

Populism and Social Movements in Comparative Perspective

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The relationship between populism and social movements in non-Western societies has long been opaque, and rarely has it been a focal point of scholarly attention. Indeed, scholarship on populism and social movements has tended to follow separate paths, with neither paying much heed to intellectual developments in the other area of research. Neither scholarly tradition has devoted much energy to a search for common spawning grounds or points of intersection between the two phenomena. Even less have they explored their potential contradictions or incompatibilities. Although both concepts are widely used to refer to the political mobilization of large blocks of common citizens, no consensus exists regarding their similarities and differences.

Drawing primarily from the recent Latin American experience, this chapter suggests that this mutual intellectual disengagement is both unfortunate and unnecessary. The study of both phenomena—populism and social movements—would be enriched by more systematic attention to the origins, dynamics, and characteristics of the other. Both, after all, can be characterized as non-institutionalized forms of contentious politics, and as I will argue, they share a **common political opportunity structure**. **Indeed, they tend to appear sequentially, with mass social protest typically preceding and setting the stage for populism**. The two rarely coincide, however, and they are not synonymous with each other; to the contrary, there is an inherent tension between populism and social movements, as they ultimately entail quite **different forms of popular subjectivity**. Whereas social movements emerge from autonomous forms of collective action undertaken by self-constituted civic groups or networks, populism typically involves an appropriation of popular subjectivity by dominant personalities who control the channels, rhythms, and organizational forms of social mobilization. Although both forms of popular subjectivity contest established elites, social movements mobilize from the bottom-up, whereas

populism mobilizes mass constituencies from the top-down behind the leadership of a counter-elite.

These distinctions are not universally recognized or acknowledged, in part because populism is a notoriously elastic and contested concept that is subject to different meanings (Weyland 2001). When conceptualized in narrow discursive or ideological terms, populism is easily conflated with social movements that discursively construct the political order as a binary realm of contestation between an authentic popular will and an unrepresentative power elite.

When conceptualized in more expansive terms as a distinct mode of popular subjectivity, however, it is possible to analytically separate populism from social movements and thus explore the interrelationships between them, including potential areas of convergence and conflict.

Following this latter course, it quickly becomes apparent that mass social protest has often been a prelude to populist eruptions in contemporary Latin America, in part because such protests both trigger and reflect a crisis of institutionalized, party-mediated democratic representation. Such representational crises create a political opportunity structure that is conducive to the rise of anti-establishment populist outsiders. These counter-elites, however—and the populist regimes they sometimes come to lead—vary dramatically in their relationships to the social movements that presaged their rise, as well as to their compatibility with autonomous forms of social mobilization under their watch.

To understand these varying relationships, it is essential not only to break down the artificial boundaries that separate the study of populism from that of social movements, but also the boundaries that separate both of these fields from the study of party politics. Populism, social movements, and political parties are alternative but inter-related modes of articulating and representing societal interests in the political domain, and one mode can hardly be understood in

isolation from the others. These inter-relationships are mapped out below through a comparative analysis of recent populist experiences in Latin America and the patterns of social mobilization that preceded and followed their ascendance.

Populist Discourse and Political Subjectivity

The relationship between populism and social movements is inevitably muddled by the conceptual morass that surrounds the use of the populist concept in the social sciences.

Economists have long equated populism with profligate social spending, polarizing redistributive measures, and other unsustainable forms of state intervention that prioritize mass consumption over capital accumulation and market efficiency (Dornbusch and Edwards 1991; Edwards 2010). Political scientists, however, have increasingly decoupled the populist concept from any specific stage of economic development or set of economic policies, allowing for the identification of populist political appeals by anti-establishment leaders or movements who adopt a wide range of economic policies, from neoliberal orthodoxy to statist heterodoxy (Roberts 1995; Weyland 1996). In so doing, they have located populism squarely in the political domain and insisted on its essential political characteristics.

These essential political characteristics, however, remain a source of considerable debate. As Conovan (1981: 294) argues, all forms of populism “involve some kind of exaltation of and appeal to ‘the people’, and all are in one sense or another anti-elitist.” The “people,” however, can enter the political arena in a variety of different ways, through multiple forms of political subjectivity. The contested meanings of populism largely center on this question of popular subjectivity and the range of mobilizational patterns encompassed by the populist label.

