

DEMOCRACY AND POPULISM IN LATIN AMERICA

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ABSTRACT

There appears to be an inherent tension between populism, old and new, and the institutions of representative democracy. This paper focuses on those intrinsic contradictions through a systematic analysis of old and new populism and of its relationship with political democracy. At the core of those tensions is the question of personalization versus institutionalization of power. "Old populism," as I term it, appears as the most salient and paradigmatic Latin American response to the crisis of oligarchic rule in the 1930s and 1940s. The continuing process of "desoligarquización" may help us to explain the emergence of "neopopulism." In contrast to old populism, which emerged in the middle of an authoritarian wave, neopopulism has emerged in the middle of a democratic wave, and thus out of the dynamics of electoral democracy. No doubt neopopulist leaders have a formal democratic legitimacy. However, neopopulist regimes appeal to the superior quality of the leader, who appears as the redeemer and the embodiment of the people and the nation. Populism is not the real problem in Latin America; rather, the real problem is the factors that cause populism, namely, the persistence of poverty and inequality, and the decomposition of traditional political institutions and elites in the region. Finally, I shall argue that Hugo Chávez is not Latin America, and Latin America is not Chávez. He may be the most visible and strident political figure, but he is not the most representative one. In fact, he is the exception and not the rule.

RESUMEN

Pareciera existir una contradicción y una tensión que es inherente al populismo, viejo y nuevo, en su relación con la democracia representativa. Este trabajo considera esas contradicciones y tensiones, en términos de un análisis sistemático del viejo y nuevo populismo, y su relación con la democracia política. En el centro de estas tensiones está la cuestión de la personalización vs. la institucionalización del poder. El populismo aparece, en América Latina como la más significativa y paradigmática respuesta a la crisis oligárquica de la década de 1930 y 1940 (viejo populismo). De alguna manera, podemos decir que aún nos encontramos en un proceso de "desoligarquización", y tal vez sea este el elemento el que nos ayude a explicar el surgimiento del "neopopulismo". A diferencia del viejo populismo, que surge en medio de una ola autoritaria, el nuevo populismo aparece en medio de una ola democrática y, por lo tanto, desde el interior de la dinámica de la democracia electoral. Existe una legitimidad formal de los líderes neopopulistas. Sin embargo, los regímenes neopopulistas apelan, en definitiva, a la calidad superior del líder, quién aparece como un redentor y la personificación misma del pueblo y de la nación. En todo caso, el populismo no es el principal problema de América Latina, sino más bien las causas que lo originan y, muy fundamentalmente, la realidad extendida de la pobreza y la desigualdad, y la descomposición de las instituciones democráticas tradicionales y de las elites tradicionales. Finalmente, argumentaré que Hugo Chávez no es América Latina, y América Latina no es Hugo Chávez. Este aparece como el líder político más visible y estridente de nuestra historia más reciente, pero no necesariamente el más representativo. De hecho, es la excepción más que la regla general.

INTRODUCTION

I began to write these lines—initially, it was not intended to be a paper—while listening to a speech by Hugo Chávez at a summit of the Andean Community of Nations in Lima, Perú, some time in 2005.¹ As inspiration for what is now a paper, the speech delivered by the Venezuelan populist leader was like music to my ears. Populism in Latin America has a lot to do with discourse, rhetoric, and symbolism, and I came to understand many things about this subject matter that are not to be found, generally speaking, in the literature, textbooks, or written statements. What I intend to do in this paper is to refer to some aspects of old and new populism in Latin America, especially as populism relates to democracy. I intend to go beyond the rhetoric of populism to achieve a more systematic analysis of democracy and populism in Latin America, through an understanding of what I consider to be the inherent tensions and contradictions that exist in populism, old and new, regarding representative democracy and its institutions.

In a recent paper, I argued that, in many significant ways, the history of Latin America in the last century corresponds to the search for responses and alternatives to the crisis of oligarchic rule that took place in the 1920s and 1930s.² Populism appears as the most salient and paradigmatic response to such a crisis within the context of the waves of democratization and authoritarianism that we have known in Latin America for so many decades. Somehow we are still in the process of “desoligarquización” that started at the beginning of the twentieth century. This is perhaps what explains the emergence of “neopopulism” in recent years, especially in the cases of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Evo Morales in Bolivia, and Rafael Correa in Ecuador. In this process, we have to avoid both generalizations and caricatures, and take into consideration the specificities of all three cases, which, nevertheless, have certain features in common.

I shall argue that both old and new populism reflect certain intrinsic tensions or contradictions with regard to representative democracy and its institutions.

OLD POPULISM

Populism emerged in the middle of an authoritarian wave, if we are to follow Samuel Huntington's distinction between the three waves of democratization : the long wave, from the 1820s to 1920s, the short wave from the 1940s to the 1960s, and the current, "Third Wave" of democratization, starting in the mid-seventies in southern Europe, and the late-seventies in Latin America.³ The period between the 1930s and the 1940s that saw the emergence of populism in Latin America corresponds to an authoritarian wave, characterized by negative attitudes towards liberal-democratic institutions and liberal capitalism. The period between the wars saw the emergence of Nazism, fascism, and Stalinism, and, in the case of Latin America, of corporatism and populism. This context of the widespread discrediting of liberal-democratic institutions is a fundamental difference from the neopopulism that emerges in this third and unprecedented wave of democratization in Latin America and around the world.

At the core of the emergence of old—or traditional or classical—populism was the crisis of oligarchic rule and the emergence of the "social question," as the emerging popular and middle sectors sought "their place under the sun" in terms of social and political inclusion.

In the following lines I describe some of the basic characteristics of populism, especially as it emerged and developed in the 1930s and 1940s.

The first characteristic of populism corresponds to its popular and national elements: "popular," in terms of its anti-oligarchic component, and "national," in terms of its anti-imperialism. It was popular in terms of its reaction against the old, oligarchic regime and especially against the rule of the landed aristocracy. It was anti-imperialist in terms of its rejection of foreign control of natural resources and national economies and, broadly speaking, of its nationalism, which was widespread in the period between the wars, in Latin America and elsewhere in the world.

