Three populist waves shook Latin America’s political history: classical populism, neoliberal populism, and radical populism. No other political phenomenon has had such perseverance in the region’s history. Its continuity gives the impression that modern politics in Latin America, more than in any other region in the world, have been marked by populist waves that left long-lasting legacies (Panizza, 2009; Roberts, 2013; Conniff, 1999). As in other world regions, the concept of populism in Latin America keeps generating passionate debates regarding its appropriateness, clarity, and scope (Drake, 1982).

The image of populist waves is neither new nor original, but it is illustrative (Roberts, 2008; Rovira Kaltwasser, 2015; Ulloa, 2017). It suggests that populism is a disruptive phenomenon that overflows the political scenario in times of crises and uncertainty, when charismatic leaders mobilize the masses. However, if populisms are analyzed as a phenomenon that emerges, shocks the setting, and leaves for the waters to calm down and return to their normal course, the idea of a wave can be confusing. The populist phenomena have long temporalities, surprising lasting-ness, and they never fully abandon the scene. Its leaders have influence both inside and outside government, from their countries or from their voluntary or forced exiles. As will be shown below, the politics of populist waves – which is how I would like to define it – is closely connected to the charismatic leaders’ biography. The idea of a wave leads to some sort of analytical paradox: populism crops up in exceptional moments of political life, but is also a constitutive and almost routine element of the Latin America’s modern politics.

The idea of populist waves that emerge and simultaneously shock several countries suggests the presence of mechanisms of diffusion, leaning, or contagion (Rovira Kaltwasser, 2015; de la Torre, 2017). Populism is diffused through discursive frameworks that offer common solutions to overcome economic and political crises. Those frameworks can be repeated without losing the strategic advantages they originally possess if they resonate with culturally familiar concepts within a political culture (Tarrow, 2013: 13).

The first populist experiences in Latin America date back to the last century, in the 1930s, when the region’s economic and political models of oligarchic domination plunged into crisis.
The first wave spread with different paces and time scales throughout multiple countries until the 1970s. The cases that the literature designated as paradigmatic cases of “classic populisms” were Brazil with Getúlio Vargas, Lázaro Cárdenas’s Mexico, and Juan Domingo Perón’s Argentina. It first appeared in countries that underwent processes of social change and modernization linked to rapid urbanization processes, industrialization, and a broad mobilization of the so-called “lower classes”. Populism also appeared in nations with different rates of modernization and industrialization: Ecuador under José María Velasco Ibarra, Víctor Haya de la Torre in Peru, and in Colombia the rise and tragic murder of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán. As shown in Chart 1, the wave of classic populism lasted for several decades in each country.¹

There is a second historical moment on which almost all the literature agrees to recognize as a populist wave, although the adjectives used to describe it vary: radical, leftist, or anti-establishment populism.² The new wave developed in the late twentieth century, when Hugo Chávez was elected in Venezuela, and expanded to Argentina with the victory of Nestor Kirchner, Evo Morales in Bolivia, and Rafael Correa in Ecuador. This wave took place in an unprecedented context of continuous democratic regimes in Latin America that began with the transitions in the 1980s. The cases of Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia aroused great interest due to their radical mobilization of the principle of popular sovereignty, and their promises to re-found the economic, social, and political life. The Kirchnerist movement shared some of the characteristics of the Bolivarian processes, although it was a reinterpretation of Argentina’s long-standing Peronist tradition.

There is less agreement on the neopopulist wave that encompassed Alberto Fujimori in Peru, Fernando Collor de Mello in Brazil, Abdalá Bucaram in Ecuador, and Carlos Menem in Argentina. The term neopopulism refers to common elements with other populisms – charismatic leaders, polarizing speeches, direct appeals to the popular sectors, and challenges to ruling political elites. Yet differently from the other waves these leaders used a sort of “popular liberalism” (Schamis, 2013: 166) based on structural adjustment policies that aimed to promote the capitalist market and globalization. All these experiences that took place in different historical and socioeconomic contexts, enriched the debates on Latin American populism.

This chapter has three sections. The first analyzes the causes of populism, and whether or not it was an ephemeral phenomenon destined to disappear. The second discusses the charismatic nature of populist leadership. Populism displaces politics from institutional frameworks to personalist leaderships (Arditi 2009). The third addresses the debate on populism’s relation to democracy.

1. Transition and social change in populisms

Sociologists in the 1960s viewed populism as a transitory moment in the modernization process (Germani, 1968, 1973, 1978; Di Tella, 1970, 1973; Ianni, 1973; Cueva, 1988). Germani and Di Tella saw it as an irruption of new social groups linked to the transition from a traditional to a modern society. Marxist interpreted populism as a class-based pattern of mobilization. These first studies showed that populism activated politically and mobilized the lower classes (Germani, 1973; Ianni, 1973; Di Tella, 1973; Cueva, 1988). Other scholars argued that populism entailed the passage of elite to mass politics, and to views of democracy understood as the symbolic occupation of public spaces in the name of a leader (de la Torre, 1993).

