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**Global populism**

Histories, trajectories, problems, and challenges

Carlos de la Torre

As the different chapters of this book illustrate, by invoking the will of the people, populists have challenged the power of elites in Asia, Africa, the Americas, the Middle East, and Europe. In some regions like Latin America, they have governed in different populist waves since the 1930s and 40s until the present. In Africa, Asia, and the Middle East a first generation of populists linked to anti-colonial struggles dominated their postcolonial histories, and using elections a new generation of populists assumed power in several nations of these regions. What is new, perhaps, is that populists are in power not only in fragile democracies in the global south, but with Donald Trump’s election also in the cradle of liberal democracy, the United States. Populist parties are becoming stronger in consolidated European democracies, and at the time of writing this chapter are in power in Italy, Hungary, Greece, and Poland.

Pundits and scholars responded to what they named the surge of populism with fear or hope. For some populism is the biggest threat to democracy, and even to the foundations of the project of modernity based on pluralism and reason. For others populism represents a democratizing response to the rule of technocratic global elites that have kidnapped the will of the majorities. The different chapters in this book take very seriously the populist diagnosis of the deficits of real existing democracies in the north and in the global south. When seeking power, populists politicize issues and point to problems that need to be addressed such as inequalities, the loss of national sovereignty to globalization, or the rule of unresponsive political elites. Yet populist solutions tend to be problematic, simplistic, and in most instances, instead of leading to better forms of democracy, their outcomes were authoritarian. The different chapters in this book illustrate how the populist playbook of concentrating power in the hands of the president, using the legal system instrumentally to punish critics, and attacking the media and civil society led to hybrid regimes in Zambia, Turkey, Hungary, Venezuela, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Bolivia. Even in more consolidated democracies like Israel, the United States, or Silvio Berlusconi’s Italy, populist attacks on the institutional foundations that allow for fundamental freedoms of association and information led to processes of democratic erosion.

This volume illustrates the diversity of populism globally. Populists differ on how they conceptualize the people. This category central to populism, nationalism, and democratic theory is one of the most abused and ambiguous concepts in political theory. It refers to the
population as a whole, and simultaneously to a section of the population, those considered to be excluded. It could be imagined as a diverse population or as a homogenous whole. If imagined as a diverse and plural population, no one could claim to embody its will and interests, and no politician could pretend to remain in power until liberating the people. Differently from pluralists, populists view the people as one, as an entity with one will and consciousness. They claim to be their saviors, and to be their only and truthful voice. Those who challenge their authoritarian appropriations of the will of the people are labeled as enemies. In order to liberate the people, populist leaders like the late Hugo Chávez even attempted to stay in power indefinitely.

In Australia, Europe, and the U.S. some populist leaders and parties use exclusionary ethnic, cultural, and religious constructs to exclude immigrants, refugees, and in general nonwhite populations from the people. Muslims and former nonwhite colonial subjects are constructed as threatening and inferior outsiders. Other populists in Europe and the U.S. are antiracists and refuse to stigmatize nonwhites. In Africa and Latin America several populist parties and leaders use inclusionary ethnopolitical appeals (Madrid 2012; Cheeseman and Larmer 2015). Differently from xenophobic constructs, they include various ethnicities under their notions of who are the people. Some populists use religious notions that exclude nonbelievers, while others use secular political constructs of the people to confront elites. Rodrigo Duterte and Donald Trump pledged law and order, while Hugo Chávez and Evo Morales promised better forms of democracy. Populists also differed on whether they are forward looking or promised the return of a nostalgic and glorious past, and on whether they use the state to redistribute wealth, or believe in the magical powers of the unregulated market.

Despite advocating for different economic policies, appealing to different class and ethnic constituencies, and promoting different models of democracy, as the chapters in this book show, populists share a political logic and use similar political strategies to get to power and to govern. Populists aim to rupture exclusionary systems to give power back to the people. They understand politics as an antagonistic struggle between the people and their enemies. They feel a sense of urgency: because the establishment is so corrupt, it needs to be overhauled immediately. Populist leaders claim to be the only voice of the people, and even their embodiment. Many use a revolutionary rhetoric; all face enemies and not democratic adversaries. After gaining power populists attempt to create new political and social institutions; they share majoritarian views of democracy, disregard pluralism, and try with different levels of success to regulate and control the public sphere and civil society. As Jan Werner Müller (2016, 48) put it, populists in power attempt to “create the homogeneous people in whose name they have been speaking all along”.

Until recently and with the exception of the People’s Party founded in 1892 by American farmers and workers, only external observers used the term populism. Most parties and leaders that were labeled as populist did not accept this characterization. Things are different nowadays. Leftwing parties like Podemos (Yes we can) established in Spain in 2014 by professors of political science, or Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s La France Insoumise, proudly accept the label populist. Similarly, as Pedro Zúquete shows in Chapter 27, rightwing populists like Marine LePen or Matteo Salvini, head of the Italian political party Lega Nord (Northern League), describe themselves as populists. However, in global media discourses, with the exception of the United States where the term populism still has positive connotations as pro-labor and democratizing, it still evokes images of demagoguery, irrationality, danger, and fear.

Differently from Eurocentric studies that relegate the multiple populist experiences of the global south to footnotes, this book aims to look at populism globally. The first populist
regimes emerged in Latin America, combining open elections and views of the unitary people and of the leader as its savior (Finchelstein 2017). In order to understand the effects of populism on democracy, for instance, scholars working on Europe and the U.S. would profit from studies of the long Latin American experiences of populists in power (Finchelstein 2017; de la Torre 2017a, 2017b; Peruzzotti 2017).

This chapter is divided into four sections. The first discusses different approaches to populism. It explains how these theories conceptualize populism, and analyzes the normative claims that each of these perspectives uses to evaluate the effects of populism on democratization. The second part of this chapter analyzes how different constructions of the people could lead to different forms of inclusion and exclusions. The third explores different links between the populist leader and followers. It distinguishes between charisma, populist organizations, and the media. The fourth focuses on populism in power. It analyzes how and why, despite promising to return power to the people, populists in power either disfigured consolidated democracies, or led fragile democracies in crises toward authoritarianism.

1. Studying populism: from mass society to discursive and political theories

Writing after the traumas of fascism, the first round of historians and social scientists of populism were suspicious of its democratic credentials. Notions of crises, of the irrational responses of the masses to stress, and manipulation in conditions of anomie were at the center of social scientific and historical scholarship. Analyzing McCarthyism, Talcott Parsons (1955, 127) wrote: “it is a generalization well established in social sciences that neither individuals nor societies can undergo major structural changes without the likelihood of producing a considerable element of ‘irrational’ behavior”. The expected responses to the stress produced by major structural transformations were anxiety, aggression focused on what was felt to be the source of strain, and a desire to reestablish a fantasy where everything will be all right, preferably as it was before the disturbing situation.

Contrary to the prevailing view of the U.S. populist movement and party of the 1890s as progressive and democratizing, historian Richard Hofstadter showed its ambiguities. He argued that populists “aimed at the remedy of genuine ills, combined with strong moral convictions and with the choice of hatred as a kind of creed” (Hofstadter 1955, 20). Populists imagined the populace as innocent, productive, and victimized by predatory elites. Their views of politics, he claimed, “assumed a delusive simplicity” (Hofstadter 1955, 65). It was a Manichean and conspiratorial outlook that attributed “demonic qualities to their foes” (Hofstadter 1969, 18). Populism was the result of an agrarian crisis, and a transitional stage in the history of agrarian capitalism. Populists aimed to restore a golden age, and its base of support were

those who have attained only a low level of education, whose access to information is poor, and who are so completely shut out from access to the centers of power that they feel themselves completely deprived of self-defense and subjected to unlimited manipulation by those who wield power.

(Hofstadter 1955, 71)

Even though he asserted that the populist movement and party “was not an unambiguous forerunner of modern authoritarian movements” (Hofstadter 1955, 71), the paranoid style in American politics reappeared with McCarthyism, and other forms of cranky
“pseudo-conservatism” (Hofstadter 1965). This opinion was shared by prominent American social scientists like Talcott Parsons (1955, 136), who argued that the “elements of continuity between Western agrarian populism and McCarthyism are not by any means purely fortuitous”.

Gino Germani, an Italian-born sociologist who sought refuge from Mussolini’s jails in Argentina only to later lose his academic job under Perón’s government, set the research agenda for the study of Latin American populism, and for the comparison between fascism and populism. Like Hofstadter, he viewed populism as a transitional stage provoked by the modernization of society. Relying on modernization and mass society theories, he argued that abrupt processes of modernization such as urbanization and industrialization produced masses in a state of anomie that became available for top-down mobilization. The social base of Peronism was the new working class, made up of recent migrants that were not socialized into working-class culture, and therefore they could be mobilized from the top by a charismatic leader.

