Laclau’s theory of populism
A critical review

Enrique Peruzzotti

*On Populist Reason* represents Laclau’s most ambition attempt at delineating a general and abstract theory of populism. He hopes to move beyond the theoretical impasse on the subject that frequently led to a blind alley of conceptual ambiguity and political elusiveness regarding the political and conceptual status of the term populism and give the concept the central place it deserves within political theory. The latter involves a normative defense of populist reason as the paradigmatic expression of the grammar of politics. Laclau not only wishes to rescue the concept of populism from its marginal theoretical condition, he also aspires to placing the term at the center-stage of contemporary political theory.

The chapter divides into three sections. The first focuses on the novelties that Laclau’s approach introduces in wider debates over the ambiguous relationship of populism with democracy. The second analyzes the democratic claims of Laclau’s theory of populism. The third outlines the logic of operation of populist processes of identification. The last section critically reviews the main tenets of Laclau’s conceptual model.

The novelty of Laclau’s approach to populism

Laclau seeks to place populism as a key category of contemporary political and democratic theory. This is the main aim of his book *On Populist Reason*: to move the concept from the margins to the center of contemporary theoretical debates, arguing that populism, far from being a pathological phenomenon that affects the workings of liberal democracies, is an indispensable concept to understand the very grammar of politics. In making this argument, Laclau challenges most approaches to populism for they always consider the latter as either an open authoritarian threat to liberal democracy (Urbinati 2014) or at best, as an ambiguous phenomenon that simultaneously produces democratic and authoritarian effects (Arditi 2005; Canovan 1981; De la Torre 2000; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012; Panizza 2005; Schmitter 2006).

In Laclau’s rendering, populism is openly dissociated from its pathological status as an authoritarian menace that threatens the foundations of liberal democratic regimes. Furthermore, the concept also loses its ambiguous democratic status to become the very embodiment of democratic politics. In this way, Laclau turns the debate on populism upside down, whereas
populism appears as a normatively desirable outcome in politics while representative democracy is portrayed as a depoliticizing institutional machinery that neutralizes the creative power of the political.

What were the main tenets of the literature on populism? For the most, analyses on populism tend to fall into two categories: (a) those who indisputably considered it as a variant of authoritarian politics; and (b) those who stress the democratic ambiguous status of the term. The latter group is perhaps the most numerous and also the most relevant one to address in this discussion. If one takes the production on populism in Latin America, the region, that has given birth to the modern expressions of the term, most of it aligns with the “ambiguity thesis”, which is predicated on the normative desirability of representative democracy over any other type of regime. When addressing the legacy of classical populist regimes – such as those of Juan Domingo Perón in Argentina, Velasco Ibarra in Ecuador, or Getulio Vargas in Brazil – they are willing to recognize their contribution to the agenda of democratization by promoting processes of political and social inclusion of the popular sector. Such recognition, however, frequently is followed by the acknowledgment that such regimes usually ignored or suppressed constitutive elements of liberal democracy such as the principle of division of powers, the system of governmental checks and balances, judicial autonomy or press freedom, (Collier and Collier 2002; De la Torre 2000; Ianni 1975). Populism is consequently evaluated ambiguously in relation to its democratizing potential.

A classic example in this regard is the work of Gino Germani on the experience of classical Peronismo in Argentina (1945–1955). The Peronist regime, Germani argues, contributed to the full social and political incorporation of the popular sector, placing Argentina at the vanguard of political modernization in the region. However, the outcome of such a process was not the final consolidation of representative democracy but the establishment of a national-popular regime that exhibited many authoritarian features (Germani 1979). Similar arguments are being made to refer to the democratizing record of contemporary populist regimes, such as those of Rafael Correa in Ecuador or of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela (De la Torre 2000).

In Laclau’s approach, instead, liberal representative democracy no longer provides a yardstick to critically evaluate the performance of populism in government. On the contrary, he reverses previous arguments: in his view the trouble lies in representative democratic regimes, not populism. On the contrary, populism provides the new normative yardstick to evaluate politics. It represents the phenomenon that best expresses the fundamental logic of the political.

Laclau consequently criticizes any approach that seeks to understand populism “in terms of abnormality, deviance or manipulation” as misleading (Laclau 2007: 13). Populism, he argues, is not a deviant or irrational political phenomenon but is the expression of a specific political rationale. He seeks to rescue the concept from the marginal position it has traditionally enjoyed within social and political theory so it can be “dignified with the status of a full rationality” (Laclau 2007: 19). Furthermore, he equates populism with the logic of politics tout court:

Populism is the royal road to understanding something about the ontological constitution of the political as such.

