti-democratism or demagoguery or fascism emerge as dominant features. Quite the contrary. In Russian populism of the late 19th century, there is the reformist and 'progressive' orientation inherent to humanist socialism. As for Latin American populisms, although many leaders may be regarded as demagogues, they were also supporters and/or argued for the popular classes and sometimes prevented military coups d'État. Thus, and without denying the diffuse nature of this concept, Alain Touraine (1989, p. 167) defined the national-popular State as the interdependence of 3 components: a) the State as an advocate of national identity against a foreign domination; b) political and social integration mechanisms; and c) protection of national and popular culture.

In fact, it seems impossible to reach a satisfactory categorization of populism. Back in the 1960s, G. Ionescu and E. Gellner (1969) concluded that such a definition, unique and applicable to all situations, did not exist. There will not be an exhaustive account of the literature on populism in Latin America from 'the classics' (Germani, Ianni, & Torcuato, 1973; Malloy, 1977) to more recent studies on 'neopopulisms' (De la Torre, 2017; De la Torre & Arnson, 2013; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012; Rivero, Zarzalejos, & Del Palacio, 2017). In a schematic way – based on some outstanding examples

–, the existing works may be divided according to the methodology adopted. Resorting to political philosophy and grounded in a deductive method, Ernesto Laclau (2005) emphasizes that populism has an intrinsic and rational political rationale, which allows the expression of unmet social needs. Another perspective inspired by political science proposes a ‘catalog’ of objective criteria that determine a normative framework. The latter allows us to include certain historical situations and exclude others. This is the meritorious effort made by Fernando Vallespín and Máriam Martínez-Bascuñán (2017), but also Hawkins, Carlin, Littvay and Kaltwasser (2018), Kaltwasser, Taggart, Espejo and Ostiguy (2017), or Müller (2016). These works do not escape entirely from a normativism that tends to include situations in a disembodied political vocabulary. However, by placing populism in their respective historical contexts, they allow us to nuance and adjust categories that are sometimes strict. Another method, the inductive one, facilitates the passage from particular observations or specific analyses to rather general perspectives. It is the method used, for instance, by Gilberto Aranda Bustamante (2013), through primary sources. It manages to cast away both the politological reading by Carlos Malamud (2010), who sees in Chavismo a simple re-edition of the old populism, and that by Marta Harneker (2004), who analyzes it as a ‘sui generis revolution.’ Without ignoring or disqualifying a high-quality scientific reflection such as the one mentioned above, the heuristic value of this term seems to be lower due to its current political use, both in profane and scientific debates. This warning leads us to adopt the methodological viewpoint of Quentin Skinner (2000), according to which political theory cannot be considered merely as a ‘general system of ideas.’ Inspired by the performative theory of language proposed by John Austin, Skinner (2000) claims that it is necessary to see words as acts: philosophical concepts are not above reality or detached from it. They are political interventions in ideological conflicts, therefore, the historian must propose a political reading of theoretical and philosophical positions. Starting from this premise, a definition as neutral as possible of populism was privileged, so as not to incur a priori normative postulates. Populism is understood according to Taguieff (1997, p. 8, our translation):

[...] a political style capable of shaping various symbolic materials and establishing themselves in multiple ideological places, taking the political color of the place of destination. Also, and inseparably, it is presented as a set of rhetorical operations implemented through the symbolic exploitation of certain social representations: the gesture of appealing to the people presupposes a basic consensus on what the “people” is and what it is worth (demos or ethnos) and about what it wants.

In order not to add one more work to an already plethoric literature, this article proposes another perspective to ground the concept of populism, starting from the way how its enemies approach it. Based on the postulate of Q. Skinner and the fruitful works on anti-communism (Berstein & Becker, 1987), it is assumed that the use of this concept (and the content thus provided) teaches us

so much (or more) about the person, movement, or party that resorts to it than the party or person that it designates. So, this article studies the anti-populist discourse emanating from the current of thought that Albert Hirschman (1991) baptized as the 'third reactionary wave.' As it was shown in a previous study, this right-wing that has opposed the welfare State in the 20th century and its intellectual networks in Latin America are structured around the tutelary figure of the writer and Nobel Prize winner for Literature, Mario Vargas Llosa (Andurand & Boisard, 2017). Two books reflect the reading made by this current of populism and they serve as a primary source: a) *El estallido del populismo*, directed by Á. Vargas Llosa (2017); and b) *El engaño populista*, by Axel Kaiser and Gloria Álvarez (2016).

First, the figure of the current populist is analyzed (first section). Then, it is shown (second section) that her/his anti-populism is both a rejection of the people/ethnos (nationalism as the essence of populism), a denial of the people/démos (populism as a pathology of democracy), and an accusation of the people/pléthos (the fragile mass manipulated by a leader and intellectuals). The anti-populist discourse of the third reactionary wave is also characterized by its vituperation against the 'idolatry of State' uttered by populists 'opposed to economic liberalism in the name of obsessive egalitarianism.' It is concluded that 'populism' is a 'kampf-begriff' (a 'battle concept') as 'totalitarianism' once was and it may be understood as a continuation of Cold War anti-communism. As a conclusion, we wonder if, as in the short film shot by the Lumière brothers, *L'Arroseur Arrosé* (The Sprinkler Sprinkled), we are not always a populist according to another person.

The portrait of the current populist according to the third reactionary wave

Populism: left-wing and/or right-wing?