The real dichotomy of populism was between peoples and oligarchies. The people (“*pueblo*,” “*povo*”) were considered as a moral category rather than a social category. It was the masses of the people, the urban workers, the people from below—as was the case with the “*descamisados*,” or the “*cabecitas negras*,” in Argentinean populism (Peronism)—that became the defining feature of this movement (for it corresponded to a movement rather than a party organization). What was good for the people was good for the country, in an anti-oligarchic direction.

That is why, from the very outset, there was a tension between populism and Marxism. It was not the contradictions between the “proletariat” and the “bourgeoisie” as they appeared in the context of the industrial revolution and capitalist development, and were depicted in the Marxist analysis of class struggle and revolution, but the contradiction between the “people” and the “oligarchy” that was at the core of populism in Latin America. There was, from the very outset, a tension between populism and Marxism, and between the populist movement and the parties of the Left rooted in the Marxist tradition. In fact, among the populist leaders (Perón and Vargas, among the most prominent ones), there was an attempt to avoid an intensification of the class struggle, moving away from revolution and Marxism. In many ways and among other elements, it was the fear of Marxism and the spread of communism following the Bolshevik Revolution that led many of the populist leaders to advocate anti-oligarchic and anti-imperialist reforms. This tendency was strengthened even further by the mentality and doctrines present among military officers, from whom many of Latin America’s populist leaders emerged.

The second characteristic of populism in Latin America is that it usually took the form of a social and political alliance, especially among the popular and middle sectors of society. This is perhaps one of the most interesting features of populism in the region. When we study the populist phenomenon in the 1940s and the 1950s, we usually refer to it in terms of the “populist coalition,” signifying a multiclass alliance, whether between

the popular and the middle sectors of society, or the one between business, labor, and the state that was characteristic of Brazil under Getúlio Vargas or Juscelino Kubitscheck.

In fact, this was another point of tension with Marxism and the old debate about whether there was a “middle class,” or a “national bourgeoisie,” or a “petty bourgeoisie” whose interests were different from or did not necessarily coincide with those of the old oligarchy and the landed aristocracy. This led to endless discussions and tensions between populist and Marxist leaders and intellectuals, especially in various stages of the development of the communist international movement that became more identified with the thesis of the intensification of the class struggle. A more promising moment of rapprochement came in 1935 at the VII Congress of the International Communist movement with the advent of the “Popular Front” strategy within the Communist International (or Comintern) with the victory of the theses of Dimitrov, which gave priority to antifascist rather than anticapitalist social and political alliances.

Thus, there was a “populist coalition” around this multiclass alliance in both social and political terms, having potential, as we shall see, for both democratization and modernization, but in an incomplete, ambiguous way: always in tension with representative democracy and its institutions, especially in their liberal expression.

The third defining characteristic of populism was the crucial role of the state, conceived in almost a mythical way as the means of salvation of the masses of the people and the dispossessed. Thus we can properly speak of “state populism.” In fact, populism is by definition and from the very outset state-oriented, and it expresses a strong state component. It may still be debated whether the state undertook this role because there was no private sector (or “national bourgeoisie”) that could perform this role, or whether a private sector or a bourgeoisie never developed because the state occupied a predominant position in the economy. The fact remains that the state performed a very active role in economic development. The emergence, especially from the late 1940s, of the “developmentalist state,” or the “entrepreneurial state,” or of state-led import-

substitution industrialization (ISI), had a lot to do with this understanding of the state.

The state provided shelter and, moreover, appeared as the instrument for the masses of the people, the working classes, the urban proletariat, in their struggles against the old landed aristocracy and oligarchy and away from the “ancien régime.” The state came to be seen as the means of progress and well-being of the people from below: the emerging popular and middle sectors of the populist coalition.

The fourth characteristic of populism, along with and closely related to the state component that we have referred to, was the question of industrialization, which came to be seen as a strategy of development, seeking the modernization of social and economic structures. Of course this was not present in the first stages of the development of populism, which emerged from an intuition rather than from a carefully worked blueprint. Starting, however, with the new ideas that were developed by Raúl Prebisch and the ECLA (Economic Commission for Latin America) in the late 1940s, modernization was soon adopted not only as a policy, but as a doctrine that was very much at the core of the “populist coalition.” Industrialization was thought to be the necessary means through which urban workers and the “labor surplus” resulting from urbanization and the massive migrations from the countryside could be absorbed, providing the vast masses of the people with new opportunities for well-being and progress.

The fifth characteristic of populism, and one that appears as an element of continuity between old and new populism, is the identification between a charismatic leader and the masses of the people. In fact, populism refers to the direct appeal to the masses of the people by a charismatic leader, whether military or civilian, under an authoritarian or a democratic regime in the context of weak political institutions. This element of a strong personalization of power appears as a defining feature of populism in Latin America from the 1930s to the present. Populism presupposes a low level of institutionalization—in fact, there seems to be a trade-off between populism and institutions that, as we shall see, is at the core of the tensions between populism

and democracy, especially when we take democracy to mean, following Przeworski's definition, a "system of institutions."⁴ Thus the tensions between populism and democracy are very much related to the tensions between the personalization and the institutionalization of power.

The sixth characteristic of populism is an intrinsic, or inherent, ambiguity—to say the least—between populism and representative democracy and its institutions. In the logic of populism what really matters is the incorporation of the masses of the people, of the urban workers, generally in the form of a social and political coalition, whether authoritarian or democratic. In this sense, it may be said that there is an element of "democratization" present in populism, both old and new, but it is democratization understood more in social than in political terms: related to the incorporation of the masses of the people, but not necessarily through the institutions of representative democracy, which were regarded with suspicion. As Enzo Faletto has written, "populism emerged as a response to the crisis of oligarchic rule but at the same time, it constituted a divorce with the liberal understanding of democracy."⁵

In fact, populism usually took an authoritarian rather than a democratic form. This was the case, for example, with Juan Domingo Perón in Argentina and Getúlio Vargas in Brazil, perhaps the most emblematic manifestations of populism in Latin America. This is not to say that there was not a democratic element in both populist experiences, including an electoral component. Perón, for example, was elected in a clean, free, and fair election in 1946 (although this was not the case in the 1951 elections, which were more fraudulent) but he came to power as a colonel in the 1943 military coup. Fascism was undoubtedly an influence in Peronism's initial stage of development. In turn, we would have to draw a distinction between the Vargas of the "Estado Novo" (new state), in the 1930s, with its fascist, corporatist, and authoritarian features, and the Vargas that was elected as president in 1950. The fact remains, however, that Vargas preferred a strong government to a constitutional one, and that he "was happier governing as an

authoritarian than as a liberal democrat.”⁶ Vargas, like Perón in Argentina, very much dominated Brazilian politics in a highly personalistic way; Vargas appeared as the “patron” of the urban working classes, just as Evita used to refer to Perón. This was typical of an autocratic, personalistic style that was characteristic of both populist leaders.