The political incorporation of the popular masses started under totalitarianism. It gave workers an experience of political and social participation in their personal lives, annulling at the same time political organizations and the basic rights that are the pillars for any genuine democracy.

Hofstadter and Germani rightly showed the importance of analyzing populism as simultaneously inclusionary and autocratic. Populists challenged exclusions, and politicized humiliations, resentments, and fears. Yet they reduced the complexity of democratic politics to a struggle between two antagonistic camps. The populist leader was portrayed as the embodiment of the will of the homogeneous people, and even as its savior and redeemer, transforming politics into religious-like struggles. Yet for all their merits these pioneer studies reduced class and interest-based politics to the alleged irrationality of the masses, especially of poor rural dwellers and of recent migrants. Scholars showed that mass society theory wrongly viewed populist followers as irrational and populism as a transitional stage in the modernization of society. “Since the late 50s historians and other scholars have persuasively demolished both the portrait of the initial Populists as irrational bigots and the idea that those who supported Populism were linked demographically to McCarthy’s followers” (Kazin 1995, 192). Historian Charles Postel (2016, 119) showed that U.S. populists were not backward looking, but were modern and defended their interests in a movement that “resembled a type of reformist and evolutionary social democracy”. Argentinean workers’ support for Perón was rational because as Secretary of Labor he addressed workers’ demands for social security, labors legislation, and higher wages (Miguel and Portantiero 1971).

Three approaches replaced mass society and historicist theories of populism that linked it to the early phases of modernization: discursive, political, and ideational theories.

**Ernesto Laclau’s discourse theory**

As Enrique Peruzzotti analyzes in detail in Chapter 2, instead of focusing on the content of populist ideologies or on its class base, Ernesto Laclau developed a formal theory of populism and its logic of articulation. Populism is a political practice that creates popular political identities. In *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*, he defined populism as a discourse that articulates popular democratic interpellations as antagonistic to the dominant ideology.
Populist discourse polarizes the social field into two antagonistic and irreconcilable poles: the people vs. the power block. The types of populist ruptures, according to Laclau (1977), are not theoretically predetermined, and could lead to fascism, socialism, or to Perón’s Bonapartism.

In his book *On Populist Reason* Laclau contrasted everyday, mundane, and administrative politics with those exceptional moments of a populist rupture understood as the political. He argued that the division of society into two antagonistic camps was required to put an end to exclusionary institutional systems and to forge an alternative order (Laclau 2005a, 122). He contrasted the logic of difference and the logic of equivalence. The first presupposes that “any legitimate demand can be satisfied in a non-antagonistic, administrative way” (Laclau 2005a, 36). There are demands that could not be resolved individually and aggregate themselves, forming an equivalential chain. Under the logic of equivalence “all the demands in spite of their differential character, tend to aggregate themselves”, becoming “fighting demands” that cannot be resolved by the institutional system (Laclau 2005a, 37). The social space splits into two camps: power and the underdog. The logic of populist articulation is anti-institutional; it is based on the construction of an enemy, and in an equivalential logic that could lead to the rupture of the system.

“Laclau’s project is a defense of populism” (Beasley-Murray 2010, 41). He failed because he relied on Carl Schmitt’s view of politics as the struggle between friend and enemy. Under these constructs it is difficult to imagine democratic adversaries who have legitimate institutional spaces. Enemies as in Schmitt’s view might need to be manufactured and destroyed.¹ Moreover, as Andrew Arato (2015, 42) argued, populism might involve the extraction of the mythical people – as constructed and imagined by the leader or the theorist of populism – from the empirically existing people.

Peruzzotti writes in Chapter 2: “Laclau turns the debate on populism upside down. Whereas populism appears as a normatively desirable outcome in politics, representative democracy is presented in terms of depoliticizing institutional machinery that seeks to neutralize the creative power of the political”. Laclau sustained that with the global rise of neoliberalism understood as a rational and scientific mode of governance, public debate on the political economy was closed and replaced by the imposition of the criteria of experts. When all parties accepted neoliberalism and the rule of technocrats, citizens could not choose between alternatives. Politics was reduced to an administrative enterprise (Stavrakakis 2014, 506). Populism, Laclau argued, entails the renaissance of politics. It is a revolt against technocratic reasoning, the surrendering of national sovereignty to supranational institutions, and of the popular will to neoliberal political elites. According to Iñigo Errejón and Chantal Mouffe (2015), the task of the left is to construct popular democratic subjects. Otherwise rightwing populist would give expression to popular grievances by politicizing fears to migration and multiculturalism.

Ernesto Laclau did not only favor populist ruptures in his scholarship; he was also an advisor of presidents Nestor and Cristina Kichner in Argentina (Finchelstein 2017, 211–216). He decried the lack of a populist rupture in his country of origin where a stronger civil society and democratic institutions resisted the attempts of the Kichners to follow the Chávez model of populist Bolivarian transformation. His theory, as Pedro Zúquete shows in Chapter 27 in this volume, was disseminated through the Complutense University Cluster of populism in Madrid, the Thessaloniki Cluster of Populism in Greece, and through the publication Página 12 in Buenos Aires. The leaders of Podemos used Laclau’s theory, and their experiences as advisors to the Bolivarian nations of Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador, to successfully challenge Spain’s two–party system (de la Torre 2017c, 1282–1283).
Whereas Laclau and his followers are right in arguing that populism politicized neoliberal administrative orders, populist Schmittan views of the political, as Peruzzotti shows in this volume, are dangerous because they are anti-pluralist, and in the end antidemocratic. Populism attacks the institutions that are “an indispensable bulwark against political despotism” (Wolin 2006, 251). Constitutionalism, the separation of powers, freedom of speech, assembly, and the press are necessary to the politics of participatory democracy, to strengthen the public sphere, and to allow independent social movements to push for their democratizing demands. Populists in power, even those that promised more democracy, targeted precisely the constitutional framework of democracy. Their systematic attacks to civil rights and liberties, and their attempts to control and coopt civil society and the public sphere, pushed democracy to authoritarianism.

**Political theories**

Robert R. Barr argues in Chapter 3 that political theorists sustain that the domain of populism is politics because it is “a specific way of competing for and exercising political power” (Weyland 2001, 11). As Kenneth M. Roberts writes in Chapter 9, populist movements and the leaders they follow are, then, properly located in the domain of political representation, as they purport to offer a corrective to failed or flawed forms of representation – in particular, those forms that are institutionalized in party organizations and the political elites who control them.

Political theorists studied populism as a political style or as a political strategy. Benjamin Moffitt (2016b: 43–45) defined populism as a political style “that features and appeal to the people vs. the elite”, that uses what elites consider bad manners such as accent, body language, bad taste, and the performance of what are perceived as crisis, breakdown, or threat. These performances are related to distrust in the complexities of modern governance. Populists offer swift action rather than negotiation and deliberation (Moffitt 2016a: 56).

Definitions of populism as a political style focused on the mobilization and expressive aspects of populism, including its discourses and performances. According to Weyland (2001, 12), “defining populism as political style therefore casts too wide a net and hinders the clear delimitation of cases”. With the goal of providing a minimum definition that would eliminate conceptual disagreement and would advance the accumulation of knowledge, Weyland (2001, 14) defined populism “as a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers”. Rather than hewing to any particular political ideology, or to the right and left distinctions, populist leaders are pragmatic and opportunistic in their quest to conquer and retain power.

As Barr puts it in Chapter 3, “the political approach stands apart not only because of the content of the definition – i.e., the strategic element – but also its underlying concern for agency and behavior”. Political theories of populism correctly emphasized the importance of political leaders, many of them charismatic. Without charismatic leaders, as Kirk Hawkins (2010, 43) recognized, populist movements “may prove ineffective and wither away”. These theories were useful to develop typologies of Latin American populism, and to explore how it was adapted to different developmental strategies: nationalist and state-led import substitution industrialization in the 1940s, neoliberalism in the 1990s, and the return of state-led development and nationalism in the first decades of the twenty-first century.
Studies of populism as a political strategy showed that leaders and followers were not always linked by formal institutions, but tended to exaggerate the supposedly unmediated relationship between leaders and followers. As will be shown in this chapter, populist parties in Latin America, for example, were organized through formal bureaucratic party networks, and clientelist informal networks that distributed resources, information, and jobs to the poor. Like other political parties, populists exchanged services for votes. But in addition, populist exchanges went together with a discourse that portrayed common people as the essence of the nation creating political and cultural identities.

Political theories of populism use liberal notions of democracy, and therefore can show the conditions under which populism could lead to inclusion or to authoritarianism. When populism first emerged it included previously excluded citizens to the political community. Under Juan Domingo Perón, for example, voter turnout dramatically surged from 18 percent of the population in 1946 to 50 percent in 1955 (Schamis 2013, 155). His administration expanded the franchise by giving women the right to vote in 1951. Perón’s government redistributed wealth and increased the share of wages in the national Gross Domestic Product from 37 percent in 1946 to 47 percent in 1955. Populist inclusion under Perón did not foster or strengthen democracy. As with other populists, he concentrated power in the hands of the presidency, attacked the media, aimed to control civil society, and provoked the radical sectors of the opposition to topple him with a coup d’état.