The concept of transition implied that populism would disappear once capitalist modernization or development processes found their normal course. Latin American transitions appeared as anomalous to European patterns of development, or as symptoms of backwardness and underdevelopment. Since populism was viewed as a transitional phenomenon, its death and funeral were declared on multiple occasions (Drake, 1982). Modernization theories understood that societies moved from less to more advanced forms (Germani, 1968: 197),
# Chart 1 Selected populist governments in Latin America

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Presidents</th>
<th>Periods in office</th>
<th>Period date</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>JUAN DOMINGO PERÓN</td>
<td>1st Presidency: 4 June 1946–4 June 1952</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2nd Presidency: 4 June 1952–21 September 1955</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3rd Presidency: 12 October 1973–1 July 1974</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>GETÚLIO VARGAS</td>
<td>1st Presidency: 3 November 1930–16 July 1934</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2nd Presidency: 16 July 1934–10 November 1937</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3rd Presidency: 10 November 1937–29 October 1945</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4th Presidency: 3 October 1950–24 August 1954</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>JOSÉ MARÍA VELASCO IBARRA</td>
<td>1st Presidency: 1 September 1934–20 May 1935</td>
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<td>2nd Presidency: 28 May 1944–23 August 1947</td>
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<td>3rd Presidency: 1 September 1952–31 August 1956</td>
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<td>4th Presidency: 1 September 1960–7 November 1961</td>
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<td>5th Presidency: 1 September 1968–15 February 1972</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>LÁZARO CÁRDENAS</td>
<td>1st Presidency: 1 December 1934–30 November 1940</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>ABDALÁ BUCARAM</td>
<td>1st Presidency: 10 August 1996–6 February 1997</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>CARLOS SAUL MENEN</td>
<td>1st Presidency: 8 July 1989–14 May 1995</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>FERNANDO COLLOR DE MELLO</td>
<td>1st Presidency: 15 March 1990–29 December 1992</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>HUGO CHÁVEZ FRÍAS</td>
<td>1st Presidency: 2 February 1999–10 January 2001</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>2nd Presidency: 10 January 2001–10 January 2007</td>
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<td>3rd Presidency: 10 January 2007–10 January 2013</td>
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<td>4th Presidency: 10 January 2013–5 March 2013</td>
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<td>2nd Presidency: 10 August 2009–24 May 2013</td>
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<td>3rd Presidency: 24 May 2013–24 May 2017</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1st Presidency: 22 January 2006–22 January 2010</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3rd Presidency: 22 January 2015</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>CRISTINA FERNANDEZ</td>
<td>1st Presidency: 10 December 2007–9 December 2011</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2nd Presidency: 10 December 2011–9 December 2015</td>
<td></td>
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Credit: Amanda Porozo
while Marxists followed teleological models of history as a process toward the final emancipation of the exploited classes.\textsuperscript{3}

Sociologists explained populism analyzing the changes in the social structure triggered by capitalist development. They aimed to understand what new social sectors emerged and were mobilizing by Varguism, Cardenism, or Peronism. Most scholars agreed that classic populism was a complex multiclass alliance of middle sectors, the working class, and groups generically identified as the lower classes, the popular sectors, or marginalized groups. In Argentina or Brazil this class alliance included an emerging bourgeoisie that promoted protectionist models of industrial development. In countries with lower levels of capitalist modernization and development, such as Peru and Ecuador, studies underlined the prevailing presence of the sub-proletariat (Cueva, 1988) or working classes (Stein, 1999: 98).

The sociology of modernization showed that populism challenged hierarchical social class and labor relations. Germani (1973) argued that populism gave a sense of political autonomy, which was absent in a context of traditional domination, that enabled workers to “participate in a strike”, “elect a union representative in a workshop”, “alter individual behavior”, and “discuss with the employer in equal conditions”. Populism introduced an egalitarian ethos in social relations. Di Tella saw in populism “a fracture in the balance of social status” (1970: 293) that was expressed in a “visceral, and passionate manner” (1970: 294). The mobilized classes and groups “built up resentment and chew on new ideas and ways of changing things” (Ibid.). Populism was a “revolution of aspirations” that resulted from rapid processes of modernization and industrialization. The irruption of populisms, therefore, was ultimately the result of a gap between social modernization and political integration – an “absence of synchronicity in change” (Germani, 1973) that steered Latin American societies to a “pitfall” (Di Tella, 1973: 41).