For advocates of a discursive or ideological approach, populism is not defined by any particular pattern of popular subjectivity or socio-political mobilization. Likewise, no such pattern is intrinsic to populism. Populism, therefore, is polymorphic in its mobilizational expressions; the elite-popular cleavage can generate multiple and diverse forms of popular subjectivity. Mudde (2007: 23), for example, conceptualizes populism as a “thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite,’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volunté générale* (general will) of the people” (see also Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012: 8). Such a minimalist conceptualization travels easily across temporal and spatial boundaries and allows the populist label to be applied to a diverse array of anti-elite or anti-establishment political phenomena, from right-wing nationalism in Europe to socialist-inspired mass mobilizations in Latin America. It also allows populism to assume a variety of organizational forms and mobilizational patterns, including political parties (such as new nationalist parties in Europe), charismatic movements (such as those formed behind iconic figures such as Juan Domingo Perón in Argentina and Hugo Chávez in Venezuela), and grass-roots social movements (such as agrarian movements in 19th century U.S. politics, or more recent indigenous and popular movements in Bolivia).

So conceived, populism is defined by discourse and ideology rather than any particular mode of popular subjectivity. Indeed, the latter is almost infinitely malleable, allowing for participatory as well as plebiscitary patterns of mobilization, and both institutionalized and non-institutionalized organizational forms. In short, in the discursive tradition, populism has no systematic relationship to social movements and collective action; the rhythms and forms of

popular mobilization are epiphenomenal or context specific, and they are not constitutive of populism.

An alternative scholarly tradition, however, places popular subjectivity—or, more properly, the appropriation of it—at the very center of its conceptualization of populism. In this tradition, autonomous forms of collective action that generate grass-roots social movements are not considered to be populist, whatever their discourse; to the contrary, they are understood to be in tension with populist leadership, even in contexts where the two might coexist. The populist label, therefore, is restricted to cases where **socio-political mobilization is controlled from above and dependent on a dominant authority figure to weld together diverse popular interests and articulate a shared political project for “the people.”**

This tradition is especially prevalent in Latin American scholarship, where the study of populism developed in the middle of the 20th century as an attempt to differentiate regional patterns of mass political incorporation from the class-based forms of socialist mobilization that historically characterized the West European experience. This differentiation rested in part on the ideological diffuseness of Latin American populism and its heterogeneous, multi-class base of appeal. More fundamentally, however, it also rested on distinctive patterns of popular subjectivity and socio-political mobilization in contexts of delayed industrialization, where the limited size and organizational strength of the proletariat impeded the autonomous construction of a class-based political subject from below. Instead, popular subjects were routinely constructed around the figure of a charismatic leader who articulated the claims of socially diverse and often poorly organized mass constituencies that otherwise lacked a capacity for autonomous political expression (see, for example, Laclau 1977; Germani 1978).

In this tradition, a basic distinction is made between what Barr (2009) calls plebiscitary and participatory linkages between mass constituencies and the leaders or movements who claim to represent “the people”—linkages that ultimately embody very different patterns of popular subjectivity. Participatory linkages or patterns of subjectivity provide citizens with a direct role in contesting established elites or in deliberative and policymaking processes. As such, they tend to rely on autonomous and self-constituted forms of collective action at the grass-roots, inside or out of (and sometimes against) formal institutional channels. By contrast, under plebiscitary linkages or patterns of subjectivity, mass constituencies—often unorganized—are mobilized from above to acclaim an authority figure or cast judgement on their leader’s political initiatives. Such plebiscitary acclamation often resides in the voting booth or popular referendums, and is not predicated on autonomous forms of collective action at the grass-roots. Although both patterns of subjectivity routinely invoke “the people” and employ an anti-elite or anti-establishment discourse, Barr restricts the populist label to plebiscitary forms of mobilization. Weyland (2001), likewise, conceptualizes populism in terms of plebiscitary authority, and claims that populism “does not empower ‘the people,’ but invokes the people to empower a leader.”¹

Clearly, then, any hypothesized empirical relationship between populism and social movements hinges on the conceptualization of populism being employed. Whereas a discursive conceptualization allows a wide range of social movements to be characterized as populist, a plebiscitary conceptualization consigns social movements to a more participatory and bottom-up category of political mobilization and popular subjectivity. Rather than insist on one approach over the other, however, considerable analytical traction can be gained by exploring how these different patterns of popular subjectivity interact in contemporary anti-establishment movements

¹ Personal communication with the author, January 15, 2012.

in Latin America. As explained below, doing so requires that both populism and social movements be analytically linked to the study of institutionalized forms of partisan representation—or, more precisely, to the representational failures that trigger anti-establishment patterns of political contestation.