Political theories have normative and theoretical tools to analyze under what conditions populism could lead to autocracy (Levistky and Loxton in this volume; Weyland in this volume). Yet institutionalist views of democracy are not always the best to take into account populist critiques to real existing democracies. Populists promise to correct the deficits of participation and representation of liberal democracies. Populists challenged the appropriation of political sovereignty by political and economic elites, the reduction of politics to an administrative enterprise, and the depoliticization of democracy. Populists invoked the transformative power of constituent power over constituted power. Liberals are rightly afraid of the dangers of appeals to the unbounded power of the sovereign people to create new constitutions, and institutions. Yet some tend to idealize the institutions of constituted power. The powerful populist critique to the malfunctions and deficits of democracy needs to be addressed without idealizing the existing institutional system of liberal democracy.

**Populism as a set of ideas**

Kirk A. Hawkins writes in Chapter 4 that ideational approaches like political theories aimed to construct minimal definitions that could be used for empirical analysis. Instead of focusing on the strategies or style of leaders, or on their charisma, they study populism as a set of ideas of “how the world is and should be” (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, 6). Kirk Hawkins (2010, 5) wrote, “populism is a set of fundamental beliefs about the nature of the political world”. Cass Mudde (2004, 543) defined populism as

> an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite”, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people.

Lacking the sophistication of other ideologies like socialism or liberalism, it is a thin-centered ideology and could be combined with other beliefs and ideas of politics. Therefore it could be associated with nativism and neoliberalism in Austria, Belgium, or the Netherlands.
or with anti-neoliberal and anti-racist platforms in Greece with Syriza and Podemos in Spain. The role of the leader is not central to this approach, because as Hawkins argues in Chapter 4 it focused on the ideologies of movements, parties, and even attitudes in a population. However, some ideational scholars like Hawkins differ from Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser and “see the presence of charismatic leadership as instrumental in ensuring the electoral success of populist forces”.

The ideational approach was used to distinguish between inclusionary and exclusionary forms of populism (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012). The former aimed to include the excluded materially, politically, and symbolically, while rightwing variants in Australia, Europe, and the U.S. aimed for the exclusion of Muslims, and nonwhite immigrants. The ideological approach was used to measure empirically populist discourse (Hawkins 2010).

Identiﬁcational deﬁnitions of populism used the term ideology as a catchall concept (Moffitt 2016a, 19). This is problematic because populists have not written down foundational texts, and it is difﬁcult to conceptualize a distinct populist ideology (Moffitt 2016a, 20). By subsuming all cases where a “populist ideology” was used as cases of populism, “they participated in what Giovanni Sartori has termed conceptual stretching”, overextending coverage and losing the connotative precision of the concept (Jansen 2015, 165). George W. Bush, for example, scores a high populist grade in Hawkins’s (2010) measurements of populist discourse when he was clearly talking about an external enemy quite different from Chávez’s enemies. Ideational theories naively assume that populism is a “stable property of political actors, and that we can therefore classify some politicians and parties as populist and others as non-populist” (Bonikowski 2016, 13). Hence this theory cannot account for the dynamic nature of populism, and for the fact that actors use populist discourses selectively depending on the audience and context.

In their effort to not make normative assumptions about the relationship between populism and democracy, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser relied on empiricist arguments that see populism as both a corrective and threat to democracy. As Kirk Hawkins explains in Chapter 4, “it could be a corrective, by bringing issues and voters into politics, but also a threat to liberal institutions if it won control of government”. However, it is a stretch of the imagination to see the likes of Wilders, LePen, or Trump as correctives to democracy. Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser’s lack of a normative theory of democracy does not allow them to analyze the internal logic of populism. The populist view of politics as struggles between antagonistic enemies, while effective in rupturing existing institutional arrangements, often leads to anti-pluralist practices and policies that under conditions of weak institutions and fragile civil societies could lead to the slow death of democracy and its replacement with authoritarianism. The root of populism, Nadia Urbinati argues in Chapter 5, is not associated with giving back power to the whole people or to Rousseau’s general will, but rather to one of its parts: the masses that are outside the establishment. As Arato and Cohen write in Chapter 6, populism entails a pars pro toto logic that constructs a part of the population as the authentic people that stands for the sovereign whole.

What is populism?

I understand populism as political discourses and strategies that aim to rupture institutional systems by polarizing society into two antagonistic camps. I differentiate social movements that use a populist rhetoric of the people against the establishment from populism. Without the presence of a leader, as Nadia Urbinati (2014, 129) wrote, “a popular movement that uses a populist rhetoric (i.e., polarization and anti-representative discourse) is not yet populism”.
Populist leaders claim that they represent and even embody the interests, will, and aspirations of a homogeneous people. All of those who challenge their claim to be the incarnation of the people are branded as enemies of the people, the leader, and the nation. Populists do not face political adversaries; they confront enemies. As Perón put it, when political adversaries become “enemies of the nation”, they are no longer “gentlemen that one should fight fairly but snakes that one can kill in any way” (Finchelstein 2014a, 86).

Rightwing and leftwing variants of populism are not the same. As will be shown later, ethnic and religious constructs of the unitary people are a danger to democracy, and the project of the Enlightenment. Leftwing variants at least promise more and better democracies, and do not use racism and xenophobia to appeal to their constituencies. Populist parties seeking power need to be distinguished from populists in power (de la Torre 1992: 395–396). Whereas populists challenged the system or the establishment, promising to give power to the people, once in power they show their true anti-pluralist and antidemocratic colors. Once in office populists concentrate power in the hands of the executive, disregard the division of power and the rule of law, and attack dissident voices in the public sphere and civil society. When populists assumed power in conditions of crises of political representation and with weak democratic institutions, they displaced democracy toward authoritarianism. In more institutionalized political systems they disfigured democracy by reducing its complexity to a Manichaean struggle between the leader as the embodiment of the people, and its enemies (Urbinati 2014).

2. Challenging inequalities and politicizing differences

Kenneth M. Roberts writes in Chapter 9 that populist movements and leaders “invariably claim to offer more authentic forms of political representation for previously excluded or neglected constituencies”, and that in doing so they disrupt conventional political alignments. In some regions of the world populism arose against neoliberal exclusions, while in others they politicized cultural anxieties against cosmopolitanism, multiculturalism, and migration. Populists challenge conventional right and left distinctions. The French National Front, while attacking multiculturalism, promised a stronger role of the state in the economy, and national sovereignty against globalization. Podemos and La France Insoumise, Damiani writes, refuse to be identified in the left–right distinction, arguing that they represent the interests of the people against “the caste”. When challenging the power of elites, most yet not all populists show their inclusionary face. Many politicize issues, like the political economy, that were previously considered to be a technical problem better left in the hands of experts. Most defy the appropriation of the will of the people by unresponsive elites, question the loss of national sovereignty to supranational institutions, and protest against increasing inequalities.

This section discusses how different understandings of the people lead to different forms of inclusion and exclusion. The people is a not a primary datum; it is a discursive construct, and a claim made in struggles between politicians, activists, and intellectuals. As will be shown, it could be constructed with religious or secular criteria, with ethnic or political notions, and as a plurality of actors or as the people-as-one.

Constructing the people: religious, ethnic, or political

Constructs of the people as a community of believers, even when these communities are imagined as egalitarian, inherently exclude nonbelievers. Vedi R. Hadiz in Chapter 11 shows how the ummah of Islamic populism is made up of internally diverse social interests,
homogenized as those pious members of the community who possess virtue through juxtaposition against immoral elites and their foreign non-Islamic allies. Dani Filc writes in Chapter 25 that the three Israeli populist parties, the ultra-orthodox Mizrahi party “Shas”, Israel Our Home, and the Likud party, are inclusionary to the community of believers while excluding nonbelievers. Similarly Arato and Cohen in Chapter 6 show how in Western Europe and the United States, Christianity, Judeo Christianity, or Christian-Secularism is politicized as an identity against Islam which is viewed as “an insidious other who is undermining the people’s homogeneity and corrupting their traditions with alien values, beliefs, and forms of life”.

Some populist movements in Europe and the U.S. use ethnicity to exclude minority populations. The people as constructed by Donald Trump, for example, faces ethnic and cultural enemies such as Muslims, Mexicans, or militant black activists. The image of the Mexican, as most Latinos in the U.S. are nowadays called, is built on long nationalist stereotypes that marked them as lazy, dangerous, and as the ultimate outsiders to the U.S. nation. Regardless of whether Mexicans and other Latino populations have lived for long periods in the U.S., they are regarded as recent and passing immigrants, and as freeloaders who drain taxpayers. The notion of the Muslim terrorist is not only a xenophobic reaction to 9/11. It is also built on the legacies of the image of the U.S. as a Christian nation. Differently from Latinos and Muslims who could be attacked with blatantly racist words, Trump like the Tea Party and other conservatives used code words of law and order to mark the unruly black militant as a criminal and as the opposite of the law-abiding and taxpaying citizen.