The concept of \textit{lo popular} as the constitutive principle of a new political subject first emerged under classical populism. \textit{Lo popular} is a category of collective identity attached to the social groups politically activated by populisms. Octavio Ianni, for example, referred to the groups mobilized by Varguism in Brazil as “unionized popular sectors,” “non-unionized popular sectors” and, “popular marginalized sectors” (1973: 111). Germani researched the meanings of popular Peronist mobilizations. Sometimes the notion of popular is used to distinguish the presence of groups other than middle classes and working classes; and other times to describe the “lower classes”. The presence of groups or classes defined as \textit{popular} differentiated Latin America’s modernizing experience from the European experience, where lower classes were a social field defined by the prevailing presence of the working class. The presence of \textit{lo popular} defined the political culture of Latin American modernization (Germani, 1978: 125–151).

In Ecuador and Peru the prevalence of popular the groups mobilized by Velasquismo and Aprismo was absolute given the absence of working classes in these countries. As stated by Stein in his work on the birth of Aprismo: “The terms \textit{pueblo}, \textit{masa}, and \textit{elementos populares}, which had in prior years been largely absent from the political vocabulary, became prominent in the speeches and writings of nearly all public figures in the early 1930s” (1999: 98).

Populist leaders used terms like \textit{the people}, \textit{lower classes}, \textit{dispossessed classes}, \textit{disinherited masses}, “\textit{descamisados}” (shirtless), and \textit{chasma} (mob). These terms shaped the collective identities of the lower classes in Latin America. It is surprising to hear the same terms used in the 1940s in the rhetoric of radical populist leaders of the twenty-first century. Such set of language categories not only describes an economic situation, but also social, moral, emotional, and affective conditions linked to experiences of social domination in the daily lives of broad social sectors. \textit{The Popular} in populism synthesizes such different experiences. The opposite of the popular, appear in the categories used by populist movements to denounce the groups of power against
which the poorer classes were mobilized: oligarchies, pelucones (big-wigs), pitiyankees (little yankees), escuálidos (scrawny), trincas (gangs), aniñados (posh), roscas (closed rings).

Identifying lo popular as an element that was politicized by classic populisms was so important and crucial in understanding the phenomenon that it became the grounds for Ernesto Laclau’s discourse theory (Critchley and Marchart, 2008; Laclau, 1977). Classic populisms showed social and political mobilization dynamics in a broader field of contradictions than those strictly class based. Laclau named the presence of a non-class interpellations in Peronism as “popular democratic”. According to Laclau, Latin American populism revealed historical discontinuity in class structures and relative continuity of popular traditions (1977: 166). In this tension a field of popular democratic interpellations built the contradiction between the people and the power block as distinct from class contradictions (Laclau, 1977: 167). Classical populists established dual articulations of political discourse referring in their discourses to both the people and class.

1.1 Critical junctures and ruptures

Collier and Collier (1991) in their study of the incorporation of worker movements to Latin America’s political life in the 1930s developed the concept of critical junctures. It addresses watershed periods of political change, when political institutions across a range of countries adjust, in different ways, to a common set of societal pressures or challenges (Roberts, 2013: 42) The concept was transferred to studies on populism, not only to preserve the phenomenon’s “disruptive power,” but to explain its waves as the expression of major, cross national shifts in the logic of capitalism development that realign states, markets and social actors (Ibid.). Just like classic populisms emerged in an early phase of capitalist development and modernization, neopopulisms surfaced in a moment of transition toward a neoliberal and globalized capitalism; while radical populisms sprout out when the region made a shift to the left and to post-neoliberalism. Each of these processes entail different forms of social change and conflict, with different stakeholders and new demands to the political system that not always find spaces for integration (Reygadas and Filgueira, 2010).

Populism emerged in countries where representative institutions are weak, fragile, or ineffective in articulating and responding to social concerns (Roberts, 2013). It resolved the crises of political representation by resorting to a government style based on plebiscitarian linkages, mass mobilization, and the appeal to the popular sectors (Roberts, 2008, 2013; Weyland, 2004).

Ernesto Laclau’s discursive theory, on the other hand, see populism as a rupture with the prevailing political order by building collective identities in antagonistic terms. The power of populism would lie on its discursive capacity to create a popular subject or a popular subjectivity, which is always confronting an enemy that can take different identities and shapes (Laclau, 2009: 57). Populism’s specificity lies in its construction of politics as a field of antagonisms to power necessary to expand the democratic horizons.

According to Laclau (2009), the “first pre-condition” for a populist rupture is a set of unmet social demands. Populism’s discursive practice is effective when it manages to articulate a common field of identification where the myriad of unmet social demands gets to be politically expressed. It is not social demands that provide the populist discourse with an identity but their articulation into some shared idea of people. The game of identity antagonisms created by populism builds an internal boundary in the political field between power and “the downtrodden” (Laclau, 2009: 57). The downtrodden refers to hierarchically inferior, excluded, dispossessed social groups whose demands are not met by the political system.
2. Charismatic leadership, heroism, and the instability of populism

The role of charismatic leaders continues to be a controversial topic in the study of populism. It is deemed a typical feature of Latin American populism, which roots date to a caudillo (warlord) tradition born from post-independency processes in the nineteenth century (Ianni, 1973; Germani, 1978). All studies, without exception, highlight as a feature of populism a specific way of identification among leaders and followers alien to the predominant political parties and institutions. Their continuity over time and legitimacy depend on replicating this identification link as a leadership style. Leaders grant movements with a principle of identity unrelated to ideological conventionalisms — Peronism, Varguism, Cardenism, Velasquism, Gaitanism, Chavism, Correism, Kirchnerism, Evism. In its turn, a personalized leadership expresses the followers’ fervor, militancy, and passions.