As a first step, a list of leaders labeled as populists may be found in *El estallido del populismo* (Á. Vargas Llosa, 2017): D. Trump, in the United States of America (USA), A. M. López Obrador, in Mexico, D. Ortega, in Nicaragua, Lula da Silva, in Brazil, Néstor and Cristina Kirchner, in Argentina, R. Correa, in Ecuador, E. Morales, in Bolivia. In Europe, France Insoumise, Die Linke, Syriza, and most of the far-right-wing movements are mentioned, such as the Belgian Vlams Block, the French Front National, the Italian Lega Nord, or the German AfD. In Spain, more precisely, Pablo Iglesias and Podemos (which may be an amalgam of Marxism, Chavismo, and civil-warfare state) and the Basque and Catalan nationalism (which may represent the old traditionalist bourgeoisie) are pointed out. Such a list does not show great originality, because this is how the opposition to these charismatic political characters or to these 'anti-establishment' movements has always depicted them. However, there are other examples that do not seem as obvious as that of the Castro brothers, in Cuba – which add up to the categories of communist and populist –, as well as M. Bachelet, in Chile (whose second

term is regarded as an attempt to re-found the Chilean neoclassical economic model) or the British Conservative Party, which pushed Brexit in England.

It is worth noticing that in this tailor's drawer the left-wing x right-wing dichotomy is not denied. In their respective articles, Mario Vargas Llosa and Mauricio Rojas point out that, in Latin America, populism is fundamentally left-wing oriented, while in Europe its political tendency is fundamentally right-wing oriented, not forgetting to include Syriza, Podemos, France Insoumise, Die Linke, and even Rodríguez Zapatero, in 2008, in European populism. If a mere statistical count is made of the cases cited in most of the cases analyzed in *El estallido del populismo* (Á. Vargas Llosa, 2017) and in *El engaño populista* (Kaiser & Álvarez, 2016), this corresponds mainly to governments and left-wing leaders. A single left-wing government receives a *satisfecit* (Mario Vargas Llosa, 2017, p. 16):

There is also an interesting phenomenon in Latin America that goes against populism: left-wing governments, such as Uruguay's [El Frente Amplio], which have respected institutions and even encouraged some liberal measures in certain areas despite their socialist ideas and their interventionist vocation.

The anti-left-wing bias emerges in the case of Chile, when the re-foundational vocation of Michelle Bachelet's second term is denounced, which might be inspired by 'a dogmatic view.' The former unionist and *Chicago boy* Cristián Larroulet (2017) actively participated in the military dictatorship of the Military Junta, from 1973 to 1990. He could hardly classify Augusto Pinochet as a populist, despite being a 'strong leader' with a re-foundational vocation. On the contrary, he denies Michelle Bachelet a charismatic dimension, but nevertheless sees her as 'populist' during her second term. As established by her presidential program, M. Bachelet intended: a) to propose a new Constitution; b) raise taxes and change the tax system in favor of greater distribution; c) carry out a labor reform that provides the the unions with more weight; and d) reform education to introduce universal free access to Higher Education. In the end, C. Larroulet (2017) considers the center-left-wing government as populist, because it opposes the Chilean right-wing program, which has not stopped advocating General Pinochet's legacy since the return to democracy.

The Spanish case is somewhat more complex, because it emphasizes the 'transversality' between the Catalan and Basque nationalism and Podemos. Beyond the presence of nationalist left-wing currents, the reason that may allow uniting these currents has to do with the purpose they seek. They are fundamentally 'anti-Spanish,' according to the author, Cayetana Álvarez de Toledo (2017, p. 315), XIII Marquise de Casa Fuerte and member of the Popular Party, who writes: "nationalism seeks independence and Podemos seeks assault on power" and the means used by these two blocs allow us to view them as being similar. So, she proposes an impressive catalog of shared features:

Just dig using one fingertip to discover between separatists and Podemos a network of similarities. The most obvious refer to the means. Both trigger irrationality. They appeal to feelings. They promote victimhood. They despise past and present reality. They run over the truth. They monopolize the citizen's will on behalf of the people. They raise the flag of direct democracy against representative democracy. They demonize what is not in accord. They cause social divide. They cultivate an unchaste clientelism. They propose messianic utopias. And they assault democratic legality and its guardians, judges, and courts (Toledo, 2017, p. 314).

As a final proof of collusion, these two parties, both criticize the Spanish transition agreed in the late 1970s. Toledo (2017, p. 315) finishes her complaint accusing them of being a regression to Francoism, "in this, the populists reveal themselves as what they are: a regression not only regarding the constitutional regime, but to the late Franco regime. They are the new bunker. A fierce reaction." We try to see below on which theoretical basis such accusation is based.

Theoretical poverty of anti-populism: populism as "*forme jugée*"

Although some articles have a certain stylistic quality, neither of the two books analyzed brings a common definition of the term populism, something which makes the argument much weaker. The authors of *El engaño populista* state that their book "is not a treatise on populism that seeks to cover the phenomenon in all its complexity, variety, and multitude of dimensions [but] limited to the toughest forms of populism" (Kaiser & Álvarez, 2016, p. 22). Their purpose is to refer to "populism as an intellectual product" because "the ideas, ideologies, and cultural hegemony that intellectuals and opinion makers build are key nutrients for populism" (Kaiser & Álvarez, 2016, p. 22). Although they focus on this intellectual dimension, they do not refer to a concrete definition of populism in the book. According to them, this may be both left- and right-wing, but in fact the only cases of populism examined are limited to the left-wing that came back to power in Latin America with the pink tide in the 2000s. The main feature of this populist Gramscian elite could be its obsessive egalitarianism and its anti-liberalism.