Rightwing populism in the U.S. politicized white fears and anxieties around the civil rights movement. Joseph Lowndes shows in Chapter 12 how “populist discourse figured the enemies of the people as government officials above and people of color below”. The Tea Party and Trumpism, for example, contrasted a virtuous white, hardworking, taxpaying, and law-abiding middle class against black and other dependents of color below, and controlling elites above. Lowndes sustains that Obama represented both poles. In Chapter 26 Ritchie Savage illustrates how the category of the enemy understood as the Mexican, Muslim, or the illegal “becomes an umbrella term that provides a kind of explanation on the level of the ‘imaginary’ for why society is not functioning properly”.

Similarly rightwing European populists defend the ordinary people against those below such as immigrants, refugees, and former colonial subjects, and the privileged New Class above. According to Alain de Benoist, the intellectual leader of the Nouvelle Droite, the contradiction is between the New Class made up of politicians, businessmen, and media representatives, and the people. De Benoist writes that populism reassembles “the people in all its forms, as demos (the political people), ethnos (the historical and cultural people) and as plebs, meanings the popular classes under domination” (quoted by Pedro Zúquete in Chapter 27).

Differently from the exclusionary and racist view of the people as white, Evo Morales and his political party the MAS, as Raúl L. Madrid shows in Chapter 10, successfully used inclusive ethnopopulist appeals. Given the fluidity of race and ethnic relations in Bolivia, they were able to create an inclusionary ethnic party grounded in indigenous social movements that appealed to different indigenous groups while also incorporating mestizo organizations and candidates. Morales portrayed indigenous people as the essence of the nation. It was an inclusive category that signified a claim to postcolonial justice, and for a broader political project of nationalism, self-determination, and democratization (Canessa 2006). Nic Cheeseman in Chapter 23 shows that a number of ethnopopulist parties in Africa seek to combine “the ethnic appeal of party leaders within their own communities, especially in rural areas, in
addition to a broader populist message that is usually most effective in cosmopolitan urban constituencies”.

Distinct legacies of colonialism partially explain different uses of ethnicity to construct the people. “Colonialism established two differentiated worlds, the metropolitan polity for which ideas such as the sovereign people, democratic citizenship and rights were relevant” (Filc 2015, 269), and their external peripheries made up of savages, the natives, and the Orientals. Former colonial powers in Europe or imperialist nations with a white national identity like the U.S. use notions of white superiority to stigmatize nonwhite immigrants, many of them arriving from their former colonies as racially inferior, and as bearers of cultures that are antagonistic to Western culture. Exclusionary populists use nativism and xenophobia to appeal to a common past from which immigrants and nonwhites do not belong. In Ritchie Savage’s words, they construct a mythical founding moment of the past as a “moment of illusion of a once existing unified society that would otherwise be perfect if not for the disruption or disorder represented by the enemy”.

Raúl L. Madrid in Chapter 10 argues that different levels of migration, and especially different views or race and ethnicity, explain why ethnopolitism is exclusionary in Europe and the U.S., and inclusionary in Latin America. He sustains that “high levels of mestizaje have blurred ethnic boundaries in Latin America and reduced ethnic polarization”. Inclusionary ethnic appeals work in postcolonial contexts where the natives or the indigenous that are also the poor are the victims of discrimination as well as of exclusion. In Bolivia and other postcolonial nations the excluded are the core of the people and the nation, while “the oligarchy, imperialism, and colonialism are the absolute Other” (Filc 2015, 271). Yet, as Marcus Mietzner shows in Chapter 24, exclusionary constructs of ethnicity are also used in India. Narendra Modi rose through the ranks of Hindu nationalist organizations with an anti-Muslim and antiestablishment agenda. He benefited from politicizing anti-Muslim feelings, and nationalist issues that aim to restore “India’s old grandeur”. The legacies of colonialism do not fully explain different ethnic constructions of the people in Europe. Syriza and Podemos, for instance, are consciously anti-racist and refused to use ethnic criteria to stigmatize immigrants and nonwhites. Yet not all left populists defend immigrant rights. Ángel Rivero writes in Chapter 18, “Jean-Luc Mélenchon, presidential candidate in the French elections of 2017 and leader of the left populist party-movement La France Insoumise, is a strong defender of restrictions on immigration and opposes the arrival of refugees in France”.

An alternative conceptualization of the people is primarily political and socioeconomic. Leftwing populists in Latin America and Southern Europe constructed the category of the people as the majorities of their nations that were excluded by neoliberal policies imposed by supranational organizations like the IMF or the Troika. Podemos, for example, used an antagonistic discourse that aimed to rupture Spain’s institutional system. They constructed an enemy, branded as “the caste”, that dominated political, economic, social, and cultural life since the pacted transition to democracy in the mid-1970s. “The caste” is in antagonistic relations with the people, understood as the disenfranchised victims of neoliberalism (Errejón and Mouffe 2015). Similarly, Alexis Tsipiras, the leader of Syriza, constructed the antagonism between the people and the neoliberal establishment in political and socioeconomic terms (Katsambekis 2016, 6). Mélenchon also refuses left and right distinctions, claiming that when he gets to power his party will not follow class-based politics, but politics for the people (El País, 11 November 2017, p. 4).

Hugo Chávez framed the political arena so that he did not face political rivals but instead an oligarchy that he defined as the political enemy of the people, “those self-serving elites who work against the homeland” (Zúquete 2008, 105). Chávez’s rhetoric politicized relations
of inequality between different classes and ethnic groups. He reclaimed Venezuela’s indigenous and black heritages that were downplayed by the elites (Buxton 2009, 161). He tapped into the “deep reservoir of daily humiliation and anger felt by people of the lower classes” (Fernandes 2010, 85).

The plural people vs. the people-as-one

As Jürgen Habermas (1996, 469) pointed out, “the people’ does not comprise a subject with a will and consciousness. It only appears in the plural, and as a people, it is capable of neither decision nor action as a whole”. Following these constructs liberals and social democrats imagine the people as a plurality of actors with different views and proposals. By constructing the people as plural, liberal and social democrats faced democratic rivals that had legitimate institutional and normative spaces.

Differently from liberals and social democrats, some populists like Donald Trump or Hugo Chávez claim “that they and only they represent the true people” (Müller 2016, 40). Donald Trump, for example, had a unitary view of the people. In a rally in Florida he said, “The only important thing is the unification of the people – because the other people don’t mean anything” (Müller 2016, 22).

Chávez constructed the “people” as a sacred entity with a single consciousness and a will that could be embodied in his persona built as the redeemer of the people. Chávez boasted, “This is not about Hugo Chávez; this is about a ‘people.’ I represent, plainly, the voice and the heart of millions” (Zúquete 2008, 100). In another occasion Chávez commanded, “I demand absolute loyalty to me. I am not an individual, I am the people” (Gómez Calcaño and Arenas 2013, 20).

Even though Chávez’s populist political and socioeconomic construction of the people was inclusionary, his view of the people-as-one was anti-pluralist, and in the end antidemocratic because he attempted to become its only voice. Differently from autocratic constructs of the people as one, leftwing populist parties like Syriza, Podemos, and Morales’s MAS had plural views of the people. Syriza appealed to a “plural people (a ‘precarious people’ consisting of several different social groups) and expressed an effort to empower the marginalized and excluded” (Katsambekis 2016, 6). Podemos had a pluralistic, contingent, and non-essentialist view of the people constructed as the downtrodden, those at the bottom of society against the oligarchy (Errejón and Mouffe 2015, 109). Similarly, the MAS had a plural view of the people. Yet at times, Morales attempted to be the only voice of the people. When indigenous people from the lowlands challenged his policies of mineral extraction, they were dismissed as having been manipulated by foreign NGOs and not as authentically indigenous. Morales’ regime attempted to construct an indigenous identity centered around loyalty to his government, and which excluded and delegitimized all those who opposed him. But because of the power of social movements in whose name he argues he is ruling, Morales had not been allowed to impose his vision of the people-as-one. In contemporary Bolivia, according to anthropologist Nancy Postero (2016, 422), there is an “ongoing struggle to define who counts as el pueblo boliviano, and what that means for Bolivian democracy”.

Similar tensions between the populist leaders attempt to be the only voice of the people, and the resistance of their constituencies to become embodied in the voice of the leader occurs in Syriza and Podemos. Their constituencies have not succumbed to their leaders’ claim to be the only voice of the people.