Charismatic leadership has been a difficult topic to study precisely because of its multiple dimensions (Allahar, 2001). Some classic and recent works have focused on the religious, redemptive, and messianic dimension of charisma (Cueva, 1988; Zúquete, 2008; Nun, 1998; de la Torre, 2013a). Cueva, for example, described Velasquista mobilizations in Ecuador as “magic religious” rituals and Velasco Ibarra as a “prophet, pastor, and father of our sub-proletariat.” Zúquete defined Chavism as missionary politics whereby the moral community that follows the leader’s call is recreated. In the Argentina of the early 90s, overwhelmed by hyperinflation and social and political confusion, Menem “was able to appear as an authentic savior; his speeches were invariably addressed to ‘brothers and sisters’ and, also invariably, concluded with invocations to God and the Virgin, and an appeal ‘follow me!’” (Nun, 1998: 63). Carlos de la Torre (2013b) has shown the unexpected affinities between a charismatic leadership and technocratic rationality in Correism – which he has called technopopulism – that challenges Weber’s classic vision of two opposite rationalities of domination. Correa is both a redeemer and the owner of academic knowledge that he boasts to his followers during his program Citizen Liaison.4

The emphasis on the religious side, on rituality around the caudillo’s public appearances, of charisma as magical re-incantation with politics in times of despair, can put aside a more political analysis as a way of exercising authority and domination in exceptional conditions. Weber (1974) himself emphasized that in the political field, as in the military and artistic fields, charisma is not expressed in its pure forms, so its religious dimensions appear mitigated. There are two crucial elements to understand Weber’s definition of the “charismatic moment”: on one hand, the loss of legitimacy of political traditions to arrange a system of government and domination; and, on the other hand, the functioning and reproduction of the new government structure remained conditioned to the constant deployment of a heroic sense of political action. The first means that the warlord or demagogue – terms used by Weber to describe the charismatic leader in the political field – disregards formal rules and is free to act, which in turn makes him unstable and unpredictable (Allahar, 2001: 5). Weber’s ascribing irrationalism to charismatic leaders is not derived from the exceptional or magical qualities of personality, but from their capacity to break all pre-existing rules and establishing an emotional relation with their followers. Meanwhile, the heroic sense means that charismatic leaders are obliged to show their exceptional qualities in actions that materialize their promise that new times have arrived. In both cases, the idea of exceptionality means that charismatic leaders surface free of structural, institutional, and discursive constrains.

In Laclau’s theory of populism, a charismatic leader becomes the empty signifier that articulates the people as a political subject. The leader turns into the movement’s symbolic dew point (Arditi, 2009). Therefore, his body, his rhetoric, and his actions transform into the inner boundary that divides society in an antagonist field. The leader is in an ambiguous and
contradictory figure. On one hand, he can only be understood within the practices of the groups whose demands are politically articulated under the idea of people. On the other hand, given his significance, he can limit popular participation or create constant stress (Laclau, 2006: 60–61).

Latin America’s different populist experiences reveal different dynamics between the leader and his followers. Radical populist administrations differ due to the capacity given to social movements to influence the structures of charismatic leadership. While Morales must permanently negotiate the terms of government action with the social organizations that support him, Correa systematically places himself above them and even confronts and divides them (de la Torre, 2013b). Studies on Chavism show that the efforts to create popular power were always subjected and subordinated to Chávez’s leadership (Hawkins, 2008; Lopez Maya, 2011).

Leaders have to display their heroism in action. They generate a continuous and permanent succession of episodes and events to challenge the power structures and conventionalisms of elite-related political routines. Populism’s intensity occurs because actions must create the boundaries and the antagonism to establish the people as a political subject, but also because populist must challenge power relations. Charisma is not only the leader’s missionary preaching to build a moral community of followers. It is a practice that constantly trespasses the institutionalized limits of politics. Populist leaders challenge and confront the power of economic elites, the military, traditional parties, imperialism, the oligarchy, and bankers. Heroic actions must be ostentatious, challenging, transgressing, and all on behalf of the excluded.