Although this authoritarian leaning was a defining feature of Latin American populism in the 1940s, in order to demonstrate the complexities of the issue being discussed, let us recall that there were also some cases that were, in spite of their own ambiguities, closer to a democratic than an authoritarian understanding. This may have been the case with APRA (Acción Popular Revolucionaria Americana, or American Popular Revolutionary Alliance) in Perú under Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre and with “Acción Democrática” (the “Adecos,” or Democratic Action) in Venezuela— notwithstanding its support of the 1945 military coup (“October Revolution”).

The fact remains that most of the experiences in the 1940s and 1950s that we usually refer to as “populist” were closer to an autocratic than to a democratic understanding. There may be an element of (social) “democratization” in terms of the incorporation of the masses of the people, but not in terms of an adherence to representative democracy and its institutions. In fact, as we shall see later on, both old and new populism aim to build an alternative concept of democracy, different from its liberal understanding.

I have tried to avoid a definition of old populism, and to concentrate on what can be considered some of its defining characteristics. Perhaps the best expression of classical populism is to be found in a letter sent by Perón to his friend Carlos Ibáñez del Campo, who had recently (1952) been elected president of Chile:

“My dear friend: Give the people, especially the workers, all that is possible. When it seems to you that already you are giving them too much, give them more. You will see the results. Everybody will try to frighten you with the specter of an economic collapse. But all of this is a lie. There is nothing more elastic than the economy, which everyone fears so much because no one understands it.”⁷

From this quotation, it is easy to understand the legacy of populism in Argentina and elsewhere in Latin America, with its rather *sui generis* concept of the “elasticity” of the economy, leading to inflation, hyperinflation, and macroeconomic instability. This, in turn, explains some of the difficulties in consolidating a stable, democratic regime in the region.

So, what happened to populism?

Three developments conspired against its further development, at least in the paradigmatic way that it presented itself in the 1930s and the 1940s (and even in the 1950s): 1) the new wave of democratization following World War II, leading to a new democratic “momentum” in Latin America—what is usually referred to in terms of the “second wave” of democratization; 2) the problems (exhaustion?) experienced by state-led import-substitution industrialization, which was very much at the core of the “populist coalition”; and, 3) finally and more radically, the new reality of the Cold War and more specifically, the tremendous impact of the Cuban Revolution, which led to a paradigm shift from populism to revolution, producing the very dramatic dichotomy between reform or revolution that Latin America faced in the 1960s and early 1970s.

This is not to say that populism disappeared altogether: Joao Goulart, in the early 1960s, in Brazil, Juan Velasco Alvarado, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, in Perú, and Salvador Allende, in the early 1970s, in Chile, did pursue populist economic policies within the context of the extreme polarization and ideological escalation characteristic of Latin America in those years. In the end, the new “bureaucratic-authoritarian” regimes and the economic market reforms—first authoritarian and then democratic—that followed starting in the 1970s, had much to do with the demise of old populism, the developmentalist state, the populist coalition, and the policies that had been pursued during import-substitution industrialization, and the “national and popular” state.

NEW POPULISM

So, how did neopopulism emerge in the more recent history of Latin America? This may be said to be a play in four acts.

Act I: the “Populist Cycle”

In some of his writings and lectures in the 1980s and 1990s, Alejandro Foxley, Chile’s minister of finance (1990–1994), used to refer to the emergence during the 1980s democratization process of the “populist cycle.” He was referring especially to the economic policies followed in South America during the debt crisis (1980s) under the administrations of Alan García in Perú, Raúl Alfonsín in Argentina, and José Sarney in Brazil, among others, which ultimately resulted in the “lost decade” of the 1980s. This “populist cycle” is to be distinguished from a populist regime, in that it refers to the economic policies followed by the above-mentioned administrations in the initial stages of the third wave of democratization.

In short, the logic behind the economic policies followed by these governments was the need to activate the economy and raise salaries, through a kind of fiscal shock and citing the old argument about the “idle capacity of the economy”—perhaps a variation of the other song about the “elasticity of the economy.” This led, in the first year, to much presidential popularity—think of Alan García in 1985–86, as things seemed to be going just fine. In the second year, however, you have to pay the bill: inflation and hyperinflation appear on the horizon—5,000 percent in Perú and 11,000 percent in Bolivia in the mid-1980s—leading to the first signs of economic crisis. In the third year, the economic crisis becomes a social crisis, with massive demonstrations in the streets and decreasing presidential popularity, while in the fourth year, the economic and social crisis becomes a political—and even a constitutional—one, as in Argentina, where President Alfonsín had to advance the transfer of power to his successor, Carlos Menem, six months ahead of the constitutional schedule.

The “populist cycle” coined by Foxley corresponds to what Patricio Meller has referred to as a set of clearly populist *macroeconomic* policies aimed at achieving a rapid revival of the economy along with extensive redistribution.⁸ This paradigm is characterized, according to Meller, by an initial stage which appears to produce highly successful results; however, in the second stage, the strong expansion of demand generates growing disequilibrium, whereas the third stage ends in government attempts to apply a counter-inflationary adjustment policy, within a tough, orthodox stabilization program. Aside from the fact that this populist paradigm “inflicts a terrible cost on the very groups it was intended to favor”⁹ in the concrete context of the democratization process of the 1980s in South America, this populist cycle had a destabilizing effect, paving the way, paradoxically, for the neoliberal economic reforms of the 1990s.

