



Joan Prats

# Taking populisms seriously

**A debate that took place in Washington at the headquarters of the International Monetary Fund on the presentation of Javier Santiso's new book, *Pragmatism: Latin America's New "Ism"?*, makes me feel that perhaps we ought not to think little of things simply because they fail to move us very much. Moises Naim was one of those talking there and he said something like "Javier, this is a fine book; one of the aspects you bring out is Chile's experience as the great Latin American success story, but the day when you can explain to us why president Bachelet moves so few people outside the country and why presidents Chávez or Castro stir up so many inside their countries and abroad, we will have grasped deeper processes than the new pragmatism in the economy". Naim was quite clearly referring to populisms.**

Latin American populisms are the bogey bandied around both inside and above all outside Latin America as the cause or threat of all present and future ills. Today, after the defeats of Ollanta Humala in Peru and López Obrador in Mexico, the "international community" seems a little less worked up about this, but there is nevertheless a long period of concern lying ahead of it. It may be time to take populisms seriously, first of all by attempting to understand them. We prefer to talk of *populisms* in the plural to express, on one hand, the heterogeneity of the phenomenon: there are right-wing populists —Uribe—, and left-wing ones —Morales, Castro or López Obrador; there are populists who have declared that they are neither right nor left-wing —Humala— and there are some who feel uncomfortable with these classifications imported from the French Revolution —Chávez; and there are presidents who sometimes consider themselves populists and sometimes left-wing reformists —Kirchner.

Apart from this, some of today's populists and some from a not very distant yesterday —Latin America from 1930 to 1960— are still very much present in the collective imagination of a good deal of Latin American people.

Populism is a phenomenon that is very resistant to definitions. Bonilla and Páez, two worthy scholars in this field, have characterised this as a “longstanding political tradition seeking the people's support, breaking up the conventionalisms of the establishment,

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which has the ability to use multiple ideologies, which may possibly mobilise the masses and which generally is organised behind the charisma of a leader”. This is fairly useful as a rough idea, but still rather cold; it does not convey the reason why populisms revive so easily and with such passion in Latin America; it does not tell us why populisms, even though undeniably having roots and even present expressions in Russia, Europe and the United States, have found the most fertile soil in Latin America. In fact, populism is the sort of phenomenon which will let itself be

described but not defined, and to describe it a look at its history may be required.

We can recommend Alberto Methol Ferré's work, written outside transnational intellectual circuits, but stemming from the historical heart of the region —*América del Sur. De los estados-ciudad al Estado Continental Industrial*. Starting from Perón's well-known phrase “the 21<sup>st</sup> century will find us either united or dominated”, Methol discusses the generation of Latin Americans who started to rethink continental unity in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Uruguay's Rodó, who in 1900 published *Ariel*, was the first great exponent of Latin America's moral and intellectual unity, materialising this in the proposal for “a nation of confederated republics” thus going back to the historical project that had gone wrong for Bolívar in 1826. In 1910 the Argentinean Manuel Ugarte provided the first historical and political synthesis of Latin America in *El Porvenir de la América española*. In 1911 *La evolución política y social de Hispanoamérica*, by the Venezuelan Rufino Blanco Fombona, came out and 1912 saw the publication of *Las democracias latinas de América*, by the Peruvian Francisco García Calderón. The group of university students provided the great dynamic thrust to these new ideals of union. Through their revolts, mobilisations and congresses, students became the first exponents of Latin Americanism and also the origin of the great populist national wave.

The first occasion on which these intellectual endeavours and mobilisations were turned into a political project involved Victor Raúl Haya de la Torre, the founder and father of Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana (APRA). His populism was a first attempt to build or develop the State and the nation of Peru. His was the first political theorisation on the “oligarchic polis” which is what lay beneath the tag of the Latin American “nations”. They were indeed former City-States which controlled farming, mining and fishing areas now of immense export value. “They were anachronistic countries at their roots, enormously rich, but whose wealth had no potential, because the inventions were made by others. We could not export anything with sufficient added value. With a huge

farming or mining income we bought the objects of modernity, ours was a mimicry of modernism, no more” (Methol).