The most persuasive explanation is undoubtedly that by Mauricio Rojas (2017). Based on the book by the Argentine philosopher Ernesto Laclau (2005), he claims that populism is first and foremost a 'political rationale' and not an identifiable movement relying on a special social base or having a certain ideological orientation. Therefore, populist reasoning may be both left- and right-wing and speak out on the most varied social interests. This author acknowledges that populism is "in varying degrees existing in virtually all political parties" because this is a political style that agitates popular passions and seeks to gain popular support through demagoguery. It may be articulated around 5 primary ideas: a) the Manichaean opposition between people – which is unique and represents the

true nation – and elite – which represents the so-called *establishment*; b) the foreign enemy to which the autochthonous elite was linked (in the form of imperialism, neoliberal globalization, or abroad); c) the apocalyptic metaphor that may be translated as a constant lethal threat against the people; d) the messianic component, which implies the need for a savior; and e) the generalized protest discourse. Then, populism manifests in 3 outstanding features: a) plebiscitary democratic forms (i.e. disruptive and confrontational) with a view to deploying re-foundational programs; b) a strong orientation towards personalism, a supposed symbiosis between people and leader; c) its instability, since populist movements only rest on the leader, but when challenged, she/he may lose her/his unifying role or, once elected, she/he may have to sweeten her/his message.

Except for this example, the chapters that constitute *El estallido del populismo* (Á. Vargas Llosa, 2017) and *El engaño populista* (Kaiser & Álvarez, 2016) provide a merely descriptive account of the situation in various countries and their respective leaders. According to Julián Castro-Rea (2018, p.144, our translation), these books have no scientific pretense because they belong to what he names as journalistic best sellers, which achieved a quite wide dissemination in the Hispanic world:

The so-called *best sellers* are mass-produced soft cover books for distribution to an audience with an average general culture in an editorial market. They may be fiction works (novels, short stories, poems, etc.) or non-fiction works (essays, analysis of current reality, self-help books, etc.). Due to their low production cost per copy, publishing houses can offer these titles at competitive prices. Thus, best sellers, insofar as they propose an accessible interpretation, to any attentive reader, of complex social, political, and economic issues, may be a powerful instrument in the struggle for hegemony, in the sense that Antonio Gramsci speaks of.

This interpretation is reinforced by the fact that these books came out at a key moment of the presidential elections in many Latin American countries and in Spain. The main mobilized authors did not hide their support for right-wing parties participating in these elections and the apologetic tone used in many pages of these books is rather typical of an electoral campaign discourse than of a scientific analysis. In neither of these two books there is an actual will to discuss the very presuppositions of the term ‘populist.’ The vast majority of the articles are limited to citing, as a reliable proof of the veracity of their analysis, authors related to their specific ideological reading, in the manner of a self-citation system that could self-justify, which inevitably leads to tautological demonstrations that prevent a contradictory argument. So, we may claim that using the concept of populism just as these books do corresponds to “une forme jugée,” in Roland Barthes’ words in *Le degré zéro de l’écriture*. Marc Angenot (2014, p. 9, our translation) explains about it:

Some concepts introduce the world 'in a judged form.' This term has been coined by Roland Barthes in *Writing degree zero*: 'totalitarianism,' 'neoliberalism,' etc. In a way, these categorizations, these ideal-typical labels, say it all: if you accept this term to attribute a specified quality to an opinion, a theory, you are predisposed to take the guilt and the conclusions that accompany it. The process of condemning the labeling is a way of attributing a *motu proprio* authority, the appearance of at least an authority delegation, just because it classifies in a quasi-legal way that the person who proposes it becomes an inspector and turns a contrary opinion into something more than a 'mere' opinion: a fault, a crime, or even an outdated vocabulary that retains its meaning, a blasphemy against what is civically and politically sacred, something that ends up nominating itself to public outrage. Some of the categories are arguments in themselves or, rather, allow us to use them to take advantage while seeking intimidation.

Despite its use as "*une forme jugée*," it is nevertheless worth analyzing the arguments proposed by the anti-populist discourse.

The populism of anti-populists: populism as a pathology of democracy

Populism and the people as an issue: ethnos, démos and pléthos?

Although Etienne Balibar (2015) prefers to talk about 'counterpopulism' without defining it concretely, but as a strategy of those advocating the current neoliberalism to scare the peoples, it is necessary to point out that the concept of anti-populism – just like populism – suffers from a unitary and univocal theoretical definition. Some authors highlight that anti-populism, in its academic version, translates contempt for the people, what Federico Tarragoni (2013, pp. 58-59, our translation) names, for instance, as a 'populology':

By reviving the passions and flattering the instincts of a voter who ends up forsaking interest and privileging her/his membership – real or ghostly – to the people, populism endangers governability and must necessarily be anti-liberal. These epistemological assumptions run through the scientific literature on populism. But they are much more widely assumed because the analyst accumulates many forms of legitimacy – scientific, media-based, political, and intellectual.

Federico Tarragoni (2013, pp. 58-59, our translation) illustrates the link between popular irrationality and populist danger using a speech by Mario Vargas Llosa, awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, when commenting on the Venezuelan news in 2001:

The fact that so many Venezuelans support populist and autocratic delusions of the ridiculous figure of Lieutenant Colonel Hugo Chavez does not make him a democrat. It only reveals the extremes reached by the Venezuelan people's desperation, frustration, and civic enculturation.