Perhaps the best theoretical and comparative work on populism in terms of policies, and more specifically economic and macroeconomic policies, is the book by Rudiger Dornbusch and Sebastián Edwards, *The Macroeconomics of Populism in Latin America*.¹⁰ Borrowing from experiences of populist macroeconomic policies in countries like Argentina, Chile, Brazil, Nicaragua, Mexico, and Perú, the authors coin the term “populist paradigm,” and more particularly the “macroeconomics of populism,” to refer to those populist regimes that have historically tried to deal with issues of income inequality through the use of overly expansive macroeconomic policies, leading almost inevitably to major macroeconomic crises. According to the authors, “the use of macroeconomic policy to achieve distributive goals has historically led to failure, sorrow, and frustration” (p. 2). In the end, those policies have failed to benefit the poorest segments of society, resulting in the fact, for example, that real wages ended up being lower than they were at the beginning of those experiments. This “self-destructive” feature of populism, resulting from persistent macroeconomic instability and mismanagement, has led, ultimately, to the failure of populist macroeconomics in Latin America.¹¹

It is not a coincidence that this first approach to neopopulism in the more recent history of Latin America (the “populist cycle”), which focuses on economic policies and the *macroeconomics* of populism, comes from economists like Dornbusch, Edwards, Foxley and Meller. I hold the view that in the following years—Acts II, III and IV of our play—neopopulism adopted a form that combines the traditional “economics of populism” with political and institutional aspects that have to do with the crisis of democratic representation in Latin America, and the adoption of highly personalistic and plebiscitary forms of democracy. Thus it is not only a question of economic policies, or the “economics of populism,” but also of the “politics of populism” (or neopopulism).

Act II: “Neoliberal Neopopulism”

More recently, neopopulism emerged not from the Left but from the Right and the neoliberal economic reforms of the 1990s. Fernando Collor de Mello in Brazil, Carlos Menem in Argentina, and Alberto Fujimori in Perú introduced not only neoliberal economic reforms characteristic of the so-called “Washington Consensus” in the 1990s, but also the kind of personalistic, plebiscitary, populist, and delegative democracies that are at the core of neopopulism in the more recent history of Latin America. Government by presidential decree, direct appeal to the masses of the people, the great popularity of the populist leaders, at least in the initial stages of the processes of the 1990s leading to the reelection of both Menem and Fujimori, and a radical program of neoliberal economic reforms were some of the characteristics of these administrations and their policies.

Kurt Weyland has coined the term “neoliberal neopopulism” in trying to explain these processes.¹² He contends that although the literature has considered neoliberalism and neopopulism to be antithetical, in fact in the 1990s there was a “synergy” between both, as the neoliberal reforms needed a kind of “free hand” through the means of the state, to bring some stability and predictability to the day-to-day lives of the people. All this appeared as a response to the inflation and hyperinflation so characteristic of

democratization in the 1980s, with devastating effects for the economy and particularly for the popular sectors—which explains, in turn, the initial popularity of both Menem and Fujimori. A highly personalistic and plebiscitary component was attached to this neoliberal neopopulism, along with low levels of institutionalization, which in turn appears as a defining characteristic of populism in Latin America. Following an initial, bold phase of market reforms, there emerged the need for “institutional rules” in order to bring some predictability to investors and economic actors. This, in turn, resulted in the gradual erosion of the neoliberal neopopulist model. The initial synergies that characterized this relationship were definitely gone.

As we know, the recent story of neoliberal economic reforms, whether populist or nonpopulist, ended very badly in Latin America. In Argentina, it resulted in the deep economic crisis of 2001; in the Peruvian case, Fujimori went into exile and was recently extradited from Chile to Perú. Broadly speaking, from the “Caracazo” in Venezuela in 1989—a popular reaction to the “austerity package” and the radical neoliberal policies adopted by Carlos Andrés Pérez—to the events of October 2003 in Bolivia, in which Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada was overthrown, with hundreds of people killed in the streets of Caracas and La Paz, the neoliberal economic reforms of the 1990s ended disastrously. However, populism survived those reforms; in fact, it reappeared and reemerged as a response and as an alternative to neoliberal economic reforms, especially in Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador—and perhaps in Argentina (although this is more debatable).

Act III: “Leftist Neopopulism”

Two related processes that took place in the late 1990s and early 2000s may help us to explain the survival of populism in Latin America, now in the form of Leftist neopopulism: on the one hand, the decomposition of traditional political institutions and elites in countries like Venezuela, Bolivia, and Perú, leading to the collapse of the party system (six governments in Bolivia in six years, seven governments in Ecuador in ten

years, the final crisis of 1998 in Venezuela that led to the election of Hugo Chávez, and his reelection in 2000 and 2006), and on the other hand, the emergence of what we could call the “Cry of the People”: the new social demands of different sectors of society—the urban unemployed and youth, new social movements and indigenous movements (especially in Bolivia), among others—that were not only disappointed and frustrated with (and angered by) traditional institutions and elites, but also demanded their “place under the sun” in terms of their powerful social demands.

The element of continuity between the neoliberal neopopulism of the 1990s and this new, Leftist neopopulism at the beginning of a new century is provided by the highly personalistic, plebiscitarian, and delegative democracies that have emerged in our recent history during the third wave of democratization. Whether from the Right or from the Left, this personalistic form of democracy remains as a defining characteristic of neopopulism in Latin America and one of the major challenges (and obstacles) to consolidating stable democratic institutions. I define contemporary populism, following René Mayorga, “as a pattern of personalistic and anti-institutionalist politics, rooted mainly in the appeal to and/or mobilization of marginalized masses.”¹³

There is no doubt that there was a high social cost attached to the neoliberal economic reforms of the 1990s, from which emerged new social demands among vast sectors of society. These demands and the sense of frustration among the popular sectors in this new scenario of the post-Washington Consensus were expressed in a very eloquent way by graffiti on a wall in Lima, Perú, a couple of years ago: “No más realidades, queremos promesas” (“no more realities, we want promises”).¹⁴

These three elements—the failure of the neoliberal economic reforms of the 1990s, the decomposition of traditional institutions and elites, and the new social demands of these emerging social sectors—led to the emergence of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Evo Morales in Bolivia, and Rafael Correa in Ecuador. I would also include the case of Argentina under the Néstor Kirchner administration, although in a context

that would require a whole different explanation, but having in common with Leftist neopopulism a strong “personalization” of power, along with the “institutional weakness” that has been at the core of the widespread and pervasive instability of Argentina in recent decades.¹⁵ In addition, “Kirchnerism” very much belongs to the mainstream of “Peronism,” which, in turn, is perhaps the most paradigmatic and emblematic expression of Latin American populism.