When ethnic or religious views of the people are combined with constructs of the people as one, populism becomes exclusionary and antidemocratic. Under these conditions populism
could be a threat to the basic values of modernity such as a plural, critical, and inclusive civil society. Political and socioeconomic constructions of the people could lead to inclusionary policies. Yet when the people is viewed as one, as Chávez did, his populism was inclusionary and antidemocratic because he assumed that the part of the people that he embodied was the only authentic people. Pluralist views of the socioeconomic and political people could be inclusionary and lead to more democracy. Yet as the cases of Morales and Tsipiras illustrate, these leaders tried to be the only voice of the people.

3. Populist links: charisma, organizations, and the mass media

Populist leaders and followers are linked and mobilized through charisma, populist organizations, and the mass media. The study of each of these linkages allows seeing populism from different angles. Charisma focuses on the words and performances of leaders, and on how followers construct a leader into an extraordinary figure. Instead of analyzing the discourses and performances of leaders, when focusing on populist organizations the concrete mechanisms that are used to mobilize followers need to be explained. Finally, scholars disagree on whether the media is the main mechanism used by populists to get to power and to govern, on the meanings of the mediatization of politics, and on whether television and Twitter led to the replacement of rational arguments with emotions.

Charisma

Paula Diehl writes in Chapter 8 that to remain cohesive populist movements require a charismatic leader. In Chapter 13 Carlo Ruzza sustains that rightwing populist parties in Europe relied on charisma. Danielle Resnick explains in Chapter 17 that Michael Sata viewed himself as the people’s liberator, proclaiming: “Zambia needs a redeemer, Zambians wants Moses to redeem them, and I am the redeemer of Zambia!” The concept of charisma, as Felipe Burbano de Lara elaborates in Chapter 28, has been used to analyze Latin American populism since Gino Germani wrote his seminal essays on Peronism in the 1950s. Populist leaders emerged in moments of distress that realigned socioeconomic and political relations. Followers transformed charismatic leaders into moral archetypes, exemplary figures that ought to be followed. Charismatic leaders were assimilated to religious and nationalist myths.

Not all charismatic leaders used populist strategies. José Figueres, who was president of Costa Rica on three occasions in 1948–1949, 1953–1958, and 1970–1974, Luis Roniger explains in Chapter 29, “had no wish to encourage a personalist, caudillo-like style of politics”. He created autonomous institutions to carry his program and respected autonomous institutions and electoral procedures. Differently from Figueres, the persona of Hugo Chávez integrated the myths of Simón Bolívar the liberator and of Jesus Christ the Messiah. He was erected into the carrier of Bolívar’s project of national and continental liberation. To celebrate the tenth anniversary of his presidency, Chávez visited the tomb of Bolívar and asserted: “Ten years ago, Bolivar – embodied in the will of the people – came back to life” (Lindholm and Zúquete 2010, 24).

His followers elevated Chávez into a saint-like figure with the power to heal. In 1999 an elderly woman grabbed him by the arm to beg him, “Chávez, help me, my son has paralysis”. A crying young man stopped him outside the door of Caracas Cathedral and told him: “Chávez, help me, I have two sons that are dying of hunger and I do not want to become a delinquent, save me from this inferno” (as quoted in Torres 2009, 229). Chávez compared his leadership with that of Jesus Christ. In 1999, he asserted: “true love for other human beings is
measured by whether you can die for others; and here we are ready to die for others” (Torres 2009, 230). His prophetic words of following Jesus’ example of giving his life to liberate his people were dramatically manifested when Chávez compared his agony with cancer with the passion of Christ. During a religious service broadcasted by national television during Holy Week in 2012, he prayed out loud:

Give me life … Christ give me your crown of thorns. Give it to me that I bleed. Give me your cross … Give me life because I still need to do things for this people and motherland. Do not take me. Give me your cross, your thorns, your blood. I will carry them, but give me life. Christ my Lord. Amen.

(http://runrun.es/runrunes/40538/la-nueva-religiosidad-de-chavez-revela-la-gravedad-de-su-cancer.html)

Donald Trump triumphed in two mythical and almost religious arenas of American capitalism: the business world and mass entertainment. Since beginning his campaign Trump referred to his extraordinariness. “We need a truly great leader now. We need a leader that wrote ‘The Art of the Deal’ … We need somebody that can take the brand of the United States and make it great again” (Judis 2016, 72). Billionaire Donald Trump flaunted his wealth; his name became a brand for skyscrapers, hotels, casinos, and other commodities; he owned the Miss Universe franchise; and with the TV show The Apprentice that he hosted for fourteen seasons he became a media celebrity. People in his rallies told ethnographer Arlie Hochschild (2016, 226) they were amazed to “be in the presence of such a man”.

To make America Great Again, he argued what is needed is a successful businessman and popular culture impresario who was not corrupted by the deals of politicians and lobbyists. He stirred emotions, and was able to construct politics as a wrestling match between good incarnated in his persona and the crooked establishment personified by Hillary Clinton. She was portrayed as the embodiment of all that is wrong with America, therefore, and without a proper trial Trump and his followers condemned her to prison, chanting in his rallies, “Lock her up!” Many proudly wore T-shirts or carried signs that read “Hillary for Prison”.

Similarly to the Latin American leftwing populists analyzed by Felipe Burbano in Chapter 28 and Luis Roniger in Chapter 29 that confronted traditional political parties and the oligarchy, Trump claimed that “the establishment, the media, the special interest, the lobbyists, the big donors, they are all against me” (Judis 2016, 72). His final campaign TV ads indicted the “failed and corrupt political establishment” for giving up America’s sovereignty to global and greedy elites that brought “destruction to our factories”. With images of the predominantly white crowds that attended his rallies, he concluded, “The only thing that can stop this corrupt machine is you. I am doing this for the people and for the movement”.

Populist organizations

Populist followers are not irrational masses in a state of anomie as earlier theories of populism based on mass society theory assumed. Populist organizations could be grassroots as those created by the Tea Party, The Five Start Movement, and Podemos, or like Chávez’s Bolivarian groups could be formed from the top down. Populist associations are part of civil society. Yet as Andrew Arato and Jean Cohen write in Chapter 6: “populism is in but not of civil society”. It flourishes in civil society but its logic is “antithetical to the underlying principles of civil society and ultimately to democracy itself”. Populist organizations undermine civil society’s open, plural, inclusive, liberal, and democracy-enhancing features.
There is a diversity of populist organizations such as clientelist networks, organizations that deliver social services, and a dense web of associations. In Latin America populist parties used clientelist informal exchange that distribute resources, information, and jobs to the poor in exchange for political support. Studies on political clientelism in Latin America showed that the poor voted instrumentally and strategically for the candidate with the best capacity to deliver goods and services (Menéndez-Carrión 1986). The resilience of Peronism among poor Argentineans, for example, was partially explained by the informal networks of the Peronist Party that in addition to delivering material resources recreated political and cultural identities (Auyero 2001).

Islamic populism, Vedi R. Hadiz writes in Chapter 11, “stepped in the vacuum created by the demise of the Left in circumstances where the onslaught of neoliberalism has meant growing inequalities and precarity”. The Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt established dominance over civil society, establishing an extensive network of charities and health facilities geared to the poor and the impoverished middle classes.

Rightwing populist parties in Europe fostered a sense of community by creating what Carlo Ruzza in Chapter 13 named “populist civil society associations”. These were formed in the name of “an undifferentiated, self-evident, and self-justified category of the people” that faced enemies defined in essentialist terms. Ruzza distinguishes between populist-xenophobic associations and nationalist territorial groups. The former define the people and its enemies with racial categories, the latter with culturally essentialist categories. Examples of xenophobic association are neo-Nazi groups and the associations of the French National Front. The Northern League constructed territorial-related populist associations such as language schools, hunters, drivers, hiker associations, and different Padonian groups for women, boy scouts, and welfare groups.

These populist associations are examples of bonding social capital. They create strong identities, a sense of community, and clear boundaries between them and us. Members of these associations and groups only relate to likeminded individuals, are exclusionary, and disdain pluralism. These organizations and associations, in sum, do not bridge social capital; instead they undermine it.

Tea Party organizations were made up of relatively well-educated, middle-aged, white Americans. Conservatives and libertarians coexisted in these organizations. Skocpol and Williamson (2012, 200) note a “sharp bifurcation between generous, tolerant interaction within the group, and an almost total lack of empathy or sympathy for fellow Americans beyond the group”. The organizations of the Tea Party were insular, and despised pluralism. They dismissed organized African American and Latino groups as threats to the nation, and Democratic Party and liberal organizations were portrayed as unpatriotic. Their insularity was magnified by their reliance on Fox News and its nightmarish representation of the U.S. as a nation where “illegal immigrants, criminals, and badly behaving people of color are overrunning America” (Skocpol and Williamson 2012, 202).