Populism and Social Protest in Latin America's Post-Adjustment Era

Populism and social movements have both flourished on the contemporary Latin American political landscape, leading many observers to assume that they are a natural response to the market-based structural adjustment policies that were adopted in the region following the debt crisis of the 1980s. Market liberalization, however—which occurred throughout the region—cannot readily explain the considerable cross-national variation that existed in the strength of populism and social movements. Such variation, I argue, was not a function of market liberalization per se, but rather a response to the representational failures produced by particular types of partisan alignments around the process of market reform. Whereas some partisan alignments channeled societal resistance to market orthodoxy towards institutionalized parties of the left, other alignments channeled such resistance into extra-systemic forms of social and/or electoral protest, including populism. These different political responses to market liberalization—in essence, alternative political expressions of Polanyi's (1944) celebrated “double movement”—are an essential starting point for understanding the complex interrelationships between populism and social movements in contemporary Latin America.



In most of Latin America, the period of economic crisis and structural adjustment in the 1980s and early 1990s was associated with the disarticulation and demobilization of historic labor and popular movements (Roberts 2002; Kurtz 2004; Rice 2012). Populism, where it

existed, was highly detached from social movements or any other form of grass-roots collective action; indeed, it could thrive in contexts of economic crisis and social fragmentation that enabled populist outsiders like Alberto Fujimori in Peru to appeal to unorganized mass constituencies by attacking a discredited political establishment. Such forms of populism—clearly plebiscitary in form—could even be embedded in neoliberal projects where populist leaders challenged organized interests in a broad range of social and economic settings (Roberts 1995; Weyland 1996).

Following stabilization and structural adjustment, however—in particular, the defeat of hyperinflation across the region by the mid-1990s—the political winds began to shift. Social and political resistance to market liberalization intensified in the post-adjustment era, helping to revive leftist parties, strengthen social movements, and push populism back toward more statist and redistributive policy orientations. The specific form of this Polanyian backlash, however, depended heavily on the politics of market liberalization in each country, and in particular on partisan alignments around the process of market reform; the political opportunity structure was more conducive to mass protest in some countries than others. Where conservative actors led the process of market reform and a major party of the left was consistently present as an opposition force, the Polanyian backlash in the post-adjustment era was largely contained within institutional channels. Indeed, societal resistance to market orthodoxy strengthened established parties of the left and eventually enabled them to win the presidency in countries like Chile, Brazil, Uruguay, and El Salvador. In each case, levels of social protest were relatively moderate in the post-adjustment era, established parties remained electorally dominant, and anti-establishment populist figures made little headway in the electoral arena (Roberts, forthcoming).

The political legacies of market liberalization, and the political opportunity structure for mass social or electoral protest, were strikingly different where center-left or labor-based populist parties played a major role in the process of structural adjustment. In the short-term, “bait-and-switch” market reforms imposed by parties that campaigned against them and historically championed more statist and redistributive policies contributed to the broad technocratic consensus around the neoliberal model in the late 1980s and early 1990s—what aptly came to be known as the “Washington Consensus” (see Williamson 1990). Such bait-and-switch patterns of reform, however, proved to be highly destabilizing in the post-adjustment era, as they de-aligned party systems programmatically and left them without institutionalized outlets for dissent from market orthodoxy. Such dissent, therefore, was often channeled into social protest movements and varied forms of electoral protest, including support for populist outsiders or new “movement parties” on the left (Kitschelt 2006). In countries like Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela,² bait-and-switch market reforms left a sequel of explosive social protest that directly or indirectly toppled presidents, led to partial or complete party system breakdowns, and (in the latter three cases) ushered in the election of an anti-system populist figure or a new movement party (Silva 2009). The political character of Latin America’s “left turn,” therefore, varied dramatically across countries depending on political alignments during the critical juncture of structural adjustment (Madrid 2009; Levitsky and Roberts 2011; Roberts, forthcoming).