The political trajectories of Latin American populist leaders clearly show the heroic, dramatic feelings they endow their lives with; but also, concurrently, the conflictive and unstable political dynamics. Perón, Haya de la Torre, Velasco Ibarra, and Abdalá Bucaram lived long periods in exile. Many underwent incarceration, military overthrows, or were dismissed by congress. Populist movements were proscribed (Aprism and Peronism), and their leaders were sent to exile. This unleashed long periods of riots and violence to demand their return. The influence of these leaders goes beyond their administration periods. “The leaders, whether in power or exile, dominates his party for long stretches” (Horowitz, 1999: 22). They became a sort of spectral presence, they threaten to come back, and bring popular turmoil and mass mobilizations to create instability and to challenge those in power.

The irruption of classic populisms generated dynamics of instability between civil and military regimes. Velasco Ibarra, for example, was removed four times from the presidency. Perón became politically active as part of a coup in 1943. He held the positions of Secretariat of Labor and Social Security. “Perón used the department of labor, however, as platform from which to win over the hearts and minds of much of the working class” (Horowitz, 1999: 29). Perón was not allowed to finish his second term because he was removed by a military coup in September 1955. Getúlio Vargas’ first presidential term (1930–1934) was an interim government imposed by the military after a coup. At the end of his second term (1937) he made himself dictator and remained in power until 1945, when he was removed by another military coup. Vargas ended his political life by committing suicide during his fourth term (1950–1954). He left his famous “testament letter” where he described himself as a “slave to the people” (Bethell, 2013: 187). This document was deemed an authentic populist manifesto (Ibid). In other cases, such as that of Assad Bucaram, in Ecuador, and Haya de la Torre, in Peru, the military prevented them from taking office.

Some neopopulist leaders generated similar histories of instability. Abdalá Bucaram was removed from Ecuador’s presidency six months after he took office. Resorting to a
constitutional provision, Congress dismissed him on the grounds of “mental incapacity” to
govern. Since then he has been self-exiled in Panama. Fernando Collor de Mello resigned
from office three years before Congress dismissed him on the grounds of corruption.
Alberto Fujimori shut down the Peruvian Congress two years after he took office. After his
second re-election, which was questioned and contested on the grounds of fraud, he
resigned via fax from Japan.

Radical populist leaders also had conflictive records. Chávez was involved in two
attempted coups before he won the elections in 1998. Morales was the leader of the coca
growers union in the region of Chapare. He led the resistance against the U.S. policy of force
eradication of coca crops. In 2002 he was elected to Congress and two years later he was
removed for instigating violence. When Correa ran for office in 2006, his movement Alianza
País did not register candidates to Congress in order to send a clear sign that his victory would
immediately lead to a call for a constituent assembly with full powers that was to assume
legislative functions, and so they did.

These brief descriptions of popular leaderships’ political instability, drama, and intensity
must be supplemented by the daily episodes in government management where they
challenged political traditions and conventionalisms to stage their heroic qualities. Populist
waves come with the drama of their leaders’ political life that expresses their huge difficulties
to institutionalize their rule and their trend to remain on the border of the system or outside
of it. In Drake’s words, “institutionalization could cost the movement its protest credentials,
its dynamism, and its followers” (1982: 225).

3. Democracy and populism: futile reconciliation attempts

The relation between populisms and democracy still divides scholars. This debate first
appeared with the first populist wave, and the meanings assigned to these concepts had
varied in different historical contexts. Three political stances can be determined in the current
debates: a first position sees populism and democracy as opposites. A second argues that
populism is rooted in a long Latin America tradition that understands democracy as the
construction of the popular will upon the demands of excluded and impoverished groups.
And a third stance considers populism as a mirror where democracy can look at to discover
the limits of its institutional pragmatism and go back to its emancipatory promises. However,
it could degenerate in violent authoritarian forms of government.

3.1 Populism as antagonistic to democracy

The vision of populism as a phenomenon that is contrary to democracy dates back to the
works of Germani and Di Tella. While populist mobilization was an answer to limited
democracies with low levels of participation and little recognition of political rights, if offered
the lower classes channels of integration to the political life outside the institutional mechan-
isms of liberal representative democracy. Germani argued that participation in populism was
conducted by charismatic autocratic leaders and was oriented to plebiscitarianism. Germani
argued that the populist incorporation of the lower classes was distinct to both liberal, and the
social-democratic traditions (Germani, 1978; Di Tella, 1973).

National populist regimes such as Peronism, Varguism, and Cardenism reflected the
expectations of the lower classes for inclusion, though their political actions were guided
by an ideological horizon that is far-flung from liberalism (Germani, 1973). Populism
reflected the mistrust of the Latin American middle classes to liberalism. Scholars and
activist argued that liberalism was an ideology of the upper classes (di Tella, 1973), and of modern illustrated elites that feared popular traditions (Prieto, 2004). Scholars like Laclau (1977) understood populism as an alternative to Eurocentric liberal models of democracy and development.