(Laclau 2007: 67)

His argument establishes the following equivalency:

“The political” = populism
The pejorative adjectives that usually were attributed to populism (its logic of simplification, its ideological incoherence, the vagueness of its discourse) are to be understood as key features of its political rationale. They are the ingredients that ensure the success of a populist formula.

**Populism as democracy and the neutralizing role of indirect democracy**

Having established the intimate links that exist between populism and “the political”, Laclau takes a further step by associating the former with (to borrow his previous expression) democracy *tout court*. Populism expresses the democratic act per excellence: the constitution of the people. His argument against representative democracy and in support of populism is a contemporary rendition of Carl Schmitt’s contraposition between the logic of representation and that of identification as opposing ways of reaching political unity (Schmitt 2008). In Laclau’s terminology the previous contraposition is now translated as one between an institutional and a populist logic. The target of his critique, as it was the case in Schmitt, is the notion of indirect politics. The field of mediated politics that representative democracy establishes for processing and articulating demands is dismissed by Laclau as neutralizing device to render “the political” impotent. In this way, he brushes off the mediation of parties, the public sphere, and of parliament as depoliticizing tools. The process of political mediation that characterizes representative dynamics has no autonomous political function but rather responds to individualized demands. The logic of institutionalism seeks to preserve the logic of atomization: demands are not processed and transformed by the existing structures of political mediation but merely transmitted to the proper state agencies for them to address them individually. The logic of institutionalization, Laclau argues, is one of “difference”; that is, it is a dynamic that keeps social demands isolated from one another.

The more social demands tend to be differentially absorbed within a successful institutional system, the weaker the equivalential links will be and the more unlikely the constitution of a popular subjectivity; conversely, a situation in which a plurality of unsatisfied demands and an increasing inability of the institutional system to absorb them differentially co-exist, creates the conditions leading to a populist logic.

(Laclau 2005: 37)

The logic of populism is that of identification. For Laclau, the paradigmatic act of democracy – the construction of the people – takes outside any institutional mediation:

Democracy is grounded only on the existence of a democratic subject, whose emergence depends on the horizontal articulation between equivalential demands. An ensemble of equivalential demands articulated by an empty signifier is what constitutes a people.

(Laclau 2007: 171)

Furthermore, such process of identification can only come to life when the regulative power of institutions is lost (and so is the depoliticizing role they play).

For Laclau, the mediating structures and procedures of representative democratic regimes play a neutralizing role by dissolving any notion of *the people* into a myriad of individual demands. Requests are both formulated and addressed individually; that is, in isolation from one another (Laclau 2007: 127). Whenever the institutional system of representative
government is successful in absorbing demands in an individualized manner, “the ‘people’ as a historical actor disintegrates” (Laclau 2005: 89). Representative democracy is an institutional device that reproduces the atomizing logic of individualism that characterizes his understanding of the “social”. Its role is to preserve a social situation characterized by the generalized isolation of individuals and the consequent fragmentation of their claims:

We will call a demand which, satisfied or not, remains isolated a *democratic demand*. 

(Laclau 2007: 74)

Paradoxically, Laclau depicts institutional responsiveness as a threat to democracy since it seeks either to isolate demands from one another or simply to make them disappear by addressing them and thus preventing the possibility of them being horizontally articulated (Laclau 2007: 93, 154).

Given his description of representative democracy, it is not surprising that Laclau considers that its crisis represents a prerequisite for setting the process of populist identification into motion. The existence of a crisis of representation deep enough to interrupt the normal flow of representative politics means that populism becomes politically viable, for the neutralizing process of vertical institutional absorption of socio-political demands no longer operates, resulting in the horizontal proliferation of unmet demands. It is only then that the political operation *par excellence* – the construction of a “people” – becomes a possibility. The political logic of institution of the social comes to center-stage only when the institutional order loses its regulative capacity (Laclau 2007: 117).

In Laclau’s, rendering, populism is neither a mirror (Panizza 2005) nor an internal periphery of democratic politics (Arditi 2005) but the expression of democracy itself. For what is democracy but the process of constituting the people? And what better way to constitute the latter than via an effective process of identification? To the previous formula, Laclau adds a third equivalency:

“*The political*” = populism = democracy, an equivalency that endows populism with a normative status: populism is presented as a democratic theory (on this point see also Hawkins in this volume).