Populist organizations of the Tea Party or the Northern League did not foster the politics of a plural and democratic civil society. Their insularity did not allow them to build links with other organizations, and their notion that they and only they constitute the true people led to the autocratic exclusions of those considered to be the ultimate Other.

Organizations created by Chávez’s government illustrate the tension between the autonomous demands of followers that use the openings of populism to present their own demands, and their subordination to a charismatic leader. In June 2001 President Chávez encouraged the formation of Bolivarian Circles. These were “small groups of seven to fifteen people, they were intended to study the ideology of Bolivarianism, discuss local issues and defend the
Bolivarian Circles had approximately 2.2 million members and had an active role in the massive demonstrations rescuing President Chávez when he was temporarily removed from office in an April 2002 coup d’etat. Bolivarian Circles did constitute forms of participation for poor people, yet they often worked as clientelar networks to transfer resources to neighborhoods where the president had supporters (Hawkins and Hansen 2006).

Communal Councils were conceived as institutions to promote popular power and were seen as the foundation for the future establishment of a socialist direct and pyramidal democracy. Critics and supporters of the Bolivarian Revolution agreed that communal councils faced the same problems as the Bolivarian Circles, namely the persistence of clientelism in the exchange of social services for political support, and a charismatic style of rule that neutralizes or prevents autonomous grassroots inputs (Wilpert 2007, 195–204).

Bolivarian Circles and Communal Councils may have experienced problems of autonomy because they were created from above to promote Chávez’s Bolivarian revolution. Other institutions such as the Urban Land Committees and Technical Water Roundtables, for example, accepted more autonomous grassroots inputs and were more pluralist. The government gave squatter settlements collective titles to land on which precarious self-built dwellings were situated. Through this process, “the community forms an urban land committee to administer its new collective property and to undertake and demand support for material improvement such as water, sewerage and electricity services or road paving” (Raby 2006, 188–189). Similarly, local water committees “arrange the distribution of water between neighboring communities which share the same water mains” (Raby 2006, 189). Nevertheless, Urban Land and Water Committees lacked autonomy from the charismatic leader, as Chávez was the guiding force for these institutions (García Guadilla 2007).

Bolivarian organizations were based on low levels of institutionalization (Hawkins 2008). Chávez set their agendas and strategies, and it was difficult to build identities that differ from the image of the people as constructed by the leader. Populist Bolivarian organizations were based on insularity, as they did not promote solidarity with similar organizations in civil society. They did not value pluralism because they adopted the idea of the people as an undifferentiated and homogeneous whole. Hence the people could only be organized under loyal organizations to Chávez. Yet sometimes, common people used populist organizations, and the rhetorical claim that they are the true nation, to present their own demands. In contexts of profound political polarization like those living in Venezuela under Chávez, populist organizations fostered loyalties, and powerful political identities that partially explained the longevity of chavismo after Chávez’s death.

The mass media

Benjamin Moffitt (2016b, 70) argues that “media processes need to be put at the center of our thinking about contemporary populism”, and further maintains that populism is “the media-political form par excellence at this particular historical conjunction” (Moffitt 2016b, 77). Populism blurs the line between politics and entertainment. It also questions who has the power to deliver information and to control communication.

The media: populism and entertainment

Populists were media innovators that politicized emotions to convey their anti-elite messages. Eva Perón, for example, used the radio to communicate with her followers, transforming
politics into a melodrama (de la Torre 2010, 18). The rise of television further contributed to blurring the lines between politics and entertainment. The media and populism needed each other.

The media must cover the sensational stories provided by contentious, often flamboyant (and in some cases “media darling”) figures while populist leaders must use the media to enhance the effectiveness of their messages and build the widest possible public support. (Mazzoleni 2008, 62)

Populist performative style and the media’s logic are complementary. Populists’ appeal to the people versus the elite “plays into the media’s logic’s dramatization, polarization and prioritisation of conflicts”. The personalization of politics in a leader is “lined with the media’s logic of personalization, stereotypisation and emotionalisation; while its focus on crises plays into the media’s tendency of intensification and simplification” (Moffitt 2016b, 76–77). Olivier Jutel writes in Chapter 16, “Donald Trump’s celebrity status and reality TV rhetoric of ‘winning’ and ‘losing’ corresponds perfectly to these values”. Yet as Silvio Waisbord argues in Chapter 14, “We do not have sufficient evidence to suggest that mediatization offers conditions that favor populism more than other political styles. Contemporary politics as a whole, not just populism, is embedded in the dynamics of mediatization”.

Some scholars argued that television transformed politics based on reason into media-politics based on melodrama. Yoram Peri (2004, 113–114) argued that the logic of television contributed to the personalization of politics in Israel, and gave priority to emotions over rational arguments. “The central place once occupied by party platforms, values and ideologies, and specially the candidate’s political plans, was replaced by the personal characteristics of the political actors”.

Even though television became one of the main venues used by populists to win elections, it was not the only reason behind their rise to power. Some populists like Alberto Fujimori in 1990 in Peru or Abdalá Bucaram in Ecuador in 1996 won despite the opposition of the media (de la Torre 2010: 127–138). In Italy media entrepreneur Silvio Berlusconi and comedian Beppe Grillo used television to communicate with their followers in the 1980s and 90s (Lanzone 2014, 63). In the following decades Grillo criticized television and used the web to communicate with his constituencies. Grillo’s success is explained by his creative use of new media like the web with traditional electoral techniques like mass meetings and personal contacts with citizens. Similarly Podemos used the web and alternative television shows distributed by YouTube, voted for party platforms online, used grassroots organizations like the Podemos circles, and staged mass demonstrations.

The new media was used to organize and mobilize followers. Benjamin Moffit in Chapter 15 shows how Grillo launched a blog in 2005 to call his supporters “to organize offline local meetings through the meetup.com platform. These culminated in large events entitled ‘V-Day’ in 2007 and 2008, and the Five Stars Movement (M5S) was officially launched in 2009”. The M5S “political rhetoric has revolved heavily around messages of cyber-utopianism and the democratic promise of the web”.

Controlling the media

The elections of Silvio Berlusconi and Thaksin Shinawatra showed that ownership of the media could lead populists to power. The former made his fortune in cable television, and is the owner of three of the seven major television stations. The latter had a telecommunication
empire that included cable television, satellites, television stations, and Thailand’s biggest mobile company (Moffitt 2016b, 82). Once in power Berlusconi interfered with the independence of the national broadcaster Rondotelevisione Italiana (RAI), and Thaksin Shinawatra intruded on election coverage, instructing television stations to cut down negative news. “Thaksin pursued a number of defamation cases, and even opinion pollsters were harassed and intimidated” (Moffitt 2016b, 83).

Olivier Jutel shows in Chapter 16 how Fox News dominated conservative politics and created a populist public. He argues that diminution of public political life in neoliberalism led to a combination of “individuation and volatility in the electorate that allows Trump to coalesce individual affective investment into a populist public around himself as an ego-ideal enjoyment”.

Populism has difficult relationships with liberal-progressive conceptions of democratic communication. Silvio Waisbord writes in Chapter 14 that this model is grounded in the existence of the public commons (that includes public, private and mixed, legacy and digital media), that facilitate and promote informed public dialogue characterized by civility, diversity, tolerance, reason, and facts. This model historically entailed the guarantee of constitutional rights and institutional settings to catalyze news and public debate.

Populists as diverse as Donald Trump, Viktor Orbán, Rafael Correa, and Michael Sata embarked on wars against the media. Latin American radical populists were convinced that the media had a great influence on the population’s ideology and collective consciousness (Waisbord 2013, 45). Control and regulation of the media by the state was at the center of the populist struggle for hegemony. Chávez and Correa enacted laws to regulate the content of what the media could publish; the state took away radio and television frequencies from critics. The state became the main communicator in these nations. Their governments used and abused mandatory broadcasts that all media venues were forced to air, and created their own TV shows, Aló Presidente and Enlaces Ciudadanos. Every Sunday Chávez addressed the nation for four to six hours, and Correa talked every Saturday for two to three hours over ten years. They set the informational agenda as they announced major policies in TV shows where they also sang popular tunes, talked about their personal life and dreams, and viciously attacked opponents and journalists. Chávez and Correa became ever-present figures in the daily life of Venezuelans and Ecuadoreans. They were always talking on the radio and on television, billboards with their images and propaganda of their governments adorned cities and highways, and citizens became polarized by deepening divisions between loyal followers and enemies.

Populists are media innovators and use old and new media to establish direct links with their followers, bypassing political parties. The logics of the media and populism are complementary and explain some of the shifts of politics into entertainment, the proliferation of populist media outlets, and the closure of spaces for pluralistic debates.