Thus, in the most recent history of Latin America, the origins of Leftist neopopulism have to be seen in the first place as an outcome; that is, a response to the failure of neoliberal economic reforms and the culmination of a long process of decomposition of political institutions and traditional elites, especially in certain countries (not in all, nor even in the majority of countries, as we shall see). However, in terms of the central topic of this paper, the relationship between populism and democracy, it must also be said that this recent Leftist neopopulism confirms the intrinsic and inherent tensions and contradictions that exist between populism and democracy in Latin America—within the broader process of “desoligarquización” that underlies both old and new populism.

Patricio Navia and I have developed this point in terms of the populist and nonpopulist responses to the neoliberal economic reforms of the 1990s, emphasizing the tensions between the personalistic features present in recent populist democracies, whether from the Right or from the Left, and what we refer to as “democracy of institutions,” as part of the tradition of representative democracy and its institutions. Because we understand populism as personalistic leadership that weakens institutions, we believe an obvious tension exists between the strength of institutions and the appearance of personalistic leadership in Latin America.¹⁶

Behind the call to a “direct” or “participatory” form of democracy characteristic of neopopulism and regarded as an alternative and a superior form of democracy, there is the reality of personalistic and plebiscitary democracy—or an “extreme case of

delegative democracy,” as Michael Coppedge has labeled the Chávez regime.¹⁷ This form of democracy ends up bypassing or neutralizing (if not directly challenging and threatening) the institutions of representative democracy—especially the role of parties and parliaments—while attempting to bring under control institutions such as the Constitutional Court and jeopardizing some basic democratic freedoms.

Undeniably neopopulism and its leaders (presidents) have a formal, democratic legitimacy and that makes a difference if we compare neopopulism with the rather authoritarian leanings of old or traditional populism. However, ultimately it is the personal characteristics of a charismatic leader and his or her identification with the masses of the people that end up prevailing over any form of institutional constraint. As René Mayorga has stated, “unlike historical populism, neopopulism is involved in the democratic game. It accepts the rules of political competition, but at the same time resorts to the higher quality and legitimacy of the leader, who presents himself as redeemer and embodiment of the people and the nation.”¹⁸ See, for example, a recent statement by one of the politicians closest to Hugo Chávez, José Vicente Rangel, who has been the vice president of the republic, minister of defense, and minister of foreign affairs, trying to describe what Chávez represents in terms of Venezuelan democracy: “si algún poder representa Chávez es el poder del pueblo, es decir, Chávez está por encima de las instituciones porque encarna al pueblo” (“if there is any power represented by Chávez it is the power of the people, which means that Chávez is above institutions because he is the embodiment of the people”).¹⁹ Thus it is legitimate—and accurate—to refer to the “Chávez regime” in Venezuela, due to the strong personalization of power.

In spite of their differences, and the specificities of each country, the cases of Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador all share in common this idea of a “participatory” and “direct” form of democracy, which is seen as a superior form when compared to representative democracy and its institutions. This process ends up bypassing the institutions of representative democracy by resorting to a direct appeal to the masses of

the people. The recent experience of constituent assemblies in all three countries and the tensions that they reflect regarding basic democratic freedoms and rights and the role of the opposition is only the most recent example of the logic of direct or participatory forms of democracy, and the tensions with liberal, representative democracy.

I take “representative democracy”—or what I have referred to as “democracy of institutions”—as the backbone of the whole Inter-American democratic system, from the 1948 charter that created the Organization of American States (OAS) to the Inter-American Democratic Charter signed in Lima on September 11, 2001. It must be kept in mind that from the very outset the OAS charter considered “representative democracy” to be “an indispensable condition for the stability, peace and development of the region,” and one of the “essential purposes” of the OAS in terms of the promotion and consolidation of its institutions. Resolution 1080 (1991) called for the “effective exercise” of representative democracy to “be made operative” in a variety of situations, whereas Article 3 of the Inter-American Democratic Charter went even further in terms of defining the “essential elements” of representative democracy.²⁰

Thus this is not only an academic discussion but one with strong political implications. Thirty-four American states have made explicit commitments with regard to the defense and promotion of representative democracy. What is perfectly clear is that neopopulism, whether from the Right or from the Left, is different from traditional populism because it has emerged into an environment characterized by a new legitimacy of political democracy, in this post-authoritarian third wave of democratization in Latin America and elsewhere in the world. Although there is an inherent tension between populism and democracy, there is also a more ambitious and demanding environment growing out of a certain international context and a mood that is not only more market friendly, when compared to the state-led, inward-looking import-substitution industrialization of the “national and popular” state, but also pro-democracy, in spite of the many shortcomings of the new democracies that have been established in Latin

America since the late 1970s and early 1980s. This is perhaps the true meaning of the December 2007 referendum in Venezuela. The defeat of Chavez' attempt to be reelected indefinitely seems to demonstrate that a democratic culture related to the democratic process that took place in Venezuela from 1957 to 1998 still exists.

Act IV (and final): Populist and Nonpopulist Responses to the Neoliberal Economic Reforms of the 1990s—The Social-democratic Moment

In this final act, I shall argue that Hugo Chávez may be perceived as the most visible and strident political figure in Latin America but he is not the most representative one, in the much more complex, rich, and diverse reality of the region. Taken in a broader perspective, the Chávez regime is more likely to be seen as the exception rather than the rule in Latin America.

