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Populism, Old and New: Introductory Remarks

As liberal democracy awoke from the long night of authoritarianism, in many Latin American countries it found itself sharing blankets with an old, familiar bed-fellow: populism – youthful, naked, and embellished with the prefix “neo”. The new tide of populism has stirred up the waters of opposition politics, and it has even swept several political newcomers to the commanding heights of executive power. Remember, in particular, Argentina’s Carlos Menem, Brazil’s Fernando Collor de Mello, Peru’s Alberto Fujimori, or Venezuela’s Rafael Caldera.

The core of populism, understood as a *style of politics* with variable contents, has not changed very much. “New” populists share many discursive or ideological elements with their “old” populist predecessors. Playing the tunes of “the politics of redemption” (Joel Whitebook) they engage in systematic over-promising and describe themselves as heroes and saviors blessed with quick and simple solutions. In addition, personalism and anti-institutionalism are among their favorite trade-marks. Populists of all generations strive for direct relationships with citizens. They disdain parties and parliaments and show a general contempt for political intermediation. Last but not least, they all pursue confrontational, polarizing strategies based, on one hand, on aggressive anti-elite rhetorics, and on the other, on broad appeals to the people (*el pueblo*), the exploited and oppressed.

The *structural conditions* furthermore which provide the context (and motor) of contemporary populism echo those of previous populist waves in Latin America. Some catch-phrases suffice: the weakness of democratic institutions, policy failures and ingovernability, popular disorganization and disaffection, the exhaustion of previous development models, the deep and multifaceted economic crises and of course, the notorious and still scandalous levels of prevailing poverty and inequality.

At the same time, however, the old and the new forms of populism exhibit striking policy differences. Today’s populism has undertaken the dirty job of digging the grave for macroeconomic paradigms which yesterday’s populism had put into practice. The mainstream of contemporary populism has dropped the promise to domesticate capitalism by enlarging an interventionist and mercantilist welfare state. Quite the contrary, it enters the political market promoting the new orthodoxy of neoliberalism. Now working to create capitalism – instead of regulating it – this new, neoliberal (and predominantly right-wing) populism preaches free markets and lean, minimal, efficient states.

This pro-market drive implies, among other things, that neopopulism has redirected its polemical attention to new opponents. Abandoning the classic targets of populist attacks (which were mostly economic and partly external, namely capitalism, imperialism, and oligarchy) new populists instead focus on national political objects: the state, the bureaucracy, political parties, or the political class. In this sense, contemporary populism deserves the label "antipolitical". It is not the establishment *per se* their purifying crusades are directed against but more specifically, the *political* establishment.¹

The following three analyses of Latin American neopopulism all represent revised and updated versions of papers which were originally presented at the first *Vienna Dialogue on Democracy*. This international meeting, held in July 1994 and organized by the Austrian Institute for Advanced Studies, analyzed anti-political establishment parties around the world under the title of "The Politics of Antipolitics".

In his descriptive, explanatory, and evaluative study, René Mayorga analyzes recent neopopulist experiences in Brazil (Collor de Mello), Peru (Alan García and Alberto Fujimori), and Bolivia (Max Fernández and Carlos Palenque). He draws our attention to the opportunity structures, the *institutional context* which neopopulist actors encounter. This includes, above all, the degrees of party-systemic institutionalization, and the constitutional structures (presidentialism *cum* proportional representation) prevailing in the region. In his conclusions, the author puts special emphasis on Latin America's heterogeneity, on the diversity of national experiences. We have to look beyond the widespread prejudice of regional uniformity, he argues. Tracing significant cross-national differences may not only disprove over-generalizations as well as economic determinism, but may also correct our frequent bias for pessimism.

Gamaliel Perruci's Brazilian case study distinguishes two types of populism: right-wing "neoliberal" populism and left-wing "popular" populism. The former propagates dynamic markets and good government while the latter puts political participation and the redress of social injustice first. After reconstructing the 1989 and the 1994 presidential campaigns Perruci classifies Collor de Mello as an unequivocal representative of the first type of populism, Luis Inácio "Lula" da Silva as embodiment of the second, and the current president Fernando Henrique Cardoso as a possible synthesis of both. The article concludes by comparing Brazil's neopopulists with similar actors in Argentina, Chile, Mexico, and Peru.

1 For further discussion, see Schedler, Andreas, "Antipolitical Opposition. A Framework for Comparative Analysis", paper prepared for presentation at the First Vienna Dialogue on Democracy on "The Politics of Antipolitics", Vienna, Institute for Advanced Studies, July 7-10, 1994.

Perruci's "popular" populism resembles "traditional" left-wing populism with its double program of political integration and social integration (via welfarist and developmentalist state intervention). As Soledad Loaeza describes it, this type of populism formed an integral part of Mexican post-revolutionary authoritarianism. Yet more than a decade ago, the "last macroeconomic populists", Luis Echeverría and José López Portillo, were effectively replaced by the technocratic generation of Miguel De la Madrid, Carlos Salinas de Gortari, and Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de León. As a consequence, the populist heritage has changed camps. What formerly represented an uncontested monopoly of the state party has now turned into a cherished conquest of the left-wing opposition. Now, for the first time in post-revolutionary Mexico, Loaeza writes, populism has moved into opposition – where it is well and alive, strong in social movements as well as in the PRD, the Party of the Democratic Revolution.²

All three authors are critical of populism. However, while admitting that strong socio-economic, institutional, and cultural pressures work in favour of its periodic resurrection, they all allude to the possibility of overcoming the irrationalities of populism. Even in the absence of immediate social and economic improvements, and even if as a solution it falls short of redemption (from redemption), combining political learning, institutional reform, and political virtues like prudence and cooperation could indeed help a lot.

Andreas Schedler

2 After the dramatic exchange rate crisis of December 1994, it is not so certain any more whether neoliberal reformer Carlos Salinas de Gortari did not, after all, qualify as a veritable "macroeconomic populist", too. It seems not exaggerated to state that he implemented a bold mixture of *macroeconomic corruption* (the use of macroeconomic instruments for partisan and personal benefit) and *macroeconomic gambling* (entrusting economic stability on volatile short-term capital inflows in a context of political instability, serious balance of payments imbalances, an over-valued exchange rate, and a spectacular increase of short-term, dollar-denominated public debt).