4. Populism as a regime

After reviewing in detail Narendra Modi’s national populism in India, Thaksin Shinawatra in Thailand, Joko Widowo in Indonesia, and Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, Marcus Mietzner writes in Chapter 24, “in Asia, there has been no case of a populist who improved the quality of democratic participation, civil liberties, and other indicators of democracy’s
health”. Similarly Dani Filc shows in Chapter 25 how in Israel and Turkey populism in semiliberal democracies and in societies characterized by ethno-conflicts led to further exclusions of ethnic and religious minorities. Burbano de Lara, Levitsky and Loxton, and Weyland show how and why radical populism in Latin America, despite its promises to enact more participatory models of democracy, ended in competitive authoritarian regimes.

African populists included the poor and simultaneously were against democratic institutions and pluralism. Danielle Resnick shows in Chapter 17 how Michael Sata in Zambia used the judiciary for his personal political objectives, made use of defamation lawsuits against independent media outlets, controlled NGOs, and transformed government officials and the rank and file of his own party into sycophants who tried to show greater loyalty than their colleagues. Despite the fact that parliamentary systems offer more protections, Jacob Zuma targeted the independent media in South Africa. There was a “flagrant increase of corruption” under his government, and a process of democratic erosion.

Lech Kaczyński in Poland and Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Ángel Rivero writes in Chapter 18, “are enforcing a so-called democratic project where the liberal checks and balances are weakened in favour of a strong government able to fully develop what they call national sovereignty”. Orbán followed the populist playbook by eroding democracy from within.

Post-communist Hungary was considered a success story of democratic consolidation. It featured a stable party system and strong governments; it was the leading country in the region in attracting foreign direct investments (FDI) and eventually became one of the front runners being considered for European Union (EU) membership (Buzogány 2017, 1307)

Orbán’s party Fidesz won the 2010 election, and secured a two-thirds majority in congress. Orbán was elected after eight years of incompetent and corrupt Socialist rule. Once in office he set about a project to transform Hungary into what he described in a 2014 in as speech as “an illiberal new state based on national foundations,” in which the government purposely marginalizes opposition forces by weakening existing state institutions (including the courts) and creating new, largely autonomous governing bodies and packing them with Fidesz loyalists. (Mudde 2016)

His party transformed the civil service law “to enable the party to place loyalists in what should have been nonpartisan bureaucratic positions” (Müller 2016, 44–45). He weakened checks and balances on the executive power, and adopted a majority electoral system by redesigning electoral rules to make it difficult for the fragmented opposition to mount an effective challenge (Batory 2015). His administration created a regulatory body to control the content of what the media could publish, and “Fidesz loyalists directly or indirectly acquired the ownership of important media outlets, and government appointees dominated the management of public service broadcasters, leaving little space for unbiased political discourse” (Batory 2015, 13). Orbán confronted and discredited NGOs, accusing them of being controlled by foreign powers and serving external interests (Müller 2016, 48). His administration displaced democracy to “the grey zone between liberal democracy and fully blown authoritarianism” (Batory 2015, 18).

What makes populism in office and as a regime autocratic? Why, as Nadia Urbinati maintains in Chapter 5, despite its appeal to the people, is populism’s membership in the
democratic family problematic? Why does populism flourish in civil society and simultaneously, as Arato and Cohen argue in Chapter 6, attempts against its values? How does populism twist representation, and under what conditions does populist representation become, as Paula Diehl writes in Chapter 8, “a state of pure authorization without any accountability”? Why is the populist answer to the juridified and depoliticized understanding of constitutionalism, as Paul Blokker writes in Chapter 7, tendentially authoritarian and even despotic? Under what conditions does populism lead to the disfigurement of democracy (Urbinati 2014), or to its transformation into authoritarianism?

**Fascism and populism**

Europeans first analyzed the rebirth of populism in the 1980s and 90s as the reappearance of fascism. Yet this view was abandoned because the populist radical right is nominally democratic: they use elections to get to power and based their legitimacy in the notion of the sovereignty of the people, whereas fascists opposed these fundamental principles (Mudde 2007, 31). Nonetheless, fascists and European rightwing populists shared views of the people as one.

Latin American scholars analyzed the similarities and differences between populism and fascism (Germani 1978; Laclau 1977; Finchelstein 2014a, 2017). The comparison between these authoritarian regimes made sense because Juan Perón, like other Latin American populists of the 1930 and 1940s such as José María Velasco Ibarra from Ecuador, Jorge Eliecer Gaitán of Colombia, and the Peruvian leader Victor Raúl Haya de la Torre, lived in Europe, visited fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, and were influenced by fascism.

Germani (1978, 229) argued that whereas the downwardly mobile middle classes supported fascism, the social bases of Peronism were the new working class made up of recent rural migrants. Unlike the Italian middle classes, which acted irrationally, attaining only “psychological, ersatz satisfactions (prestige, respect, law and order)” (Germani 1978, 235), Peronism gave workers material and symbolic rewards. For Laclau (1977, 111), fascism was “one of the possible ways of articulating the popular democratic interpellations into political discourse”.

Federico Finchelstein in Chapter 20 writes that populism first emerged as a new and differentiated ism, after the defeat of fascism. “Modern populism arose from the defeat of fascism, as a novel post-fascist attempt to bring back the fascist experience to the democratic path, creating in turn an authoritarian form of democracy” (Finchelstein 2014b, 472).

Fascism and populism aimed to integrate and mobilize the masses, and shared an obsession for staging popular participation. Despite similarities, they differed on how they mobilized and integrated the masses. Fascists abolished elections. Under fascism, as Carl Schmitt argued,

> genuine democracy was based on identity between the governors and governed – a principle from which followed that the popular will could be concentrated in one individual, making a dictatorship like Mussolini’s a much more credible expression of democracy than liberal parliamentarism.

*(Müller 2016, 116)*

Populist leaders did not establish a one-party rule, preserving some limited spaces of pluralism and contestation. They did not fully colonize the public sphere and civil society. Their legitimacy was grounded in winning elections that in theory could be lost (Peruzzotti 2013). Populist leaders, as Federico Finchelstein (2017, 230) shows, had a dual source of
legitimation: winning democratic elections, and “a firm belief in the leader as a transcendental charismatic figure whose legitimacy goes beyond electoral representation”.

Michael Mann (2004, 364) argued that, “the main attraction of fascism was the intensity of its message”. Fascists “ claimed a higher moral purpose, transcendent of class conflict, capable of ‘resacralizing’ the nation . . . They identified a ‘civilizational crisis’ . . . They denounced their enemies in moralistic and highly emotional terms” (Mann 2004, 79). Even though populists also used a highly charged emotional language, and had the mission to liberate their nations, they were more eclectic and less ideologically dogmatic. Instead of appealing to transcendental notions like the nation, their goal of winning elections was more secular and pragmatic.

Like fascists, populists constructed political rivals as enemies, but differently from fascists did not actualize the physical elimination of the permanent enemy. Populists did not use mass terror and disappearances to create a homogenous and uncorrupted national community. Even though the enemies of the populist leaders were attacked, beaten, and exiled, populists did not create paramilitary organizations. Paramilitarism and violence, as Michael Mann and Federico Finchelstein argued, were fundamental elements of fascism. Differently from fascists that staged extraordinary politics by waging war against external and internal enemies, populists dramatized their extraordinariness by embarking on elections. These were not ordinary competitions between leaders and platforms. Elections were constructed as gargantuan battles between populist redemption, and the past of oppression.

**Populism: between elections and the semi-embodiment of power in a leader**

To make sense of the importance of elections as the foundational moment of the representative populist contract, and to understand the difference between how populists filled the open space of democracy and how fascists obliterated it, I build on Claude Lefort’s political-symbolic theory of democracy. In *The King’s Two Bodies* Kantorowicz argued that the king’s body was mortal and time bound, as well as immortal and eternal. The revolutions of the eighteenth century decapitated the immortal body of the king. The space occupied by the religious-political body of the king was opened and “power appears as an empty place and those who exercise it as merely mortals who occupy it only temporarily or who could install themselves in it only by force or cunning” (Lefort 1986, 303).

The revolutions of the eighteenth century also generated “from the outset the principle that would threaten the emptiness of that space: popular sovereignty in the sense of a subject incarnated in a group, however extensive, a stratum however poor, and an institution or a person, however popular” (Arato 2012, 23). Totalitarianism, thus, was

> an attempt to reincarnate society in the figure of a leader or a party which would annul the social division and would realize the fantasy of people-as-one, in which there is no legitimate opposition, where all factual opposition is conceived of as coming from the outside, the enemy.

*(Flyn 2013, 31)*

Symbolically, this is done by abandoning the democratic imagination of the people as “heterogeneous, multiple, and in conflict” and living in a society where power does not belong to any individual (Lefort 1986, 297). Under totalitarianism, the divide is between the
people – imagined as having one identity and one will – and its external enemies, which need to be eliminated in order to maintain the healthy body of the people.