This statement may be seen as quite counterintuitive, if we consider that the headlines and the front-page stories around the world usually tend to identify Latin America with the Chávez regime. Some references may also be made, occasionally, to Evo Morales in Bolivia, but I would argue that although there are many common elements, there are also differences in all these cases. In many significant ways, Bolivia is not Venezuela and Morales is not Chávez, just as Latin America is not Chávez and Chávez is not Latin America.²¹ Suffice it is to say that in Bolivia, in spite of the recent approval of the new Constitution—in a military school, no less, with the presence of the government political forces (MAS, Movimiento al Socialismo, or Movement Toward Socialism) and the deliberate exclusion of the opposition forces (PODEMOS, Poder Democrático y Social, or Democratic and Social Power)—the opposition still remains as a majority in the Senate, whereas it controls five of the nine departments in Bolivia (Santa Cruz, Tarija, Beni, Pando, and Cochabamba). It is too early to make a final judgment on the political process taking place in Ecuador; Argentina, in spite of its previously mentioned high degree of personalization of power and weak democratic institutions,

can hardly be equated with the Chávez regime—in fact, it would be a great mistake to do so. Perhaps it is accurate to say that Argentina under Néstor Kirchner and Cristina Fernandez is somewhere between a personalistic form of democracy and a “democracy of institutions.”

The final point that I want to make is that there are populist as well as nonpopulist responses to the neoliberal economic reforms of the 1990s. These reforms may have paved the way for Leftist neopopulism, but without precluding the possibility of nonpopulist responses to the same set of reforms, as is the case, I argue, with the vast majority of Latin America countries. This argument does not attempt to transform this final act into a kind of “happy ending,” but at least aims to make the point that Latin America is not well represented by the Chávez regime, and that the Chávez regime is the exception and not the rule in the region.

On the one hand, we must not lose sight of the fact that right-wing or Center-Right governments are part of the political landscape in Latin America today. This is the case in El Salvador, which has elected four right-wing ARENA administrations in a row. It is also the case in Colombia, where President Alvaro Uribe was elected and reelected with more than 60 percent of the vote. Finally, it is the case in Mexico, where President Felipe Calderón was elected on a Center-Right political platform. Moreover, it must be kept in mind that both Andrés Manuel López Obrador, in Mexico, and Ollanta Humala, in Perú—typical expression of Leftist neopopulism—were defeated. It is true that in Mexico it was a close, competitive election, but Calderón defeated López Obrador (or AMLO, as he is known) by 240,000 votes (0.5 per cent of the total), much more than the margin Romani Prodi or Angela Merkel received in Italy and Germany—or, for that matter, Oscar Arias in Costa Rica—and no one argues that they were not legitimate winners. It is true that Latin America would be quite different had AMLO and Ollanta Humala won those presidential elections, but the fact remains that they lost, confirming that neopopulism is not the uncontested, widespread trend in the region that it is usually perceived from abroad to be.

Above anything else, we have to consider that there is not such a thing as “the Left” in Latin America, or even the “Two Lefts” to which Jorge Castañeda and Patricio Navia have referred.²² I shall argue in these concluding remarks that there are (at least) three “Lefts” in Latin America, and that there is a big difference among them in terms of the main topic of this paper, the question of democracy and populism.

There are Marxist, populist, and social-democratic Lefts in Latin America. It is true that the Marxist and the populist Lefts have come together recently, leaving behind the disputes that existed historically, ideologically, and politically between populism and Marxism; this coming together of the Marxist and the populist Left can be seen in the alliance between Fidel Castro and Hugo Chávez. But along with the Marxist and populist Lefts, and in very significant ways, there is a new social-democratic Left that cannot be ignored. This Left may be less visible and less strident than the one represented by Chávez, but not less effective, especially when faced with the challenge of consolidating democratic institutions in Latin America.

I take the term “social-democratic” to mean a reformist position—the legacy of Edward Bernstein, the “revisionist”—along the lines of a clear commitment to social equity and an unambiguous endorsement of representative democracy and its institutions. This social-democratic Left has become increasingly market friendly, with a favorable attitude towards globalization:²³ aware not only of the threats that it represents but of the opportunities that it provides. The emergence of this social-democratic Left in Latin America has much to do with the post–Cold War, post-Marxist, and post-authoritarian political setting, which partly explains its reformist, moderate, Center-Left leanings.²⁴

This definition provides a clear dividing line between a social-democratic Left, and both the populist and Marxist Left in Latin America. There is a Left rooted in the Marxist tradition which we cannot ignore: the Left of Cuba’s Fidel Castro, the Communist Party of Chile, sectors of the Frente Farabundo Martí de Liberación Nacional (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, or FMLN), in El Salvador, and the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (Sandinista National Liberation Front, or FSLN), in

Nicaragua, and parties and factions to the left of the Partido dos Trabalhadores (Worker's Party, or PT), in Brazil, or even within the PT itself. It is true that this Left is not what it used to be in the 1960s after the Cuban Revolution, or even in the 1970s and 1980s, around the time of the Nicaraguan revolution (1979)—but it can hardly be ignored.

Thus in the recent history of Latin America, along with this Marxist and populist Left there is a social-democratic Left that is clearly committed to representative democracy and its institutions. I have argued elsewhere and in a different context that in the 1970s and 1980s there was already a process of “social democratization” underway in the Chilean Socialist Left, at the time of the Pinochet dictatorship. This process led to a new appreciation of political democracy, a discovery of the democratic roots of the European Left, and a new appreciation of social democracy and its “reformist” values.²⁵ This renewal of the Chilean Socialist Left expresses itself in the “Concertación,” the coming together of the Socialist Left and the Christian Democratic Party in the 1990s and 2000s. The governments of socialist presidents Ricardo Lagos (2000–2006) and Michelle Bachelet (2006–2010) are examples of this broader process of “social democratization” of the Latin American Left.