By criticizing an alleged civic enculturation of Venezuelans that might lead him to vote for an anti-democrat man, Mario Vargas Llosa fails to say what he means by 'Venezuelan people.' However, Etienne Balibar (2015, p. 3, our translation) highlights that, at the theoretical level, 'popular sovereignty' creates a tension between populism, nationalism, and democracy. And this cannot be resolved without precisely defining the word 'people':

In a way, there has always been tension; it is inscribed in the heart of modern political systems, because, as the very etymology indicates, the notion of 'people' may be understood in various ways. The word that has been preserved in modern Greek for constitutional use, *laos*, from which the name 'populism' (*laikismos*) is derived (it is quite funny for a Frenchman that this is a quasi-homonym of 'laïcité,' which is currently one of the major focus points of populism in France) is only one of those to designate or connote the idea of 'people' in the traditional language of politics. There are at least three others that are more or less competing with each other: first *ethnos* (the historical people as a common culture, or even as a genealogical offspring, therefore essentially the nation or nationality), then *démos* (let us say, the community of citizens, who are supposed to have the constituent power), and finally *pléthos* (which Latin languages translate as mass, crowd, or *plèthos*).

How does the anti-populist discourse pose this issue of the people in its triple dimension of *ethnos*, *démos*, and *pléthos*?

The people/*ethnos* and nationalism as a poison

Mario Vargas Llosa (2017, pp. 9-10) writes about populism:

It is not [The populist threat] an ideology but a viral epidemic – in the most toxic sense of this word – that equally strikes against developed and undeveloped countries [...] Populism is a degeneration of democracy, [no country] is vaccinated against this disease.

The idea of pathology of democracy (body and medical discourse) may be defined by paraphrasing the thinker Corrado Gini (1935, pp. 725-726) (a fascist man and creator of the famous eponymous index), when suggesting the existence of an “economic pathology.” This intends to tackle the causes of imbalance and the rebalancing mechanisms in the political organization of societies. In the analysis proposed by Mario Vargas Llosa, political pathology implies the existence of a ‘realistic’ position, even ‘naturalistic,’ about what a democratic society should be, as the classic topos of the ‘fair political order.’ So, populism is characterized, according to him, as a regression to a tribal stage, i.e. nationalism: in face of globalization, which it regards as the most promising fact of the present time, this is the denial of culture, democracy, and rationality. It resorts to the most successful instincts in human beings, i.e. tribal spirit, distrust, and fear of the other, based on the fact of having a different race, language, or religion, as well as to xenophobia, patrioterism, and ignorance. Introduced as an anti-rational feeling that arises in a context of crisis, nationalism is, according to Mario Vargas Llosa (2017, p. 11), one of the main explanatory factors for the populist poison: “the central ingredient of populism is nationalism, the source, after religion, of the deadliest wars that humanity has experienced.”

As conceived by Karl Popper (1945), who provides Mario Vargas Llosa’s analysis with a basis, the closed, magical, tribal, or collectivist society is grounded in ‘organic’ or biological theories of the State. The relationships between members tend to be more ‘physical’ than ‘socially abstract.’ So, racism becomes the central ingredient of nationalism, because it is the weapon of the people/ethnos that defends itself as an organic community against an external aggression. According to Mario Vargas Llosa, countries with rather entrenched democratic traditions, such as Great Britain, France, the Netherlands, and the USA are not exempt from this ‘cancerous corruption,’ something which shows that the germ of destruction can be found within the open society itself. Usually, it arises when the people is manipulated by unscrupulous leaders, managing that the people/démos votes for him.

The people/démos before the charismatic leader: the supposed psychological weakness of the masses

The leader as a theme does not deserve a detailed analysis herein, because the presence of the leader and her/his direct relationship with the people are usually the central feature wielded by all populist analysts. The important thing lies, however, on the graduation proposed in the books *E/*

estallido del populismo (Á. Vargas Llosa, 2017) and *El engaño populista* (Kaiser & Álvarez, 2016). By way of example, Lula da Silva is depicted as a moderate man (Schüler, 2017). The only thing that is reproached about this leader is that he was demagogic at the time of appealing to the people, but not so much both regarding ideological conviction and mere pragmatism. On the contrary, Juan Claudio Lechín (2017, p. 246) assigns an almost divine dimension to Evo Morales:

The populist caudillo is generally a being empty of convictions. Her/his pathological ambition for power is mobilized by a great will (Triumph des Willens) and grounded in an intuitive antenna (a natural pragmatism). Her/his antenna captures obvious things, inequality, injustice, anti-Semitism, but fundamentally the traumas of the collective unconsciousness. And when she/he does, the messianic caudillo becomes a mirror of the collective soul and the collectivity looks at her/him, recognizing and enchanting her/himself. This popular narcissism generates a massive devotion. In 2003, [Evo Morales] detected a growing indigenism and declared himself an indigenist. At that time, he turned from a politician into a messiah.

In the case of Manuel López Obrador, it is not so much the leader who appeals to the people, but the people could also influence her/his 'mana-personality' and how she/he behaves. Enrique Krauze (2017, p. 79) explains:

Now, much more than in Echeverría's time, the dialectics described by Jung is operating [i.e. the mana-personality]. The 'collective unconsciousness' of many Mexicans is dragging López Obrador to imbalance, requiring him to fulfill messianic expectations [...] He has been the first one to encourage those expectations and believe he can meet them. 'Anointed,' rather than elected, by the people, he could have the revolutionary and autocratic temptation to dissolve democratic institutions at one blow or little by little, including the reaction.