### The rationale of populism

How is “the people” constructed? Laclau enumerates certain prerequisites for such an operation to take place. The first one has already been discussed: the proliferation of social demands that cannot be properly addressed by the existing democratic institutional order. Populism has as its condition of existence the generalization in society of the perception that an insurmountable gap has opened between institutional performance and the requests of specific social groups:

Without this initial breakdown of something in the social order . . . there is no possibility of antagonism, frontier, or, ultimately, people.

(Laclau 2007: 85)

Populism is a politics that comes to life under extraordinary situations.

A second condition is the political articulation of unfulfilled social demands into what Laclau refers to as an “equivalential chain”. For the process of populist identification to be
effective, he argues, those isolated demands that had been left unmet by the political system because existing institutional arrangements proved incapable to address them. The proliferation of unmet requests creates the opportunity for the linking of them; that is precisely the specificity that lies behind populist process of identification: it consists on a discursive operation to establish an equivalential relationship among them:

A plurality of demands which, through their equivalential articulation, constitute a broader social subjectivity we will call popular demands.

*(Laclau 2007: 74)*

Without these equivalencies there cannot be populism. Creating a chain of equivalencies entails the drawing of an internal frontier between people and power. What previously were a heterogeneous group of isolated demands is now articulated as a unified claim made by a homogeneous group, the people. The people, Laclau argues, are a part of the community, which views itself as the only legitimate totality (Laclau 2007: 81): in such a situation, one particular demand or set of demands “stand in” for the social whole (Bickerton and Accetti 2015: 8). This is a key aspect of populist identity, one that undermines the symmetry established by democratic institutions in relation to the treatment of its citizens. The principle of political equality that the citizenship principle establishes treats all differences as equally valid. Such equality is broken under populism, which replaces the democratic principle of symmetry with an asymmetric identity of exclusion: if the people represent the whole, there is no space for those who are defined as being outside such category. We are faced with a monistic construction of the people as an organic whole, rather than as a pluralistic and institutionally mediated construction. Far from considering such a scenario problematic, Laclau sees the establishment of a central asymmetry in society as the coming to life “of that exhilarating game that we call politics” (Laclau 2005: 49).

The construction of a situation of political asymmetry demands a double operation: on the one hand, the creation of the people; on the other, and the creation of their enemies:

There is no populism without the discursive construction of an enemy.

*(Laclau 2005: 39)*

Defining the enemy’s identity is as important as defining the people for this identity is relationally constructed. As Bickerton and Accetti rightly argue when referring to the Laclauian process of populist identification,

The collective identity of the “people” is created by establishing a series of equivalential links between individual social demands. By implication, what binds them together is ultimately only their common opposition to what he calls an antagonistic pole . . . In the absence of such antagonistic pole, the populist conception of the people would immediately dissolve into its constituent parts.

*(Bickerton and Accetti 2015: 8)*

Thus the construction of the enemy is as important as the construction of the people. Both processes are intimately related each one representing the other side of the populist coin. Constructing an enemy also requires the establishing of a chain of equivalencies to give signification to the whole antagonistic camp (“the regime”, “the oligarchy”, “imperialism”, etc.). Both signifiers, “the people” and its enemies, are to be vaguely constructed, as they are
the frontiers that divide them. Vagueness and ambiguity are key conditions for the symbolic efficacy of populist identification to work (Laclau 2005: 40). They are the key element of this form of symbolic construction.

The drawing of an antagonistic frontier supposes a formidable act of political simplification whereas that all conflicts are reduced to a single one: the people versus its enemies (Laclau 2007: 18). Empty signifiers, given their vagueness, are the most effective way to draw an antagonist frontier to structure the political field. The process of identification consists of an ensemble of fragmented and dislocated demands that are lump together into a vague notion of the people.

The specifics of such process, the symbols that are mobilized to create an equivalential chain, are context-dependent. Populism, Laclau argues, is an abstract political logic that can assume manifold configurations. Thus one can find State, Jacobin, or Ethnic forms of populism (Laclau 2007: 191). In each of them, the enemy is constructed following different criteria (class, race, religion, etc.).