But Chile is not the only case. There is also the case of presidents Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1994–2002) and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2002–2010) in Brazil, both of whom express this “social democratization” of the Latin American Left. This is very clearly so in the case of the Partido Social Demócrata Brasileiro (Brazilian Social Democratic Party, or PSDB), but also in the case of the PT in very significant ways (which even led some sectors from the Left of the party to distance themselves from the “neoliberal”—in fact, social-democratic—leanings of the PT and Lula). Brazil is a very remarkable case if we consider the concerns that existed at the time of Lula's first election, in 2002, with the specter of “populism” appearing in Brazilian politics (due, among other things, to his background as a union leader, and his social origins). The fact remains that, just as Chile achieved a remarkable stability in 1990–2007, Brazil achieved

great success in 1994–2007, which can be explained by, among other things, the “social democratization” of the Left in both countries, clearly different from both the populist and the Marxist Left in other parts of Latin America.²⁶

The truth of the matter is that there are a number of other cases of a social-democratic Left in Latin America; many more than appear in front-page stories and media headlines. This is particularly true in the case of President Tabaré Vázquez and the Frente Amplio (Broad Front) in Uruguay, but also of Lionel Fernández in the Dominican Republic (in fact, President Fernández replaced Hipólito Mejía, a typical and emblematic representative of populism), Martín Torrijos in Panama, Oscar Arias in Costa Rica, and even Alan García in Perú, who is very different from the populist leader of the 1980s. More recently in Guatemala—and contrary to pre-election polls—Alvaro Colón, the representative of a moderate, social-democratic, Center-Left party, defeated a hardliner (“*mano dura*”), former General Otto Pérez, to win the presidency in a country where 5,000 persons had been killed in the previous year. It is too early to say whether Cristina Fernández and “Kirchnerism,” in this second administration, will move in the direction of social democracy, especially considering the background of well-established Peronist political culture in Argentina.

In fact, there is a long list of social-democratic governments, parties, and leaders in Latin America, most of which (perhaps all of them, at least the ones that we have mentioned) have adopted policies that are not only market friendly, although this varies from country to country, but democracy friendly, belonging to the mainstream of representative democracy and its institutions. (Let us also recall that most of the Caribbean countries are “labor,” or social-democratic—this trend has been confirmed by the victory of the social-democratic party in Barbados.)

In the past, Latin America paid a high cost for its political rhetoric (and practice, in some circumstances) that denounced the “formal” or “bourgeois” character of democracy in a pejorative, derogatory way. In the recent history of Latin America, the

appeal of an alternative “direct” or “participatory” form of democracy, as expressed by the neopopulist Left and conceived of as a superior form of democracy, seems to capture some of the “malaise” that exists in broad sectors of society. In its concrete practice, however, that rhetoric hides the reality of personalistic, plebiscitary, populist, and delegative forms of democracy which end up bypassing the institutions of representative democracy. This confirms, once again, the inherent tension between populism (old and new) and democracy in Latin America.

Although I have been critical of neopopulism, especially regarding its intrinsic tensions and contradictions with the liberal understanding of representative democracy, let us not lose sight of the roots of neopopulism in the recent history of Latin America. In fact, one could say that populism is not the real problem in Latin America. Rather, the real problem is the factors that cause populism, namely, the persistence of poverty and inequality, and the decomposition of traditional political institutions and elites in the region. Above all, what we have learned in our recent and not-so-recent history is that there are no “short cuts” on the path towards development and democracy, and populism is precisely and almost by definition a shortcut: the promise of immediate satisfaction of social demands. It may create the appearance of effectively dealing with poverty and inequality, but—as has been systematically demonstrated, again and again, throughout the history of Latin America—it has also systematically failed to do so, usually at the expense of democratic institutions.

A less visible, less strident, and less heroic, but perhaps more successful path is opening another way forward in Latin America, by consolidating representative democracy from the broader perspective of the deepening of democratic institutions. This path, which aims to simultaneously move ahead in the direction of political democracy, economic growth, and social equity, is the one that has been adopted by this new, social-democratic Left, different from the populist and the Marxist Left, in a nonpopulist response to the neoliberal economic politics of the 1990s. This path may be less epic than

other paths that have been tried in the waves of authoritarianism and democracy that have characterized the political history of Latin America, and it may be a long and sometimes tortuous one, but at least it guarantees that it will be the people—a citizenry—that through deliberation, negotiation, compromise, consensus-building, and the strengthening rather than the weakening of political institutions will have the final say in the public realm.

ENDNOTES

¹ I was minister of foreign affairs (2004–06) in the administration of President Ricardo Lagos, and we were both attending that summit.

² Ignacio Walker, “Democracia en América Latina,” *Foreign Affairs* (Español), Vol. 6, No. 2, 2006. I have developed in a more systematic way some of the ideas that were already present in that article.

³ Samuel Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*, University of Oklahoma Press, 1991.

⁴ Adam Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market*, Cambridge University Press, 1991. This is one, although not the only, defining element of democracy as it appears in Przeworski’s theory.

⁵ Enzo Faletto, “Sobre Populismo y Socialismo,” *Opciones*, No. 7, September–December 1985, p. 70.

⁶ Gary Wynia, “The Populist Game,” in *The Politics of Latin American Development*, Cambridge University Press, 1984, p. 141.

⁷ Quoted in Albert Hirschman, “Against Economic Determinants,” in David Collier, ed., *The New Authoritarianism in Latin America*, Princeton University Press, 1979, p. 65.

⁸ Patricio Meller, *The Unidad Popular and the Pinochet Dictatorship: A Political Economy Analysis*, Macmillan Press Ltd., 2000. For Foxley, Meller, and many of us who have belonged to CIEPLAN (Corporación de Estudios para América Latina, or Economic Research Corporation for Latin America), the emergence of the “populist cycle” in the 1980s and thereafter in Latin America and its ill-conceived policies leading to macroeconomic instability were crucial in our decision in Chile, under the four administrations of the “Concertación” (1990–2010), to move away from the populist path that had been so characteristic of development—rather, “frustrated development,” as Aníbal Pinto used to refer to it—in Latin America.

⁹ Meller, *The Unidad Popular and the Pinochet Dictatorship*, p. 32.

¹⁰ Rudiger Dornbusch and Sebastián Edwards, *The Macroeconomics of Populism in Latin America*, University of Chicago Press, 1991.

¹¹ According to the authors, “economic populism” is an “approach to *economics* that emphasizes growth and income redistribution and deemphasizes the risks of inflation and deficit finance, external constraints, and the reaction of economic agents to aggressive nonmarket policies” (*Idem.*, p. 9). I am especially grateful for the comments of Sebastián Edwards and others, to a draft of this paper that was presented at UCLA, on April 4, 2008.

¹² Kurt Weyland, “Neopopulism and Neoliberalism in Latin America: How Much Affinity?” *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 24, No. 6, 2003. Already in the mid-1990s, drawing from the Peruvian case under Alberto Fujimori, Kenneth Roberts had referred to the “novel paradox,” which consisted of “the rise of personalistic leaders with broad-based support who follow neoliberal prescriptions for economic austerity and market-oriented structural adjustments” (Roberts, “Neoliberalism and the Transformation of Populism in Latin America: The Peruvian Case,” *World Politics* Vol. 48, No. 1, 1996, pp. 82–116). The term “delegative democracy” was coined by Guillermo O’Donnell in his well-known paper of the same title in the *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 1994.