²Structural adjustment policies were imposed by the major historic labor-affiliated populist party in Argentina (the Peronist *Partido Justicialista*, or PJ), Bolivia (the *Movimiento Nacinalista Revolucionario*, or MNR), and Venezuela (*Acción Democrática*, or AD). In Ecuador, the leading center-left and populist parties both adopted market liberalization policies when they held executive office in the late 1980s and mid-1990s, respectively.

In short, although every country in the region experienced at least scattered and isolated forms of social protest against market liberalization, the types of sustained, mass-based protest movements that produced systemic political change were limited to a relatively small number of countries. Levels of social protest were heavily conditioned by party politics; destabilizing protest cycles did not occur where party systems provided institutionalized outlets for dissent from market orthodoxy. Where all the major parties participated in the reform process and converged on the neoliberal model, dissent was far more likely to be channeled into widespread and destabilizing forms of social protest. The iconic cases include the mass urban riots known as the *caracazo* that followed a bait-and-switch process of structural adjustment in Venezuela in 1989; the cycles of indigenous and urban popular protests in Ecuador in the 1990s and early 2000s; the *piquetero* (picketers) movement of unemployed workers and urban riots that rocked Argentina during the 2001-02 financial crisis; and the so-called “water wars” and “gas wars” that erupted in Bolivia in 2000 and 2003, respectively.

These protest cycles were veritable political earthquakes in their respective countries. All produced systemic political change, and all opened the door for new populist tendencies to emerge, if not full-blown experiments with populist authority. Mass social protest led to the resignation or removal of three consecutive elected presidents in Ecuador and two presidents in Argentina and Bolivia, and it contributed to the impeachment of Carlos Andrés Pérez in Venezuela. Likewise, in all four countries mass social protest was followed by major electoral change, with the demise or collapse of traditional parties. Indeed, entire party systems essentially collapsed in Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador, while the anti-Peronist side of the party system suffered a steep decline in Argentina. Among the major traditional parties in the four countries, only the Peronist PJ in Argentina weathered the storm; alone in the region, the PJ

successfully veered back to the left after leading the process of market reform in order to channel much of the social backlash that erupted when a financial crisis occurred under the watch of its partisan rivals in 2001. In the other three cases, entire party systems were outflanked on the left by the rise of new populist leaders (Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and Rafael Correa in Ecuador) or a new movement party spawned by the protest cycles (the *Movimiento al Socialismo* [MAS] in Bolivia)

Although these latter three cases are routinely lumped together as examples of populism in contemporary Latin America (see, for example, Levitsky and Loxton 2013; Weyland 2013), and Argentina is sometimes added to the mix, these countries have manifested quite different patterns of socio-political mobilization and popular subjectivity in recent times. As such, they help to crystallize the debate over different conceptualizations of populism and its relationship to social movements, both before and after taking state power. It is to these relationships that I now turn.

Populism and Popular Subjectivity in Latin America's "Left Turn"

Although mass social protest played a central role in the demise of the old order and the rise of new populist or leftist alternatives in Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Argentina, the relationship between social movements and these new alternatives varied dramatically. The Bolivian case is *sui generis*, as new partisan and electoral alternatives grew directly out of social movements. As Santiago Anríquez states (2013: 19), Bolivia "is the only case in the region where social movements, originally in the rural areas, created a political leadership of their own, formed a political organization—the MAS—as their electoral vehicle, and captured state power through their participation in democratic elections after leading a series of mass protests."

President Evo Morales began his political career as an activist in Bolivia's largely-indigenous coca growers union, which joined with other highlands peasant organizations to found a series of electoral vehicles that culminated in the MAS in the late 1990s. The MAS then capitalized on the explosion of anti-neoliberal social protests in the "water wars" and "gas wars" of the early 2000s, extending its organizational networks to urban areas and broadening its base of electoral support. Although Morales undoubtedly played an important role in forging a common political project out of the diverse rural and urban movements that ultimately converged in the MAS, his leadership was deeply rooted in an autonomous and bottom-up dynamic of socio-political mobilization—in short, a highly participatory form of popular subjectivity.