On the other extreme, we have portraits of leaders drawing almost demonic beings, parasites, unscrupulous or immoral individuals. An example of this cartoonish critique is the one made in the book by Axel Kaiser and Gloria Álvarez (2016), showing that the populist leader is part of the Greek hybris (i.e. excess). According to the authors, populism could allow us to cover, as historical reality, the following regimes:

The truth is that beyond comparisons, ideologically, people like Mussolini, Hitler, Stalin, and Mao were following the same route of people like Chávez, Perón, Castro,

Iglesias, Allende, Maduro, Morales, Correa, López Obrador, Kirchner, and Bachelet (the latter in her second term, in which she implemented a re-foundational program with the purpose of bringing to an end the successful system of freedoms that prevailed for more than three decades) [That is, since the beginning of the 80s in Chile, when General Pinochet's dictatorship glorified/raised the flag of free society in its 1980 Constitution!] (Kaiser & Álvarez, 2016, p. 28).

According to these authors, Latin American populism may be traced back in Europe's creation through the myth of the 'noble savage,' whose promoters devalued European civilization and raised the flag of the Native American, assaulting the idea of private property. In the same subchapter, they manage to draw a line of populist and totalitarian thinking that goes from Michel de Montaigne to Raúl Prebisch, passing through Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Karl Marx, and Che Guevara. They are responsible for spreading the myth of the noble savage:

A follower of Montaigne, the French philosopher born in Geneva Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a direct precursor of Marxist and National Socialist totalitarianism, would take this myth of the noble savage and the condemnation of private property up to the point of delirium [...] It is inevitable not to see in this myth that depicted Latin Americans as 'victims' of Europeans one of the intellectual origins of the famous doctrine of 'structuralism' that led to the ruinous system of import substitution that prevailed in Latin America from the 1940s onwards (Kaiser & Álvarez, 2016, pp. 36-40).

Both in *El estallido del populismo* (Á. Vargas Llosa, 2017) and in *El engaño populista* (Kaiser & Álvarez, 2016), this distorted view of the reality advocated by populists has been made possible due to manipulation of the people. The title of the book by Kaiser and Álvarez (2016), when referring to a 'hoax,' is symptomatic of this reading. More generally, the whole semantic field of these books revolves around the idea of 'lie,' 'fraud,' 'cheat,' 'mystification,' or 'trickery' that are detrimental to the people, since an elite fully devoted to affirm the hegemonic will of the leader manages to manipulate the people. The people/démos (i.e. a group of citizens) then becomes a people/pléthos, i.e. a mass subjugated by its leader. Due to its numerical superiority, this mass manages to take the leader to power and keep her/him there, something which leads these authors to put into question the validity of 'popular sovereignty' as a source of democracy. According to Gabriela Calderón (2017), this problem arises in Ecuador because the equation "a person, a vote," which lies on an atomistic view of society, is 'parasitized' by the idea of common good inspired by the concept of 'good living' that keeps citizens in a state of immaturity.

In his study on Evo Morales, Juan Claudio Lechín (2017) asks himself in the title, unfortunately never providing an answer, if Morales' terms may be characterized as a 'plebeian monarchy' or

‘lumpen monarchy,’ which would have led to an ‘infantilization of the Indian.’ In this interpretation of the weakness of the masses, an idea of the Indian as a child that goes back to the colonial period intersects with more recent interpretations. According to Seymour Martin Lipset (1963), for instance, populist and extremist movements appeal to discontent individuals and people suffering from psychological weakness, those in a situation of personal failure, immature, uneducated, and authoritarian individuals. Such a weakness of peoples and individuals instrumentalize leaders through State’s resources that enable the establishment of a clientelistic system. Hence the obsession against the alleged idolatry of State among populists and their struggle for conquering the State, the major resource of their power.

Populism as ‘kampfbegriff’: criticism of the idolatry of state

Criticism of the welfare State: a dividing line between populism and anti-populism

For the members of the third reactionary wave, the dividing line between populism and anti-populism turns out to be primarily the defense of the welfare State or what they name as *statism*. Mauricio Rojas (2017, p. 373) writes:

Much more relevant are other dividing lines [than the right-wing/left-wing], such as those that separate ‘modernists’ and ‘traditionalists’ in a value sense or those that propose an expansion of State functions and regulations with regard to those who advocate a limited State and greater freedom of action for the private sphere. This last dividing line has gained great relevance due to the evolution of various ‘right-wing’ populist parties towards statism, particularly in relation to the Welfare State, whose defense and expansion in many cases has become a key axis of the populist discourse.

Conceptually and theoretically, A. Kaiser and G. Álvarez (2016, p. 28) explain that populism is equivalent to – not to say synonymous with – totalitarianism because it lies on hatred of individual freedom and idolatry of State: “the German nazism and Italian fascism, for instance, [...] were also populist movements that made hatred of individual freedom and worship of the State their crucial propeller.”