¹³ René Mayorga, “Outsiders and Neopopulism: The Road to Plebiscitary Democracy,” in Scott Mainwaring, Ana María Bejarano, and Eduardo Pizarro Leongómez, eds., *The Crisis of Democratic Representation in The Andes*, Stanford University Press, 2006, p. 134. In a similar way, Kurt Weyland defines populism as “a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises governmental power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers.” (Kurt Weyland, “Clarifying a Contested Concept: Populism in the Study of Latin American Politics,” *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (October), 2001, p. 14.) This definition is very

much in tune with Roberts' "political concept" of populism which is defined as "the top-down political mobilization of mass constituencies by personalistic leaders who challenge elite groups on behalf of an ill-defined *pueblo*, or 'the people'" (Kenneth Roberts, "Latin America's Populist Revival," *SAIS Review*, Vol. XXVII No. 1 (Winter-Spring), 2007.) Although Roberts draws a sharp dividing line between Hugo Chávez and Evo Morales in terms of the "top-down political mobilization" of the former vis-à-vis the "social mobilization from below" of Morales—who, in turn, is portrayed as the "antithesis of populism"—I take both Chávez and Morales to belong to the mainstream of neopopulism in terms of their direct appeal to the masses of the people as charismatic leaders (whether from the top or from below), in the context of weak political institutions.

¹⁴ This was seen by Arturo Valenzuela in Lima some years ago, and related to me in a personal conversation.

¹⁵ A superb analysis of this phenomenon is to be found in Steven Levitsky and María Victoria Murillo, *Argentine Democracy: The Politics of Institutional Weakness*, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005.

¹⁶ See Patricio Navia and Ignacio Walker, "Gobernabilidad Democrática en América Latina (instituciones y liderazgos)," in *Serie Estudios Socio-Económicos*, CIEPLAN, No. 29 (diciembre), 2006. A new, modified version of this paper is forthcoming as "Political Institutions, Populism and Democracy in Latin America" in Scott Mainwaring and Timothy Scully, eds., *Democratic Governance in Latin America*, Stanford University Press.

¹⁷ Michael Coppedge, "Venezuela: Popular Sovereignty versus Liberal Democracy," in Jorge Domínguez and Michael Shifter, eds., *Constructing Democratic Governance in Latin America*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003, p. 165.

¹⁸ René Mayorga, "Outsiders and Neopopulism," p. 135.

¹⁹ Interview with José Vicente Rangel, in *Ultimas Noticias*, Caracas, Venezuela, reproduced in *La Tercera*, Santiago, Chile, February 11, 2007.

²⁰ These include (1) respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, (2) access to and the exercise of power in accordance with the rule of law, (3) periodic, free, and fair elections based on secret balloting and universal suffrage as an expression of the sovereignty of the people, (4) a pluralistic system of political parties and organizations, and (5) the separation of powers and independence of the branches of government. The Summit of the Americas of 1994, in Miami, went even further to state that representative democracy "is the sole political system which guarantees respect for human rights and the rule of law; it safeguards cultural diversity, pluralism, respect for the rights of minorities, and peace within and among nations."

²¹ A similar approach is taken by Michael Reid, in his book, *Forgotten Continent: The Battle for Latin America's Soul*, Yale University Press, 2007.

²² Jorge Castañeda, "Latin America's Left Turn," *Foreign Affairs*, (May/June) 2006, and Patricio Navia, "Lagos y Chávez: Las Dos Izquierdas de América Latina," *Foreign Affairs* (Español), Vol. 6, No 2, 2006.

²³ Borrowing from the experiences of Brazil and Chile, Fernando Henrique Cardoso—along with former President Ricardo Lagos one of the leading figures of this social-democratic Left in Latin America—directly refers to the "political model" of a "globalized social democracy," saying that "it does not fear the external market, values the institutions and the responsibility of citizens, is aware that the stability of the democratic process depends on some measure of economic progress but also, a lot, on active policies geared to reducing poverty and enhancing social well-being" ("New Paths: Reflections about Some Challenges of Globalization," unpublished paper presented at the conference on "International Inequality, Then and Now: Revisiting Cardoso and Faletto's *Dependency and Development in Latin America*," Watson Institute for International Studies, April 3–5, 2008.

²⁴ I must say that although Kenneth Roberts correctly draws on the distinction between this Latin American social-democratic Left—referring to Uruguay, Brazil, and Chile—and the European social-democratic Left, especially in terms of the characteristics of “labor movements” and “class constituencies,” I do not agree, as may be clear from my paper, with his definition, following Panebianco, of Latin American social democracy as simply “a *professional-electoral Left* that is organizationally designed to win elections rather than mobilize civil society behind far-reaching socioeconomic reforms” (Roberts, “Repoliticizing Latin America: the Revival of Populist and Leftist Alternatives” in Woodrow Wilson Center, “Democratic Governance and the ‘New Left,’” November 2007).

²⁵ Ignacio Walker, “Democratic Socialism in Comparative Perspective,” *Comparative Perspective*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (July), 1991. In fact, in many fundamental ways—the primacy of politics, a full-fledged alternative to both Marxism and liberalism, and the need to reconcile democracy, capitalism, and social stability—this new social-democratic Left in Latin America is very much in tune with the mainstream of social democracy in Europe, although in the context of developing, middle-income countries in intermediate stages of development. (See Sheri Berman, *The Primacy of Politics: Social Democracy and the Making of Europe’s Twentieth Century*, Cambridge University Press, 2006.)

²⁶ The cases of Brazil and Chile, among others, come close to what Javier Santiso, following Albert Hirschman, has referred to as “The Political Economy of the Possible,” as contrasted with “The Political Economy of Impatience,” characteristic of neopopulism in Latin America (Javier Santiso, *Latin America’s Political Economy of the Possible: Beyond Good Revolutionaries and Free-Marketeers*, The MIT Press, 2006).