The principle of leadership plays a crucial articulating role, to the extent that the polarizing of society frequently revolves around the figure of the populist leader (Laclau 2005: 40). Given the assumptions on which the social is predicated, whereas society is presented as a disorderly assemble of individuals, order can only be established politically from above (Arato 2015: 46). Collective consciousness must be incarnated in the person of the leader, whose name becomes the ultimate signifier. Laclau’s conception is predicated on a notion of identification as embodiment that brings back the theological conception of a physical incarnation (Arato 2015; Bickerton and Accetti 2015: 10; De la Torre 2015; Laclau 2007: 170). As Arato argues,

Laclau’s assumes Kantorowicz’s Christological metaphor, that which is absent must be made present by incarnation The success of the whole operation of identification relies on a leader’s capacity to embody the unity of the people.

(Arato 2015: 49)

Laclau polemically rejects Claude Lefort’s understanding of modern democracy as an empty place of power that is hostile against any attempt to fill out such space via embodiment (Lefort 1988):

The logic of the King’s two bodies has not disappeared in democratic society: it is simply not true that pure emptiness has replaced the immortal body of the King. This immortal body is revived by the hegemonic force.

(Laclau 2007: 170)

If a leader succeeds in promoting a populist process of identification, her persona becoming the empty signifier of a community, she can legitimately claim to occupy that space (Laclau 2007: 170).

Lastly, the success of any populist mobilization is the crystallization of empty signifiers into a permanent system of identifications that will structure the field of politics into a new hegemony. The specifics that such process of routinization might adopt are of no interest to Laclau’s theory. First, because his conception focuses on extraordinary, not ordinary politics; consequently, any questions regarding the nature of the constitutional designs that regulate the normal flow of politics become irrelevant for they merely express superficial variations of the one-dimensional logic of institutionalism. Second, and related to the first point, institutions are mere expressions of power relations, making superfluous any reference to the validity
claims that are mobilized to legitimize them. The fact is that populism adopts many different (and frequently contrasting) institutional and ideological configurations.

### Critical reflections on the Laclauian conception of populism

Laclau’s theory of populism describes the specifics of an unmediated process of political identification. Departing from Schmitt’s notion of democracy as identity, his theory seeks to determine both the logic and necessary steps that need to be present for successful processes of populist identification to take place. He consequently translates Schmitt’s notion of identification into a formal model that disentangles the different elements that are present in the process. The theory focuses on the discursive and dramaturgical resources that are mobilized, indifferent to the political orientation that leaders imprint on them.

Given that populism simply refers to a formal logic of identity building, the concept

> has no referential unity because it is ascribed not to a delimitable phenomenon but to a social logic whose effects cut across many phenomena. Populism is, quite simply, a way of constructing the political.

*Laclau 2007: xi*

Such logic of identification can be consequently put to very different uses. It is impossible to pigeonhole the Laclauian concept of populism with a particular ideology, as it is fruitless to search for ideological coherence into a process of identity construction where vagueness and ambiguity are key dimensions. Laclau recognizes the intrinsic ideological fluidity of a concept that is built up with vague and frequently contradictory contents:

> Between left wing and right wing populism there is a nebulous no-man’s land that can be crossed – and has been crossed – in many directions.

*Laclau 2007: 87*

The exclusive criterion when evaluating the dynamics and outcome of a populist intervention is its polarizing potential; that is, whether the mobilized empty signifiers have the capacity to effectively draw an antagonistic frontier into society: what matters in Laclau’s model is not content but the antagonistic traction of empty signifiers. As Andrew Arato argues in his insightful critique of Laclau:

> The vagueness of the ideology is compensated for by the intensity of antagonism. The absence of real identity is made up for by affective, libidinal ties, love for the leader, and love for all those whom the leader really loves.

*Arato 2015: 160*

If populism is ambiguous in relation to its ideology, the same can be said regarding its institutional configuration. From the examples that Laclau mentions in the book, it is clear that populism does not inevitably bring democracy or democratization and that consequently betting on a populist strategy to overcome a crisis of representation can be a risky choice. Populism too often institutes hybrid plebiscitarian regimes where key features of liberal democracy are either weakened or simply overruled as exemplified by the classical Latin American experiences of Varguismo, Peronismo, or the Bolivian MNR or of contemporary Venezuela and Hungary.
Laclau’s pretention to develop his model of populism into a democratic theory is consequently surprising. After identifying populism with the political tout court, and in contradictory fashion, he proceeds to also identify populism with one of the specific forms of the political: democracy. His model establishes three equivalencies:

“The political” = populism = democracy

Each term appears as different ways of referring to the same phenomenon: the unregulated and creative force in politics. Laclau’s appreciation for populism as the expression of the political is fundamentally grounded on the de-structuring role against the forces of constituted power than on its instituting role. The creative force of populism is linked to its desire to transcend the status quo, indistinctively of the order that might result from such intervention.

