



European Ideas Network

THE PHALLACY OF POPULISM

By

Eduardo Gutierrez
Former Spanish Ambassador
to the OAS/OEA

Paper presented at the EIN Seminar in Washington, 21-24 June 2010

1. Introduction

Populism is →an old phenomenon, or should we say an old political disease,
and

→it flourishes everywhere

- It is old. Aristotle already mentioned it, in its classic division of political systems and its corresponding degenerations (Monarchy and Tyranny, Aristocracy and Oligarchy, Democracy and Demagogy).
We can assert that populism identifies itself with demagogy: a way to exert power that appeals to the emotions (feelings, phobias, fears, wishes) of the masses to gain its support, often by use of rhetoric's and propaganda.
It is, thus, I) a degeneration of democracy ii) in which politicians, through concessions and flattering proposals cajole the basic feelings of the citizens iii) in order to get or keep the power.
- It flourishes everywhere: in Russia and the US during the 19th century, in France during the fifties, with Pierre Poujade championing the interests of the “little man” against corporations, unions and foreign investors. European totalitarianisms during the 20th century had, in their beginnings, obvious components of populism and demagoguery.

We can affirm, besides, that from populism to authoritarianism there is only a step: with the passing of time every populist becomes a tyrant: Fidel Castro's entrance in Havana in 1959, and its ensuing evolution might be the clearest example of this transformation.

2. Populism in Latin America

Everybody agrees that it is in 20th century Latin America where populism has had the greatest and more enduring influence. As Fernando Londoño, a Colombian political writer puts it: “Latin America has been the haven of populisms of all sorts because it is a monster of a thousand heads, a restless creature that sometimes relies on nationalist feelings, other in racial or religious considerations, or in socializing passions. And we will find populisms in the right and in the left: like the one of Perón and Evita (the archetypical one), the communistoid type of Salvador Allende's experiment in Chile, the weird passionial cluster that was the PRI in Mexico, a good share of Venezuelan candillismo, or that of Fujimori in Peru who, after being elected, set up a machinery of authoritarian power that would have been the envy of any military *golpista*”.

3. Reasons why it flourishes in Latin America.

Why has Latin America been so fertile a land for Populism? What are the reasons that contribute to explain the rebirth of populism in today's Latin America?

Enrique Krauze, a distinguished Mexican intellectual, offers the following explanations:

1) The presence of Hugo Chavez at the helm in Venezuela in a favourable international time characterized by fierce anti-Americanism, China's economic advance and high oil prices. To those who question the importance of Man in history, Chávez shows that if a determined leader decides to get the power, and succeeds in it, with abundant means and resources, he can do what Chavez has already done, and much more, unless the minoritarian Latin America liberal opinion prevents this from happening.

Chavez embodies a series of traditional dangers that in 1999 seemed to be conjured for good: militarism, caudillismo, a new Marxist mix (with doses of indigenism, Liberation Theology and estatism). In fact, he is the real Mr. Danger.

2) The insufficient or awkward implementation of the policies that shaped the Washington Consensus. Besides, that agenda was not accompanied by the adequate fiscal policies, strengthening of institutions, effective social measures and fight against corruption.

This, plus the awkward handling of the debt crisis of the eighties, has led to disenchantment with the economic outcome of the last two decades and with the performance of traditional political parties.

3) The modern concepts of liberal democracy, although theoretically inspired the Latin America political systems created in the 19th Century, have not really impregnated them.

What prevail, still in our days, are the political ideas that originated in the 16th and 17th centuries, according to which the political chief of a country, the President, is conceived more as a Monarch, the owner of power than a recipient of it.

In today's Latin America political mentality it still lingers a magical conception of power and politics. As Juan Rulfo, the creator of Pedro Páramo said: "The best example of Mexican fantastic literature I know are the Annual Reports of the Mexican Presidents to the Congress (those were the times of the PRI...).

4) Extreme inequality and indigenous exclusion are two structural factors in most of Latin American societies that also favour the appearance of a charismatic leader offering quick remedies and solutions to very complex situations.

Adventurers of politics, seekers of political fortune (not rarely with a military background) thrive in this context.

Characters

- **Typically the populist leadership is charismatic:** there is no populism without a leader capable of solving at once (that's to say, in the short term) and forever, the problems of the people. Perhaps the PRI was the only exception to this rule, because it was an institutionalized populism (but after all the PRI, like its very name, was a walking contradiction).
- **Populist abuses the political message, manipulates it.** The populists take advantage of the modern technologies of communication to perform their act ([Facebook and Twitter](#)). They are very much like televangelists. "Give me a balcony and I will become president", said José María Velasco, Ecuador's most prominent populist. They create their own truth but at the same time they hate freedom of expression.
- **Macroeconomic Populism in Latin America.**

In their classic work on this topic Dornbusch and Edwards gave a simple answer to the question why populism triumph. It does so because the alternatives fail. Populist cycles repeat in Latin America because the austerity policies of some governments end up boring the people which then opts for leaders ready to spend more and get their countries deep into debt.