Then a new generation of Latin Americans was born that set out to convert the mimicry into reality. They were all populist nationals. But even then populism was considered inferior, though it is when all is said and done “the only political thought that came out of Latin America in its own right, and gave rise to Haya de la Torre in Peru, Vargas in Brazil, Perón in Argentina, Ibáñez in Chile, Lázaro Cárdenas in Mexico, Rómulo Betancourt in Venezuela (Methol), Velasco Ibarra in Ecuador, Gaitán in Columbia and Victor Paz Estensoro in Bolivia. Vargas in Brazil and Perón in Argentina were authoritarian; the others had limited conceptions and ambiguous relations with democracy. But all of them sought the involvement of the masses, the people, in national construction and political practice, implicating the old and new sectors that had been kept out of participation in the former oligarchic republics whose social, economic and political crises led to the emergence of populist leaders and policies.

**As they produced growth in their countries** the exporting oligarchic Latin American republics gradually generated masses of proletarians and workers in their large port cities —craftsmen, small traders, skilled workmen and professionals who joined the masses who had historically been abandoned to the country or the mines, all those who had been left out of the mechanisms of political and oligarchic representation. In Europe, socialist and social-democratic parties and unions had integrated these masses through universal suffrage, the progressive conquest of the welfare state and the corresponding transformation of the State and the liberal economy into a *democratic and social constitutional State* and into a *social market economy*. This in short brought about a process of creating new agents, struggles and agreements, which led to new institutions. Hence, in Europe a universal citizenship was gradually won, based on civil, political, economic and social rights and firmly anchored on a sound institutionality.

In Latin America circumstances worked out quite differently. The emigrating masses, especially those from southern Europe, clearly tried to form themselves into the political instruments of their home countries —with a high degree of anarchism and revolutionary socialism— but with no success, because these were two very different realities. The European states had a long history as complete institutional systems and had already gone through the Industrial Revolution. European social and political movements gradually relinquished their revolutionary ideals in exchange for a thorough renovation of the rusty institutionality of their states. In contrast to this, Latin American states and nations were actually not states and nations. They hardly managed to control their own territory and left the large masses outside the national identity, political representation and social inclusion. The institutionality of the oligarchic republics was frail and mainly informal. Industrialisation was still something to come. In these conditions, popular mobilisation could not be implemented from ideologies, but only from the political project of a new fatherland, the promise of a nation and a State which would include the multitudes, which would give them an identity and which would need their mobilising force. This is what was done by Latin American national populism in its diverse variants. Its leaders were above all “nation builders” although these were nations and states that had very little in common with European ones. Their rhetoric was anti-oligarchic and anti-imperialist, but was not in general anti-capitalist.

Let us look at Perón's case. From 1945 to 1955 Argentina had around seventeen million inhabitants. The first command of Peronism was industrialisation, to give work and occupation to the masses. This meant putting the income from exporting human resources to use for industrialisation and generating a business infrastructure that was able to replace imports. But even so, the national market proved too small and to extend this, economies needed to be integrated. To this end, in 1951, Perón sought an alliance between Argentina and Brazil as the basic core of agglutination, the driving force of growth towards the "bigger fatherland", towards the necessary unity of South America. "Either united or dominated". But it did not work, and there are two very clear reasons for this.

The first is that, through its very essence, Peronist populism helped to build a nation, but on very weak institutional foundations. The autocratic leader undeniably brought in a distributive and social policy, but based on clientelism, that is, on the distribution of social benefits in exchange for votes —Evita's hand so sincerely stretched out towards her *descamisado* supporters did not produce citizens with social rights guaranteed by the State's institutions. In the same way, the internal market was protected by national businessmen largely in accordance with criteria of political loyalty, and for this reason institutions and policies were needed to encourage productivity and export orientation.

The second reason is less obvious: it involves grasping the impossibility of generating effective economic integration between countries with a very weak institutionality. When states seeking economic integration have not been able to build the institutions of a genuine market economy inside their own frontiers it proves almost impossible for them to build a supranational market space governed by rules that prevent arbitrary manipulation by the member states or their most prominent business or social groups. This is the main reason why Latin American regional integration processes have never managed to come up to the expectations that they had created. Populisms generate a rhetoric of integration, but find it very hard to generate efficient economic integration, precisely because their political viability is incompatible with strengthening the economic and legal institutionality required by efficient markets. Aware of this, they have for a long time set trade between peoples —controlled discretionarily by governments— against free trade, even though this might be free trade under the rules fixed by governments, but which these cannot nevertheless change at their whim.