To what extent can a democratic theory be built around such presuppositions? How can a theory of democracy that has nothing to say about its specific ideological or institutional configurations? Populism, the term that serves as the cornerstone of Laclau’s model, is equated with “the political”; a category that seems to transcend specific institutional orders and, even more, any form of institutionalization. The end result is a theory predicated on a transcendental politics that nevertheless is devoid of a clear normative horizon. The theory describes the rationale of a particular strategy at political change but has nothing to say about the type of change that a populist intervention might bring about. It is an odd position for a theory that presumes to be a democratic theory.

Moreover, Laclau’s model of politics is predicated on a realistic understanding of institutions that is ultimately hostile to any form of institutionalization: all institutional orders are reduced to power relations devoid of any normative content. Institutions reflect particular equilibrium of power relations, which crystallized into a hegemonic order. Under such premises, any question regarding the quality and potentials of specific institutional arrangement becomes irrelevant.

If Laclau’s premises were to be taken seriously, they would inevitably lead to a celebration of institutional precariousness and personalismo: to preserve the vibrant force of the political would require keeping the charismatic bond around which populist identities are constructed continuously alive to avoid its becoming “routinized” into a new hegemonic order. However, as Weber long ago highlighted, charismatic power cannot be kept continuously alive if not for the simple reason that leaders are mortal (Hugo Chavez) and charisma is non-transferable (Maduro). Thus the inevitable destiny of all charismatic interventions is to become routinized into a new constituted order.

Laclau’s theory and contemporary political expressions of populism

What are the linkages between the described theory and contemporary political expressions of populism? There are two ways to address the issue. The first one is by analyzing Laclau’s political endorsement of specific political experiences, such as Venezuelan Chavismo or Argentinian kirchnerismo; second, by analyzing those political movements partially inspired by Laclau’s theory such as Syriza in Greece and Spanish Podemos.

Regarding the latter, there has been much talk about the intellectual influence that Laclau exerted on political leaders such as Yanis Varoufakis, the former finance minister of the Greek party Syriza, or Íñigo Errejón of Podemos. Both leaders have claimed to be directly inspired by Laclau’s conception of populism (actually, many of those movements’ leaders are intellectuals themselves who have studied at Essex with Laclau or were indirectly influenced by his
work like the political scientists that contributed to the formation of Podemos). In fact, there
has been much talk about the Latin-Americanization of Southern European politics thanks to
a process of cross-pollination inspired by the rise of contemporary forms of Latin American
populism as well as the intellectual reformulation of the concept made by Laclau. Podemos
and Syriza see themselves as expressions of a left-wing populism that openly challenges the EU
elites and its recipes of fiscal austerity and that simultaneously breaks with the euro-centric
understanding of populism as a right-wing exclusionary political phenomenon (Stavrakakis

However, neither Syriza nor Podemos fit the Laclauian model of populist politics as the
plebiscitarian Latin American experiences do: while the European counterparts might draw
some inspiration from the conceptual model of Laclau, such as a Manichean discourse that
opposes the people against the technocratic establishment of the EU or the domestic “political
caste”, once in government they remain tied both to an organizational party structure and a
parliamentary system.

In this respect, it is the new brand of Latin American populist governments that helps us
understand the dynamics and limitations of Laclau’s model of populism. Laclau was a fervent
supporter of many of those administrations for they expressed a form of leftist populism more
alike to his personal political preferences. Unlike the European experiences, it would be
difficult to argue that presidential leaders such as Hugo Chavez, Rafael Correa, or Néstor
Kirchner were intellectually inspired by Laclau’s theory. Rather, it was the other way around:
Laclau saw in those leaders the epitome of his populist ideal. In this sense, it is interesting to
analyze the positions and arguments that Laclau adopted in relation to the experiences of Latin
American populism since they serve to highlight some of the contradictions built in his theory
of populism.

Laclau considered that the Caracazo in Venezuela\(^1\) and the 2001 crisis in Argentina\(^2\)
represented paradigmatic moments of crisis of an ossified representative order that estab-
hlished ideal conditions for a populist intervention. Yet, while Chavismo provided the
textbook example of the latter, Laclau considered that Argentina under kirchnerismo never
developed into a full-blown case of populism. It is interesting to analyze Laclau’s positions
on kirchnerismo, for they serve to highlight some contradictions within his theoretical
model.