Fujimori’s neoliberal populism as well as the radical populist wave of Chávez, Morales, and Correa, shows that in societies with weakly institutionalized democracies populism leads to competitive authoritarian regimes (Levitsky and Loxton, 2013). While personalist leaders come into power promising to renew democracies, they end up by governing with non-democratic methods (Ulloa, 2017). Competitive authoritarian regimes are those in which formal democratic institutions exist and are meaningful, but in which incumbent abuse skews the playing field to such an extent that the opposition’s ability to compete is seriously compromised (Levitsky and Loxton, in this book).

From this perspective, the authoritarian drift of populisms is configured upon the same mandate granted to governments in the polls: to terminate with the existing political systems (Levitsky and Roberts, 2011). Fujimori was an extreme case in dissolving Congress by a self-inflicted coup in 1992 after which he governed for a long period “with quasi-dictatorial powers” (Stein, 1999: 115). Radical populisms pledged to re-found all political structures through constituent assemblies. They rebuilt governmental institutions through referenda with a strong concentration of power in the hands of the executive (Levitsky and Roberts, 2011). Populists damaged democratic political regimes by restricting the power of institutions that guarantee civil and political freedoms. Their negative consequences for democracy are greater than any democratizing or inclusionary policies (Levitsky and Loxton, in this book).

According to Weyland, the common feature of populisms, regardless of their grassroots support, is to take politics out of the representative institutions toward plebiscitary means, mass demonstrations, and the redemptive promises of charismatic leaders (Weyland, 2004: 33). He argues that populism is a way of competing and exercising political power, populisms are characterized by their methods of domination and not by their distribution policies (Weyland, 2004: 30). Weyland (2010) shows how anti-establishment populisms of the twenty-first century, reinforced the power of the state and weakened representative institutions to pursue their goals of radical change. Charismatic authority subordinated popular organizations. In Venezuela, all efforts of popular participation ended up subordinated to the executive in a clientelist way, while in Ecuador little interest was shown in concretizing the offer of participatory democracy (Levitsky and Roberts, 2011: 420).

Populisms’ illiberalism is the result of their claim to embody the popular will, and to exclude every group that is outside their hegemony. Peruzzotti argues that under these circumstances, populisms do not reestablish direct democracy, but rather replace it with a plebiscitary identification of the leader and the masses that can ultimately lead to the destruction of representative democracy (2013: 63).

Castañeda (2006) used the thesis of the incompatibility of populism and democracy to elaborate a dichotomous classification of left-wing governments in Latin America. Radical populism is represented as the incarnation of all ills: virulent nationalist, strident and closed-minded authoritarianism (2006: 29, 33, 34). The contrast was provided the good social-democratic left, such as the Chilean and Uruguayan left – modern, open, reformist, and internationalist (2006: 29). From this radical liberal vision politicians like Chávez manipulated the despair of the poor, invoked unsubstantial grandiloquent rhetoric, and exercised power irresponsible. Chávez is Perón with oil, and Morales an irresponsible populist (Castañeda, 2006: 38).
3.2 Populism as democratizing

A contrasting view argues that Latin American populism is based on a different concept of democracy and, therefore, cannot be evaluated from the parameters of the liberal representative model. This stream inquires why liberalism is insufficient in Latin America and populism is so pervasive (Hershberg, Camerón, and Beasley-Murray, 2010: 13). Perhaps the answer has historic roots and goes back to how democratic imaginaries were shaped in Latin America when moving toward political modernity. Peruzzotti argues that “populism means a clear preference for a direct form of democracy and, therefore, rejects representative democracy as something inauthentic and artificial” (2008: 97). While in the first the identification of government and people is direct, in the second it is measured by the representation of multiple stakeholders and interests that move politics away from an organicist concept of people as one.

Classic populisms rejected representative forms of democracy because they considered them spaces dominated by the interests of oligarchic groups and/or parties of the elites. Neopopulists built this antagonism as a struggle against political elites that were responsible for national crises. Radical populisms rejected the representative model because it had become a closed system controlled by party elites impermeable to social demands.

Scholars that defend populism as democratizing argued that its legitimacy is grounded in winning elections. Since the return to democracy in Latin America in the early 80s, the idea of elections as the only legitimate means to seize power gained acceptance. Neopopulisms and radical populisms have stuck to this rule, but transforming it into the crucial mechanism for the leader’s plebiscitarian identification with the people (Peruzzotti, 2008: 106). The paradox of populism is that in spite of being hostile to representative democracy, it can only emerge from its womb and as a reaction to it. Once the plebiscitarian link is established through the electoral process, the government’s practice is aimed to reproduce it permanently (Conaghan and de la Torre, 2008). In radical populisms one of the favorite mechanisms have been successive calls to referenda, plebiscites, and elections. Correa boasted of having won fifteen elections during his ten-year presidency. Chávez was praised the day he died for having lost only one of fourteen elections. And Morales lost four elections out of fourteen, one of them with a very slim margin to incorporate his indefinite re-election in the Constitution.