**One characteristic of the populisms of this first stage** is the one known as *economic populism*, exemplified by the often-quoted letter that Perón sent to Ibáñez in 1953: "Dear Friend, give the people, particularly the workers, all you can. When it seems that you have already given them too much, give them more. Everyone will try to scare you with the nightmare of economic collapse. But that is all lies. There is nothing more elastic than the economy, and people are afraid of it because they fail to understand it". This economic populism reached the governments in power at the start of the democratisation process, like that of Alfonsín in Argentina, Alan García in Peru and José Sarney in Chile. They practised what Alejandro Foxley has called the "populist cycle": a first year of tax expansion to generate more purchasing power: a second year in which the cost for this is paid with inflation and tax deficit; a third year with an economic crisis turned into a social crisis through mobilisations, and a fourth year of open political crisis. Salvador Allende also implemented economic populism, as well as the Sandinistas

in Nicaragua. Some have pointed out that Hugo Chávez has been able to escape the tax deficit thanks to the increase in the price of petrol.

The populist national states, which became widespread in Latin America from the nineteen-forties to the nineteen-sixties until the late sixties and early seventies, went into a crisis of economic growth —industrialisation for replacing imports was not able to exceed the consumer goods stage, nor increase productivity and open up to wider markets— then into a social crisis —distributive policies ran out of resources and had not managed to significantly reduce the chronic inequality of most Latin American countries— and into a political crisis —corruption, lobbies and arbitrariness would always be around. After great social tensions and different revolutionary attempts, as this was a time of great ideologisation, they went on to brutal military dictatorships which for the first time tried out a model of development in the hands of a new type of State: the bureaucratic-authoritarian system.

But before going on with the story, it may be a good idea to go over the conditions that make the emergence of these populisms possible, as well as some of their outstanding characteristics and consequences. Later on these will be of use for contrasting with the conditions and characteristics of present-day populisms.

The first Latin American populisms arose through a combination of circumstances which are worth restating: an economic, social and political crisis of the oligarchic republics partly caused by the deterioration in the value of exports, partly by the governments' incapacity to give an identity to the popular masses and socially include these, and partly by the crisis of political representation and social discrediting of oligarchic governments: incomplete states and nations, which were not able to control and link up their vast territories nor to include or give a national identity to their growing populations: very frail political and economic institutionalities, unable to adapt to and integrate the new social agents and to generate new, more inclusive and efficient rules of the game.

In these conditions, both then and now, national populism has appealed to and mobilised the people against the oligarchy and imperialism, seen as being hand in hand and as enemies of the people, not to further any socialist revolution (populism is not anti-capitalist), but instead to re-establish the State and build the nation of the people, by the people and for the people. The people and social movements in which it expresses itself become the new political icon. This is not a matter of universalising a new legal status of citizenship. The rights that they are seeking to conquer and guarantee are not the individual ones, which are considered liberal and bourgeois, but the collective rights of the people. The political system perceived does not wish to represent citizens, since it considers itself to be "the people's political self-representation through social movements". All this leads to diverse characteristics.

One of the first of these is the emphasis of all the symbolic, communicational, emotive aspects, and indeed, the spectacle. This is designed to express dramatically that there has been a break with the traitorous oligarchy and with imperialism, both declared permanent enemies and which are never utterly vanquished. As opposed to the corruption of which the previous political regime is accused, a show is now made of austerity and honesty, though the lack of institutions means that these virtues do not tend to endure for very long. The pre-existing racism and classism are questioned, while not necessarily being

surmounted. Society is polarised and kept tense by propagating images of struggle between the people and oligarchy, between *us* and *them*, and things are led to a level of civil division. This all becomes more dramatically spectacular through the *media spin* of today's societies.

A second trait of classic populisms is the pre-eminence given to social movements over

## Populisms maintain an ambiguous relationship with representative democracy

the more formal structures of parties and trade unions. Populist systems are sustained on the articulation of distributive coalitions made up a very wide range of social agents, who consider themselves to be a direct expression of the people: very diverse social movements, trade unions aligned with the populist regime, business

groups accompanying the process, new civil servants who take over public offices, leaders and workers of the nationalised or protected companies, diverse subsidised guilds, peasants who have obtained lands from the land reform or who hope to do so. Populism attempts to develop a system of corporatism linking and bonding the entire social structure. In fact the populist system does not conceive the person as a citizen with rights, but as a member of a movement or corporation, without belonging or subordinating to which the conditions for personal development cannot be created.