By contrast, the rise of Chávez in Venezuela and Correa in Ecuador relied overwhelmingly on plebiscitary forms of popular subjectivity. The electoral victories of both leaders had been preceded by cycles of mass protest, but neither rose to prominence through their involvement with social movements or movement organizations. Both leaders founded parties from the top-down that were electoral vehicles for their personal leadership, rather than extensions of movement organizations like the MAS in Bolivia. Chávez' party, the *Movimiento Quinta República* (MVR), had origins in the clandestine military network organized by the charismatic young leader when he was an army officer. After leading a failed military coup in 1992 and serving time in prison, Chávez became a symbol of rebellion against an increasingly discredited political establishment, and founded the MVR as a vehicle for his outsider presidential campaign in 1998. Correa, likewise, did not emerge from the protest movements that toppled successive Ecuadorean presidents in 1997, 2000, and 2005. A U.S.-trained economist who had served a short-lived stint as an anti-neoliberal Economy Minister, Correa cobbled together a media-savvy campaign team from academic and technocratic circles in order

to make an outsider bid for the presidency in 2006. To accentuate Correa's political independence and anti-establishment credentials, his hastily-organized party vehicle declined to sponsor a list of congressional candidates to accompany his presidential campaign. In neither Venezuela nor Ecuador, then, did social movements generate the political leadership of populist figures or the partisan vehicles that carried them to power; popular subjects undermined the *ancien regime* through social protest, but they did not play a constitutive role in the creation of new alternatives. Their role, in short, was one of plebiscitary acclamation in the voting booth rather than active participation.

Although these genetic traits continued to influence patterns of governance after new populist and leftist alternatives took public office, the ideal-typical distinctions between plebiscitary and participatory forms of popular subjectivity began to fade. This was especially true in Bolivia and Venezuela, where hybrid forms of subjectivity developed under Morales and Chávez, pushing the former in a more plebiscitary direction and the latter toward higher levels of participation. As Anria (2013: 33-35) notes, the rapid expansion of the MAS into urban areas in response to electoral imperatives in 2005 did not rest on the same types of organic, participatory social networks that had spawned the formation of the party in rural coca-growing regions a decade before. Instead, the party achieved territorial penetration by negotiating informal alliances with pre-existing community organizations and co-opting their leaders into government positions, in the process threatening the autonomy of many civic groups. The gradual bureaucratization of the MAS produced “detachment . . . from the social organizations that brought it to power” and made the party “reminiscent of a populist machine” in urban areas (Anria 2013: 35). But if the MAS made limited gains in opening new institutional channels for the participation of these social organizations in policymaking arenas, the organizations

themselves did not fully relinquish their capacity for autonomous political mobilization, or their ability to hold the government accountable to popular demands. to ideConstituent assembly—both participation and plebiscitary.

Following the same logic, Roberts, reflecting on the powerful social movements that toppled two Bolivian presidents, built the MAS, and elected Evo Morales to the presidency, goes so far as to claim that they represent “the very antithesis of populism.”ⁱ

is to replace political incumbents—the political establishment or ruling caste, so to speak—with a new leadership that is a more authentic representative of the common people and is directly accountable to them, at least episodically, by means of popular acclamation (typically in the voting booth). Under plebiscitary linkages, policymaking authority is delegated to a leader who acts on behalf of the people,ⁱⁱ although this leader may on occasion submit specific initiatives to plebiscitary approval by means of popular referendums. The people, in theory at least, are empowered by virtue of their aggregate capacity to select a leader from outside the establishment, but they do not define or construct the political alternatives; such initiative resides outside and above their ranks, and popular subjects are vertically constructed around the figure of the leader. Rather than being self-constituted, they are mobilized from above.

The relationship between them is highly contingent on how populism itself is conceptualized—not a minor consideration, given that populism is widely and notoriously recognized to be one of the most contested concepts in the social science lexicon (see Weyland 2001). The polysemic character of the populist label allows it to be associated with a remarkably diverse range of social and political mobilizational patterns, depending on whether specific patterns of mobilization are considered to be primary or secondary properties of the populist phenomenon.

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ⁱ Kenneth M. Roberts, "Latin America's Populist Revival," *The SAIS Review of International Affairs* 27. 1 (Winter-Spring 2007), p. 14.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p. 36.