Laclau and Mouffe (1985) also argued that populism is democratizing. They claim that populism stages collective identities and conflict for power at the center of politics. Mouffe argues that collective identities are formed within an antagonist logic that transforms political relations into friends/enemies. In the case of populism, antagonism establishes the people as a political subject confronted to the structures of power. In forming collective identities, politics recovers its emotional and antagonistic dimensions, both of which are blind spots of liberalism (Mouffe, 2014: 23).

From this perspective, populisms in Latin America have been a way of generating process of change. Laclau praised populisms because it reintroduces in society a radical antagonism opposed to institutionalized, closed, elite forms of political life. Since his first works on populism, Laclau highlighted Peronism’s capacity to expand democratic imaginaries. Because he saw populist ruptures as democratizing, he argued that Chavism was a transition toward a more just and egalitarian society (Laclau, 2006: 60). Even when he praised Kirchnerism, of which he was a leading ideologist, he considered that it was a “halfway populism,” without the political efficacy of populism to polarize the polity (Peruzzotti, 2015: 397).

Laclau and Mouffe understand democratization as the transformation of power relations in society more than as an institutional political regime. Radical populisms staged this notion of democratization in their critiques to neoliberalism, restricted representative democracies, their
vindication of the state as the guarantor of social justice, an in their flirtation, in different shades, with socialism of the twenty-first century. For Correa, Chávez, and Morales, without economic and social democracy, there is no democracy. In Venezuela, the Constituent Assembly was explicitly called to “transform the state” and to reach “social and participatory democracy.” Unlike other countries where the state returned to correct the excesses of neoliberalism, in Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador it returned not only to regulate the market but to subject it to the state’s logic. Correa stated that the market was a good servant but a bad master. Chávez used his particular language to criticize neoliberalism: “Watch out to the dogma of the market. The invisible hand of the market is a hairy one” (2013a: 65). From the beginning, Correa proposed to place the state at the “forefront” after its discredit during neoliberalism (2008). Chávez proposed to “resurrect the state” and Morales promised to provide it with dignity and sovereignty. As Chávez said: “in essence, it is actually about creating a new state, resurrecting a state that was in a grave” (2013b: 298).

3.3 Populism as a mirror of democracy

If assessed from the principle of popular sovereignty and the promise to return power to the people, populism does not oppose to liberal democracy but is the expression of its redemptive side (Canovan, 1999). The debate includes a third stance that views populism as the mirror where democracy can look at its limits and find a way for popular legitimation. As stated by Canovan’s influential work (2005), liberalism often forgets its connections to popular sovereignty and presents itself as a bridle and restraint to its plebeian expressions. But liberalism, as a modern ideology, also promises to take the principle of equality to all the people, as a whole, and not only as individuals. Populism, like liberalism, gives political expression to notions of popular sovereignty. However, while the first recreates its redemptive promise, the second incarnates its pragmatic side through institutional arrangements. Instead of being the pathological expression of democracy, populism enables a better understanding of the complexities of democracy (Canovan, 1999: 2). From this perspective, politics shift to populism when democracy turns into a space void of redemptive promises; it then becomes a structure of power that creates insurmountable distance between rulers and ruled. The redemptive side surfaces when the ruled stop feeling part of institutions, parties, and the games in between them (1999: 13). It is then when the illusion of the direct re-encounter with the people rises, without any institutional mediation. Populism, as Canovan says, involves some type of revolt against power on behalf of the people (1999: 3).

While this third perspective aims to see consistencies and balances between populism and democracy, Latin America’s recent experience with radical populisms reveals moments of disturbing tension. Chávez, Morales, and Correa appealed to popular sovereignty to re-found political arrangements in their countries. They did it by appealing to a constituent power – the people as a founding power – against established power in the existing discredited democratic institutions. It dealt with the “transformative power” expressed in the new constitutions (McCoy, 2010: 81); constitutional revolutions that called upon the people as the constituent power. Some authors called this political practice “democracies in action” (Cameron and Sharpe, 2010: 63) – or, in Chávez’s language, protagonist democracies. Nonetheless, the processes of Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador show that, once constituent power is mobilized, it does not deactivate. It continues to being called upon legitimating plebiscitarian logics and the need to expand presidential power. Constituent power, electorally articulated in the figure of the leader, never ends up fully institutionalized. The call to constituent power creates the spectrum of an exceptional moment that is in permanent relation to the rules of the game and their validity within the framework of the created institutions.
Arditi (2009) argues that relations between populism and democracy do not always follow the logics of the mirror, that is, balance and rectification. He shows three possible modes of relationship: a simple visit, a disturbing presence, and a threat. Under the first, populism would be a civilized correction of democracy by personalizing political representation and including some plebiscitarian features to recover the contact with popular sovereignty – features that are widely found in modern democracies. In the second, the populist presence is disturbing because it displaces politics to the rougher edges of democratic life, but without breaking its limits. In the third, populism becomes the authoritarian, violent, and the reverse side of democracy.