Laclau was an enthusiastic endorser of both Néstor and Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner
although he acknowledged that both had failed in developing kirchnerismo into a full-blown
populism (Peruzzotti 2017). The latter, nevertheless, did not prevent him from evaluating
their presidencies as one of the most progressive ones, if not the most progressive, of
contemporary Argentine history. Kirchnerismo, he stated, represents the most democratic
moment of Argentine history and has notoriously expanded the democratic horizon of the
country’s politics (Bossoer 2013).

Laclau’s enthusiastic support for kirchnerismo – despite the latter’s inability to become a
full-blown expression of populist politics, as it was the case with Chavismo or previously with
classical Peronism – raises some questions about the status of his general theory of populism.
Specifically, it challenges important assumptions about the privileged status he grants populism
as a democratizing strategy while simultaneously weakening his critical arguments regarding
the neutralizing role of representative institutions. If the Kirchners were able to advance a very
progressive political agenda without fundamentally challenging the institutional framework of
representative democracy, then he is acknowledging that representative arrangements can have
a transformative potential that his theory as developed in On Populist Reason seems to ignore
(Peruzzotti 2017).
It remains unclear if the previous statements entail a conscious revision by Laclau of his conceptual standpoint, resulting in a welcomed recognition of the potentials of liberal institutions, or if he just considers such an outcome a second-best alternative; one he is willing to concede given the factual limitations that a populist strategy encounters in political systems, like the Argentinian one. For Laclau argues that in the Argentine context a full-blown populist projects encounters formidable obstacles that come from the existence of a highly developed civil society with important veto power as well as from the existence of a relatively well-performing system of governmental checks and balances. Despite the 2001 crisis of representation, Argentine democracy is endowed with an active and complex field of mediated politics that combines formal and informal checks on power. This feature is viewed by Laclau as a formidable obstacle to the full unfolding of a process of populist identification.

Whatever option we choose, it undermines key conceptual assumptions of *On Populist Reason*. First, if populist loses effectiveness in societies whose political system has reached a certain threshold of development, then the explanatory power of Laclau’s theory of populism is greatly reduced. Far from being the royal road to understanding the political, populism becomes a strategy that can only be applied in a limited number of cases and that will be rather ineffective in culturally plural and institutional dense societies. Or, at least, it would demand a terminal crisis of the representative order such as the one that took place in Venezuela and opened the way for the process of regime change that Chavez promoted with the establishment of a Bolivarian Republic. If, on the contrary, Laclau is willing to acknowledge that processes of democratic deepening can take place within a representative polyarchy, then it is legitimate to raise questions regarding the costs and benefits of populist strategies as compared with alternative ones. If there are viable competing alternatives to populism to advance a highly progressive agenda, why then take the risk that the latter always entails in terms of possible authoritarian outcomes? The risk of political authoritarianism might be a price to pay if there is no feasible alternative (given the negative neutralizing role that according to Laclau representative democracy exerts on “the political”). But if one is willing to concede an autonomy and transformative potential to liberal democratic regimes, then the option for the riskier strategy of populism loses attractiveness.

**Notes**

1 The term Caracazo refers to a weeklong wave of violent protests and riots that took place in the city of Caracas and adjacent suburbs in February 1989 as a reaction to the policies implemented by the Carlos Andres Perez administration. The contentious actions lasted for several days and resulted in numerous deaths and the government’s suspending of constitutional freedoms and declaring a state of emergency. The events are usually considered the beginning of the end of the democratic experience inaugurated by the so-called Punto Fijo accords. See Lopez Maya (2003).

2 The December 2001 crisis in Argentina refers to the initiation of a wave of citizens’ protests that shook the country and that resulted in the resignation of President Fernando de la Rua. The combination of a deep economic crisis and widespread descredit of government translated into a widespread sentiment of rage against the political class, which the slogan “throw everyone out” which was chanted by the protesters clearly illustrates. The wave of protests were sparked by a nationally televised presidential address on December 19, in which then President De la Rua announced that he had decreed the imposition of a state of siege, with the consequent restriction of constitutional guarantees as a response to a series of food riots that had taken place in the Metropolitan area of the city of Buenos Aires. The December events opened up a period of political instability that was eventually closed with the Congressional appointment of Eduardo Duhalde as interim president to complete De la Rua’s term. Duhalde called for elections in 2003. Although Néstor Kirchner was elected second to Carlos Menem, when the latter refused to go for a required run-off, Kirchner assumed the presidency on May 25, 2003. For a further description of the 2001 events, see Peruzzotti (2005).
References