Lefort conceived of democracy and totalitarianism as opposites. He did not analyze the gradations between the extremes of total emptiness and embodiment (Laclau 2005b, 166), nor did he differentiate between totalitarian projects and regimes (Arato 2012, 28). The populist imaginary lies between democracy and totalitarianism. Unlike totalitarianism, power under populism was not embodied permanently in the proletariat, the nation, the party, or the Egocrat. Power in populism is semi-embodied because populists claim legitimacy through winning elections that they could conceivably lose and thus be bound by electoral results (Cheresky 2015). Populism thus differed from fascism because in populism the open space of democracy was filled but was not entirely obliterated (Arato 2015, 37–38).

How do populists erode and disfigure democracy?

When populists got to power their anti-pluralist views of the people, and their construction of politics as antagonistic confrontations between the people and the power block, had negative consequences for democracy. Once in office they controlled all the institutions of the state, seized and regulated the media, repressed independent organizations of civil society, and created loyal social movements from the top down. In poorly institutionalized presidentialist systems populists displaced democracy toward competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky and Loxton 2013; Weyland 2013). Even though in more institutionalized systems democracy did not die slowly, populists often damaged and disfigured its institutions and the inclusive and tolerant public sphere. In their effort to stop populist parties, mainstream European parties often adopt some of their xenophobic and nationalist rhetoric and proposals.

Populists, as Weyland argues in Chapter 21, undermine democracy in two ways. The first is that their closure of all democratic spaces to the opposition leads the more radical and undemocratic opponent to plot military coups. The first wave of populism in Latin America was characterized by the cycle populist government-coup d’etat. Similarly Thaksin Shinawatra was toppled by a military coup in 2006, and his sister Yingluck was toppled with another coup in 2014. Yet military interventions are costly and risky because the international community accepts only elections as the legitimate means of regime change. Nowadays and with few exceptions populism does not end with a coup; rather, Weyland argues, populists undermine democracy from within.

Steven Levitsky and James Loxton show in Chapter 22 how populists pushed weak presidentialist democracies in Latin America into competitive authoritarianism for three reasons: (1) Populists were outsiders with no experience in the give and take of parliamentary politics; (2) they were elected with the mandate to refound existing political institutions, meaning the institutional framework of liberal democracy; and (3) they confronted congress, the judiciary, and other institutions controlled by parties. In order to win elections populists skewed the electoral playing field. As incumbents, they had extraordinary advantages such as using the state media, selectively silencing the privately owned media, harassing the opposition, controlling electoral tribunal boards and all instances of appeal, and using public funds to influence the election. When these presidents won elections, the voting moments were clean, but the electoral processes blatantly favored incumbents.

Once in power presidents Chávez, Morales, and Correa turned to discriminatory legalism, understood as the use of formal legal authority in discretionary ways (Weyland 2013, 23). In order to use laws discretionarily, populist presidents packed the courts and institutions of accountability with loyal followers. These presidents followed the same script: control and
regulation of the media, creating state-led media emporiums in nations without a tradition of a public media, and in the hands of governments that did not differentiate their interests from those of the state, put these outlets to the service of populist administrations. Control and regulation of NGOs meant creating parallel social movements from the top or favoring loyal movements. Laws were used discretionally to arrest and harass leading figures of the opposition in the Bolivarian nations.

Parliamentary systems and stronger domestic and supranational institutions constrain what populists can do in power. Syriza won the 2015 election with thirty-four percent of the vote by “staging a sharp antagonism between the vast majority of the people and a privileged minority that was profiting from the crisis” (Katsambekis 2016, 9). Greece has a parliamentary system and Syriza entered into a coalition with a small rightwing populist and nationalist party, Independence Greek ANEL. Syriza promised a break from the policies of austerity and confronted foreign creditors. Differently from the South American cases discussed in this chapter, traditional parties did not collapse, nor did the institutions of democracy, and Syriza did not aim to overhaul democratic institutions via constitutional change. “Pressure from outside, especially from the Troika, stifled the eagerness for radical economic policy, held also in check by the public sentiment in favor of the euro” (Aslanidis and Rovira Kalwazter 2016, 12). At the end Syriza capitulated to the Troika in July 2015, even after winning a referendum against austerity policies. Its radical populist promises evaporated and the party became less democratic and more vertical and leader-centric (Katsambekis 2016, 10). Syriza no longer “fights the establishment, but has in effect become the center-left component of it, as PASOK was” (Judis 2016, 118).

In the U.S. political parties were considered out of touch with the electorate, yet Donald Trump chose to use the Republican Party instead of running as an independent candidate. Differently from the Bolivarian nations that experienced profound crises of political representation, the U.S. has strong democratic institutions, and its constitutional frame constrains and fragments political expression (Lowndes 2016, 97). Under these institutional constraints it is difficult to find majoritarian control of government as in Latin America, and until Trump’s election populism was confined to the margins of the political system. Under this reading the institutional framework of U.S. democracy and civil society would be strong enough to process Trump’s populist challenges without major destabilizing consequences. It might be that as Ángel Rivero concludes in Chapter 18, “democracy is still the major bulwark against populism in Europe” and the U.S.

An alternative and plausible scenario is that the Trump who comes to the presidency when the executive has more power over the legislative, with the Senate and Congress in the hands of Republicans, with the power to name ultra-conservatives to the Supreme Court and lower courts, would follow the populist playbook of controlling all the institutions of the state. He despised career functionaries, has threatened Republicans who do not support him wholeheartedly, and is transforming the Republican Party – a party to which he does not have any long-lasting loyalty – into his personalist venue.

Like other populists, Trump does not like the media, and after assuming power Trump embarked on a war against the media. He used hoarse language against civil rights groups like Black Lives Matter. His policies of massive deportation, stop and frisk in poor and predominantly Black and Latino neighborhoods, surveillance of American Muslims, and rolling back gender and LGBTQ rights would lead to confrontations with civil and human rights organizations.

Even if the institutional framework of democracy does not collapse under Trump, he has already damaged the democratic public sphere. Hate speech and the denigration of minorities
are replacing the politics of cultural recognition and tolerance built by the struggles of feminists and anti-racist social movements since the 1960s.

5. Conclusions

Populism is not democracy’s pathology (Arditi 2007). Populists politicize exclusions, point to the malfunctions of democracies, and demand better forms of democratic representation and participation. Populists, as Luis Roniger argues in Chapter 29, could symbolically empower popular sectors, and reinforce democracy. Many contributors to this volume show that the populist critique to existing democracies cannot be ignored or dismissed. It is pointless to defend existing democracies without taking into consideration the populist critique. Paul Blokker concludes in Chapter 7 that the populist diagnosis “claims to pursue emancipation from the heteronomy that results from juridified and depoliticized understandings of constitutionalism … and from too strong an emphasis on legal order, abstract (external) rules and norms”. He argues that the “answer provided by populist constitutionalism is, however, a tendentially authoritarian and even despotic one, which ultimately risks undermining a radical-democratic innovation of constitutionalism that prioritizes constitutional engagement and authorship of the people qua democratic citizens”.

Populism would be more inclusionary if it emerges with the first processes of inclusion of previously disfranchised or excluded voters. After most citizens were at least formally included in the political system, populists revolted against political elites. Traditional parties were portrayed as “a closed, self-interested, and self-reproducing governing caste insulated from popular needs and concerns” (Roberts 2015, 149). Populist ruptures, Peruzzotti sustains in Chapter 2, often took place in presidentialist systems in crises. Parliamentary systems, and stronger democratic institutions and civil societies, are shields to populist ruptures. Nestor and Cristina Kichner, Berlusconi, and Tsipras were unable to rupture stronger democracies.

Accepting some of the populist critique to neoliberal depoliticized democracies does not mean agreeing with their solutions. Populism is not the only way to construct the political, and is certainly not the only venue for radical democracy. Different from populist ruptures imagined as the overhaul of all institutions made in the name of a mythical people, Andreas Kalyvas (2008, 229) suggested, we should shift “to a plurality of social movements, and voluntary political associations as the inescapable ground upon which popular sovereignty is reconstructed”. Arato and Cohen propose in Chapter 6 that “counter publics, movements, and associations, in civil society committed to plurality and self-limitation, democracy, openness and inclusion, can provide energy and hope to reinvigorate responsible and progressive politics”. And as Nadia Urbinati writes in Chapter 5, the answer to the antiestablishment populist strategy of splitting the citizenry into two structurally predefined entities that substitute a part for the whole and that aims to abolish political divisions is to keep the political space open to the circulation of leadership, and fragmenting and diffusing power.

Notes

1 Marco Damiani in Chapter 19 gives a more favorable interpretation of the democratic credentials of Laclau’s theory of populism. He argues that Laclau abandoned Schmitt’s notion of the enemy, accepting the friend–enemy polarity in terms of legitimate differences.
3 www.youtube.com/watch?v=shqblcQW2RI.
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References

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