Macroeconomic populism deemphasizes the risks of inflation and deficit finance, external constraints and the reaction of economic agents to aggressive non-market policies. But they ultimately fail; and when they fail it is always at a frightening cost to the very groups who were supposed to be favoured. The macroeconomics of various experiences (leftist or conservative) is very much the same, even if the politics differed greatly.

The populist leader uses liberally the public moneys. He distributes directly the wealth of the state, but not for free: he targets the aid and expects political obedience in exchange.

His priority is not to generate wealth [but to distribute in a politically targeted fashion](#) the income of the State. That is why corruption is always a by-product of populist regimes.

Social Ideas

- The populist politician exacerbates the social tensions [between rich and poor](#). He blames the rich of being antinationalist or accomplices of international capitalism.
It is maniquean: Perón used [to differentiate between](#) "la patria y la antipatria".

-Political mobilizations are a must. The demagogues try to keep the masses in a permanent state of exaltation and organize huge events through **their social networks**: *descamisados peronistas*, Bolivarian circles, big anti-US demos organized by Fidel in Havana. Important political decisions are presented as chapters of the heroic fight of the masses: we've seen this recently in the language of the Supreme Decree issued by Evo Morales when he nationalized the Bolivian oil industry.

-The populist always appeals to a foreign enemy, almost invariably the U.S. or what he perceives as being its international design: globalization or regional trade agreements or foreign investments are the villains. He advocates national economic solutions, ignoring what goes on in the rest of the world.

- They look down on the legal order: the existing laws and institutions are considered to be stiff, old, not useful **anymore** for the "new times and politics". That is why they create a new legality and baptise it as "popular democracy" or "participative, advanced, democracy". To achieve his goals, the populist leader gets the control of the existing institutions, saps them and finally tames them or creates a new set of institutions through a "Constituent Assembly".

- **They dislike** traditional and structured political parties: so **the populist leader** creates movements or associations with scarce, confuse or inexistent ideology and programme. Every aspect of the new structures relies on the leader and they usually disappear with him (peronism would be an exception to this but it reflects precisely its ideological ambiguity: both Menem and Kirchner are peronists and both the left wing *gerrilla* of the 70s and its repressors were peronists.

How to fight populism?

- In the internal front

Democrats have to fight the battle of ideas. As Krauze puts it, **Latin American democrats** have to do this with intelligence, steadfastness and **statistics** that **will** unveil the sophisms and propaganda **of the populists**.

The biggest lie of the populist is that he claims for himself the title of "King of the poor", the only one that really defends their interests. If we are to fight the leftist populist the first thing to do is to fight that idea. What a populist does is, in fact, to unduly (and **immorally**) get hold of the poor and the weak and use them for the benefit of his own goals, feeding back their misery and suffering. Chávez, for instance, manipulated statistics (in 2005) to hide the fact that since his arrival to power in 1999 the index of poverty in Venezuela had increased.

Latin American democrats have to defend the idea that a policy of true general interest has to tackle with the extremely serious problems of inequality that afflict most of Latin American countries. Those are inequalities of income, indeed, but in the end, as Amartya Sen reminds us in "Development and Freedom", they are inequalities in freedom. **They** have to defend effective social justice **knowing** **than** that a populist will never **truly** do.

Civic education is, perhaps, the most effective antidote to this political disease. In the end what is at stake, as Carlos Alberto Montaner has written, is the [urgent](#) need of reconciling the State with society.

We from abroad can cooperate with Latin Americans in the effort but, ultimately, it is their own task.

- In the external front

As political parties, especially when we are not in office, we have limits [to](#) our [political actions](#). But we have to put pressure to bear on our governments not to be tolerant with potential dictators.

Cooperation for the strengthening of democratic institutions is essential in this regard. In my party even those sceptical with foreign aid agree that the resources allocated to reinforce democratic institutions in Latin America will be worth [the](#) effort.

From abroad we cannot justify our passivity behind the legality of the populist leader that has got the power through the ballot box. We have already mentioned that the passing of time enhances the totalitarian temptations of the demagogue. Thus, we have to be alert, keeping high in our agenda the risks for democracy everywhere, and denouncing the abuses of the populists. Meetings like this one in [Washington D.C.](#) are, for sure, extremely useful to achieve these goals.