In a rather subtle way, Álvaro Vargas Llosa (2017) thinks that Donald Trump is fundamentally a populist, despite some of his most significant and emblematic measures, such as massive lowering of taxes for the richest ones, are judged as anti-populist. This dichotomy allows us to classify the administrations of de Felipe González and José María Aznar as anti-populist. Likewise, it is claimed

that Chile was free from populism from 1990 to 2014, then including in the same continuity the administrations of the center-left Concertación and that of the right-wing man Sebastián Piñera. Such a reading also exists in the analysis of right-wing populism which people distinguish, for instance, between the xenophobic parties and the English Conservative Party that has led Brexit. Mario Vargas Llosa (2017, p. 11) regrets, for instance, the fact that “English nationalism has, unfortunately, some liberal aspects that add complexity to the discussion and confuse many people.” But he manages to tackle this schizophrenic position by referring to the fact that the conservative British right-wing is not to blame for Brexit, but the European bureaucracy. Taking as an example his most revered political mentor, Margaret Thatcher, Mario Vargas Llosa (2017, p. 11) states that today the liberals’ task is fighting against this bureaucratization:

The rejection of Europe is, in part, the rejection of the European bureaucracy, a reality that cannot be denied, although the best way to fight against it is from within [...] These liberal principles, which some British politicians and intellectuals share today, are surely worth of respect, and it is necessary, indeed, to fight against the bureaucratization of the European project.

This criticism of the Welfare State and the State cannot be understood without taking into account the historical role that the third reactionary wave assigns to populism.

Populism as another totalitarianism: the continuation of Cold War anti-communism

It is worth noticing, first, that the two books under study do not show a link between the historical populisms in the 1930s and 40s and the current ones. The privileged historical affiliation is established rather with European fascisms and communist regimes in the Eastern Bloc during the Cold War. As Juan Claudio Lechín (2017) explains in his study on Evo Morales, populism is today a term more convenient than ‘fascism’ or ‘communism.’ The variety – seemingly irreconcilable of these movements with each other – is based on the minimum definition of the term ‘populism,’ which would only be a new authoritarianism (Lechín, 2017, pp. 253-254):

[...] the etymology of the word ‘populism’ (populus-people and ism-doctrine), doctrine of the people, has its accuracy component because it blames the people for authoritarian regimes that manage to attract their support [...] The greatest virtue of the word ‘populism’ is that it encompasses the phenomenon of authoritarianisms that are born with popular support, without causing bias such as when the words ‘fascism’ or ‘communism’ are used.

Although most of the Latin American left-wing governments, labeled as populist by the authors of the books under study, came to power by democratic means, they are denied the adjective 'democratic' because they are 'anti-liberal' in the economic sphere. In fact, these governments were mostly related to a European-type social democracy that is not opposed to the free market and there were very few of them that followed the route of 21st century socialism led by Venezuelan leader Hugo Chávez. However, according to Mario Vargas Llosa (2017, p. 7), "communism is no longer the main enemy of liberal democracy – 'of freedom' – but populism." This author never manages to assimilate communism and populism, because he recognizes that most of right-wing populist movements are strongly anti-communist. However, he establishes a historical continuity between communism and populism based on an 'anti-liberal' genealogy that might threaten a Western and capitalist order, seen as the last stage of a natural evolution of the peoples. Although the concept of anti-liberalism has no reliable theoretical grounds (Boisard, 2017), it is usual since the Cold War to confuse it with that of 'totalitarianism.' When speaking of 'populist or communist dictatorships' as manifestations of totalitarianism, it is assumed that the terms are synonymous without analyzing the regimes types that each one supposes and lacking a historization of the concepts. However, as E. Traverso (2001, p. 11) recalls, totalitarianism has a "substantial ambiguity" because:

[...] it means at the same time a fact (totalitarian regimes as a historical reality), a concept (the totalitarian State as a new power type and unclassifiable through the typologies proposed by classic thought), and a theory (a domain model defined by elements common to the various totalitarian regimes, after having compared them).

A historization of the concept shows that it was most widely used during the Cold War (Traverso, 2001, p. 83):

The period from 1947 to 1960 is, therefore, the golden age of the idea of totalitarianism, which then reached its utmost theoretical formulation, the most widely used. However, such a canonization was done at the price of a relevant mutation: more than a critical function before the existing regimes – as in the 1930s –, the concept of totalitarianism played an apologetic role in the Western order, in other words, it turned into ideology.

Enzo Traverso (2001) deduces that the ideological function of totalitarianism as a concept stems from the fact that after World War II, the former enemy, Germany, became a new ally while the former ally against fascism, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), became the main, if not

exclusive, incarnation of totalitarianism. Then, anti-totalitarianism is confused with anti-communism and becomes a weapon of propaganda and a “battle concept” (Kampfbegriff) (Traverso, 1998, p. 102).

According to the authors of the two books analyzed, anti-populism, seen as the continuation of anti-totalitarianism, is today the last bulwark of the “Western order” and the USA still remains as the beacon of the free world. And according to Mario Vargas Llosa (2017, p. 18), the “Western order” is today threatened by the current weakening of the USA and Donald Trump’s isolationist policy:

Trump has exploited this isolationist trend and intends to leave the door open for authoritarian demagogues like Vladimir Putin to replace the U.S. leadership, weakening, for instance, Europe’s ability to curb the imperialist impulses of the Russian leader. The USA is clearly the leader of the West and it has a responsibility that it cannot avoid. Thinking that the free world can do without an active foreign policy by the USA is a dangerous naivety.