After the last populist wave, using Arditi it could be argued that the relations between populism and democracy moved from disturbing to rupture, although the limits have never been clear. If this were the case, we would have to distinguish hard from soft forms of populisms (Peruzzotti, 2013). The characterizing feature of soft populisms would be the absence of the antagonistic dimension of politics, with which we run the risk to dilute its effectiveness as a strategy that generates an identifying process around a simple axis: the people versus its enemies (Peruzzotti, 2013: 69). Concurrently, the concept would lose its analytical efficacy. If we take Laclau’s theory, the transit from disturbing to rupture would be the moment of populist rupture itself, of building a popular subject, of replacing the logic of difference with the logic of antagonism; the rupture with institutions and not the registration of social demands within their rules and regulating environments (Panizza, 2009; Laclau, 2009).

4. Conclusions

In this chapter I have used the image of waves as a metaphor to analyze the presence of populism in Latin American politics from the first decades of the twentieth century. The wave refers to the moments when populist leaderships and movements simultaneously became predominant forces in several national contexts. As shown, in most cases this irruption transforms populisms into phenomena that mark and define long periods of political life. Such moments are identified with the leaders around whom they articulated – their rhetoric and trajectory – and a popular political will – the popular subject – in open confrontation with social and political structures identified with power. Identification with the leader, as a feature of Latin American populism, carries implicitly the deployment of different forms of antagonism with power on behalf of the lower classes. As accurately stated by Ernesto Laclau, there is surprising continuity in the political logic of populism.

Although populism was conceived as a transitory phenomenon linked to an early moment of socioeconomic modernization, its recurrence led to seek for other explanations for its constant resurgence. One of them considers populism as a particular way of responding to the crises of political representation triggered by tension between social inequalities and demands for political inclusion in critical junctures. The specific feature of populism would be the solution it offers to this contradiction that is common to modern capitalist societies. Populism leads to overtly anti-institutional solutions based on plebiscitarian linkages between the leader and the lower classes, and a view of democracy outside its liberal representative model. Populist ruptures opens a new political horizon based on redemptive and emancipating politics within the framework of a renewed community.

Populism displaces politics from the institutions to a space where rules are defined in an arbitrary and voluntaristic fashion due to the need to reproduce the plebiscitarian link on which the populist leadership’s legitimacy is erected. The link is reproduced insofar as the charismatic leader is capable of testing his heroism challenging the power of elites. The
dynamic of political exceptionality set up by populism explains its difficulty to institutionalize through stable rules of the political game. It also explains its authoritarian evolution and the lack of respect for political freedoms and rights. Institutionalization, as Weber stressed, wipes out charismatic authority.

Rather than considering populism as a mirror of democracy, where it can find its own limits to rediscover its redemptive side, I believe we must see populism as another form of democracy that vindicates the rights of the lower classes directly articulated to the figure of a charismatic leader. Populism has democratizing elements insofar as it vindicates and incorporates to the political life a social activism linked to a condition of subalternity connected to cleavages, where experiences of domination are configured in strongly hierarchic societies. Its proximity to or distance from democracy is not assessed in relation to a liberal representative model, which populism repudiates and combats upon a long anti-liberal tradition in Latin America. Such hostility toward democracy’s liberal components explains its authoritarian evolution. Democracy according to the populist tradition means more than respecting political freedoms and rights. It entails altering relations of power to generate inclusion and social justice. Political freedoms and rights in conditions of social injustice are considered to be a privilege of the well to do sectors of society.

Populism democratizing capacity is assessed by the dynamics of interaction between the leader and his followers, depending on if the prevailing logic runs downward or upward. In the first, the leader’s will is imposed upon lower classes by transforming them into uprooted masses in need for a fatherly tutelage. In the second, political conduction incorporates more mediations between social organizations and the political machine of the movement or party. In both cases, nevertheless, the movement’s legitimacy remains subject to the leader’s capacity to keep alive a redeeming and emancipating sense of the lower classes’ aspirations, both in a material and symbolic sense. The breakdown of power structures seems the condition for the processes of inclusion generated by populism.

Notes

1 The chart does not include all the experiences of populist leaders and governments in Latin America—it only shows emblematic cases of each populist wave analyzed in this chapter.
2 Defined as “radical populisms” in this chapter, in line with the approach by de la Torre and Arnson (2013).
3 For a critique of these visions see Laclau (1977), de la Torre (2004, 2010), Weyland (2004).
4 Every Saturday, for ten continuous years, Correa weekly broadcasted his Enlaces Ciudadanos (Citizen Liaison). These liaisons, popularly known as “sabatinas”, took place in different sites around the national territory.

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