In this state of affairs, populisms tend to use political clientelism as a method of political action. Of course not all clientelists are populists, but populists are always clientelists. Their service to the people consists in distributing goods and services discretionarily and selectively, mainly through social organisations which prop up the regime, the directors of which end up being co-opted and subordinated to the populist political power. The higher echelons of the political movements in which they say that the people express themselves always end up being recruited and exploited by clientelism. The myth of the populist government as the people's political self-representation attempts to close the circle of legitimation. Obviously this can only occur with very low levels of political culture, but in Latin America we have plenty of cultural minima and it is these, to which the poorest and most excluded tend to belong, on which populism tries to feed.

One new characteristic of populisms, consistent with everything said so far, is their ambiguous relationship with representative democracy and the highly personal and discretionary nature of their leadership. Populists have never believed that the people express themselves either exclusively or mainly through elections, nor that popular power is only wielded through institutions. Populists use a very conscious ambiguity about representative democracy. It is not a matter of completing this with participative democracy, which would be a demand of the reformist left. Populists reserve the right to invoke the people as ultimate holders of national sovereignty every time that the institutions of formal democracy threaten to stray from the "genuine" popular will. If things go well for the populist government, this will keep the social movements supplied through clientelism and mobilised only for symbolic acts. When things go wrong, the people will return to the streets, squares and lanes to redress the deviations of the political institutions circumstantially captured by the enemies of the people or in danger of doing so. When everything deteriorates it will become clear that there are few

words like *fatherland* and *people* that have managed to become the alibi and refuge of so many scoundrels. A quote from Stalin himself may be enough, when on 4<sup>th</sup> May 1935, addressing the future officials of the Red Army, he said: “Of all the valuable capitals that there are in the world, the most valuable and decisive is the people”.

**Populisms cannot survive without a highly personal** and discretionary leader. This is due to the fact that their formal political institutions are extraordinarily weakened by having to coexist with social organisations and movements which lie outside their logic. Here the conflicts between the agents of the coalition which sustains populism are not mediated nor solved institutionally, but through the personal and discretionary leadership of the populist president, who will tend not to create any institutions which assign power and solve conflicts between agents so as not to become dispensable. The populist is quite the opposite of Machiavelli’s prince, who was advised to become dispensable by creating institutions. He will not have the greatness of Napoleon, who asserted: “Men cannot fix history, only institutions can” and dedicated himself to creating them, some still surviving today. Latin American populist leaders have only taken this path in a very incomplete and imperfect way.

Are present-day populists different? Some think that populists of today are only new through being so old. But this is not true. Nothing happens in vain. First of all, Latin America has reached levels of democracy and democratic culture which, whilst being very incomplete, are difficult to head back from. Latin America is satisfied not only with democracy as such, but with the specific democracy that it has. The Latin American crisis is not something about democracy, but takes place within this. Present-day populists doubtlessly maintain all the ambiguity of the old populisms as regards representative democracy, but they need to legitimate themselves electorally and respect a minimum political pluralism. When hard times come, they will endanger the minima of democratic institutionality, but have to reckon with a civil resistance which was unthinkable in times of the first populism.

Secondly, present-day populists seem to have abandoned what Sebastián Edwards and others have called “populist macroeconomy”. They now control inflation and the deficit and attempt to gain international respectability, maintaining the autonomy of the Central Bank. But this goes against the populist logic of political instrumentalisation of all institutionality, including the economic side. Hence, at times they cannot resist the temptation to replace the independence of institutions with a mimicry of autonomy which fails to convince anyone, and which of course does not withstand a seriously unfavourable economic situation. Today’s populisms do not seem capable of initiating the development of new productive capacities based on the multiplication of new highly productive entrepreneurs and workers. To succeed in this they would have to create the institutional conditions and appropriate and fitting economic policies which involve granting autonomy and proper rules of the game, that is, generating an institutionality which does not appear to sympathise with the demands for long term survival of populism II