The demonstration of continuity and similarity between the Cold War era and the current situation lies on the role of an intellectual left-wing elite, directly inspired by Antonio Gramsci, which advocated an anti-liberal model during the Cold War by supporting socialist regimes and it is still active today, with the defense of populist governments. In the two books analyzed, there is much emphasis on the responsibility of the ‘entourages of intellectuals’ who could be acting in the shadow of charismatic leaders. In the text about Rafael Correa in Ecuador, Gabriela Calderón (2017, p. 219) refers to the “tyranny of social engineers”:

The government of the citizen Revolution came to power ten years ago boasting of being a group of people with “lucid minds, burning hearts, and clean hands” [...] The argument was that a group of enlightened assumptions, willing to serve, and having no ambition to benefit personally from power came to save us from a mythical past in which we had allegedly been subject to the discretion of private interests. Private entities were the bad ones, those to blame for corruption and for that reason it was required to increase the State’s size and scope to control them.

This author finishes her demonstration accusing these social engineers of being experts in ‘re-foundational utopia,’ ‘State idolaters’ obsessed by egalitarianism, as well as agents of corruption and decay since, citing Ludwig von Mises (1996, p. 220), “interventionism always breeds corruption.” *Quod erat demonstrandum!* (What was to be shown).

This Gramscian elite as a theme is also a true obsession of Axel Kaiser (2014) – as his book *La fatal ignorancia. La anorexia cultural de la derecha frente al avance ideológico progresista* shows,

whose title plagiarizes the essay by F. Hayek (1988), *The fatal conceit*, known as a bible of anti-constructivism. In the book *El engaño populista* (Kaiser & Álvarez, 2016), the authors dedicate the third part to “cultural hegemony as the foundation of populism.” They explain that “to grasp the populist phenomenon, especially in its totalitarian variant, it is key to know that it resorts to a whole language and intellectual apparatus created especially to destroy freedom and justify the leader’s aspirations to power” (Kaiser & Álvarez, 2016, p. 82). Relying on George Orwell, these authors intend, then, to unmask these left-wing intellectuals. The reason is simple: “the reason why, usually, intellectuals prefer socialism is partly due to the fact that most of them are not interested in the truth, but to impose their worldview, whatever the cost others must pay” (Kaiser & Álvarez, 2016, p. 85). Beyond the fact that there would be a truth and that the liberal opponents of the socialists could have it, the authors provide their explanation by means of the example of the leader of Podemos, Pablo Iglesias, the preeminence of Antonio Gramsci today in the political struggle (Kaiser & Álvarez, 2016, p. 94):

Iglesias says, then, that the battle field of the entire fascist-populist project that they carry out lies on culture and on the terrain of ideas. Thus, their struggle is primarily intellectual, and it must be so because, lacking ‘Mao’s rifles,’ they cannot lead the armed revolution to power. What they must do, then, is changing the hegemony by using democratic structures to manage to control the State’s power.

The intellectual fathers of 21st century socialism are, then, the Argentine Norberto Ceresole, the French Ignacio Ramonet, the German Heinz Dieterich, the American Noam Chomsky, the Hungarian István Mészáros, the Spanish Juan Carlos Monedero, the British Alan Wood, and the Chilean Marta Harnecker. Among the promoters of socialism, the two authors also include Pope Francis, whose “lightness of judgment” (Kaiser & Álvarez, 2016, p. 144) has led him to get “everything wrong” (Kaiser & Álvarez, 2016, p. 147). As Kaiser and Álvarez (2016, p. 145) write: “more clear and serious is the unawareness of His Holiness when he claims that the free market does not improve the situation of the poor and that the idea that it does ‘has never been demonstrated by the facts.’”

The ultimate goal of statism, according to the authors under analysis is, however, the same: advocating the idea of a strong State to manipulate the masses through clientelistic networks funded by the public treasury. As populism is nothing else but a continuity by other means of ‘collectivism’ (in both its communist and fascist forms, according to the authors concerned), then anti-populism turns into a battle concept against what could be false democracy, because the majority (i.e. the people) can oppose the government of the fittest (i.e. the elite). We see in these arguments the basis of those who denounced back in the 1930s one of the fathers of the Vienna neoliberal economic school, Ludwig Von Mises (1996, p. 150, our translation):

The concept of majority government or government by the people, recommended by liberalism, does not aim that the mass prevails, men on the streets. It certainly does not advocate, as some critics assume, for the government of the most unworthy, boorish, and unable. The liberals do not doubt that above all the nation should be ruled by the best.

A few pages later, Mises (1996, p. 153, our translation) adds:

[...] the modernly reappearing collectivist dogmas – the main cause of disasters and sorrows that afflict us – have triumphed in such a way that they managed to relegate the primary ideas in which liberal social philosophy is grounded. Today, this thought is unknown even to many of the supporters of democratic institutions. The arguments used to justify freedom and democracy are plagued by collectivist errors; their doctrines rather constitute a misrepresentation than a defense of authentic liberalism. The majorities, in their opinion, are always right simply because they have enough power to crush the dissident; a majority government is equivalent to the dictatorship of the most numerous party, and the majority does not have to restrain itself when exercising power or managing public affairs. As soon as any group has conquered the support of the mass and, therefore, controls all the government resources, it sees itself as capable of denying the minority the same democratic rights that served it to prevail. This pseudo-liberalism, noticeably, is the antithesis of liberal philosophy.

In another book, Ludwig von Mises (1951, p. 21, our translation) explained what is, according to him, the true liberal doctrine, therefore, the very essence of democracy:

The capitalist social order is the realization of what should be named as economic democracy [...] This kind of state of affairs would be as undemocratic as a social constitution in which officials and soldiers, and not the people as a whole, should decide the government's policy. This could be the opposite of what we are used to name as democracy. When it is claimed that capitalist society is a consumers' democracy, it is meant that the right to resort to means of production, provided for business leaders and capitalists, can only be obtained by the vote of consumers, renewed every day in the market.

According to this definition, *in fine*, the populist can only be an anti-democratic advocate of totalitarianism, based on the idea that economic liberalism is synonymous with democracy.

By way of conclusion, we may claim that the use of the term ‘populism’ by the authors of the two books under study, *El estallido del populismo* (Á. Vargas Llosa, 2017) and *El engaño populista* (Kaiser & Álvarez, 2016), does not resolve the theoretical apories of a definition that depends fundamentally on the meaning given to the terms ‘people’ and ‘democracy.’ By rejecting the people/ethnos due to its exclusionary nationalism, the people/démos, due to its ability to prevent the government of the fittest and ensure the ‘dictatorship of the majority’ and the irrational people/pléthos that could facilitate the seizure of power by undemocratic leaders, the anti-populists belonging to the third reactionary wave ground their argument in a very precise definition of democracy, conceived as a ‘market’s democracy,’ and of the fundamental rights of individuals. Then, throughout this analysis of the books *El estallido del populismo* (Á. Vargas Llosa, 2017) and *El engaño populista* (Kaiser & Álvarez, 2016) a portrait of the populist as a ‘pathologized and demonized’ man emerges, a deceiver and fundamentally left-wing man, due to his obsessive egalitarianism. The cases in which a right-wing man is labeled as populist occur when he opposes economic liberalism by advocating a commercial or economic nationalism.

It is precisely by denying the theoretical validity of the equivalence between democracy and liberalism that the critics of anti-populists belonging to the third reactionary wave also classify them as ‘populists.’ The heuristic interest of this historical reading and the use of the term ‘populist’ that follows from it are, however, diminished by the fact that its political adversaries also resort to the term ‘populist’ when speaking of a ‘top-down populism.’ or an ‘far-center populism.’ In an almost ironic way, we could plagiarize the sentence by Philippe Machefer (1974), according to which “we are always a fascist according to another person,” stating that “we are always a populist according to another person.” Etienne Balibar (2015, pp. 5-6, our translation) suggests, for instance, the existence of a ‘center populism’:

I would like to add the idea that it is all the more insufficient and disconcerting to speak of an ‘extremism’ that oscillates between the right-wing and the left-wing when in fact there is also a very powerful ‘center populism’: in the sense that ‘populism’ evokes a public opinion manipulated by power structures against an imaginary ‘enemy’ that serves to prevent citizens from informing themselves and discovering where their own interests are. I take the term ‘center’ in two senses at once: the political ‘center,’ as opposed to extremes, and the dominant ‘power center.’

From the same perspective, according to the sociologist Michel Wieviorka (2017), Emmanuel Macron would embody a ‘top-down populism’ by advocating this ‘far-center’ discourse. Another leader related to ultra-liberalism, Margaret Thatcher, was also labeled as populist by Stuart Hall

(2008). According to this author, it represented an 'authoritarian populism' due to supporting an exceptional type of capitalist State that, unlike classic fascism, retained most of the old representative institutions, while building around them an active popular consent. Stuart Hall (2008) has concluded that Thatcherism was a 'Gramscian' right-wing that claimed a 'radical novelty.' Compared to the old conservatism, it intended to radically change the political system inherited from World War II and grounded in Keynesian consensus. With its famous creed "There Is No Alternative" (TINA), it has managed to discredit ideas rooted in European mentalities such as 'social spending,' 'equality,' and 'public property' in the name of a natural right to inequality and the primacy of safety over democracy. In this sense, Stuart Hall (2008) has found an ideological and cultural victory of this 'new right-wing' by imposing social models of its own (the entrepreneur, the consumer, the owner) and conveying the impression that 'it has history by its side.'

The use of the term *far-center populism* to classify the censers of market democracy emphasizes the growing tension between liberalism and democracy in many countries of the world. These two terms emerge as synonyms in the discourse of the third reactionary wave, since the two could be put into practice through appreciation of the free market, on the one hand, and of the human rights, on the other. But this liberal conception undermines the symbolic role played by popular sovereignty, which is the backbone of the democratic ideal. People's sovereignty is now perceived, in most cases, as an obsolete idea and an obstacle to the realization of human rights. Such a reading does not take into account the interconnection of two different traditions: the liberal tradition (with individual freedom and pluralism) and the democratic tradition (which emphasizes sovereignty and popular equality). This interconnection was constituted in the 19th century, through the alliance between the liberal and democratic forces. As C. B. MacPherson (1977) pointed out, the result has been that liberalism became democratized and democracy became liberalized.

The legitimacy of modern liberal democracy stems from people's sovereignty, and those who believe that it is possible to do without it are deeply mistaken. The democratic deficit that manifests itself in many ways in a growing number of liberal societies is due to the fact that people feel there is no room for meaningful participation in major decisions. This democratic deficit has contributed to the development of populist parties that claim to represent the people and fight for their rights confiscated by the elites. Current populism cannot be thought, as a political phenomenon, outside the framework of democracy. As we do not undertake an urgent reflection on current democracy and its boundaries, perhaps democracy and liberalism disappear in a not-so-distant future.

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