The missing piece in global populism

The role populism played in Central America

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For decades now, Latin America has been identified as one of the most recurring sites of emergence and crystallization of populist leaderships and movements in the 20th and 21st centuries. Scholars studying politics in the region have identified the recurrent emergence of populism, in various waves, usually defined as “early”, “classical”, “neoliberal” and more recently “radical” populism. Reading through generations of academic work on this phenomenon, it seems that populism has been one of the most enduring styles of politics in the entire region. Yet, this observation prompts awareness of an often-ignored anomaly within the region; namely, the almost complete lack of theoretical and case study literature on Central American populism, at least until recent years, when Daniel Ortega’s political strategy and style in Nicaragua were addressed as populist, drawing on the same analytical categories applied to Hugo Chávez and other Chavista leaders and movements.

In this perspective, the present chapter tries to answer the question of whether the Central American Isthmus has been “a different planet” globally and particularly within Latin America in terms of populism. Specifically, whether the relative dearth of focus on this phenomenon in Central America is due to the lack of populism in the countries of the Isthmus; or, as I would rather suggest, the result of a lack of systematic research attention, itself due to the distinct theoretical lenses used when approaching Central America from analytical assumptions dissociated from those that students of populism in other Latin American societies have applied. Finding a tentative answer to this riddle, I argue, may throw some light on populism from an uncommon vantage point, while reviewing some of the analytical biases followed when approaching Central American societies.

Making sense of the recurrent emergence of populism in Latin America

Scholars of populism continue debating how to approach populism, whether it should be primarily characterized by the policies adopted at certain moments of sociopolitical development or as an analytical category defining a political style, rhetoric and/or mobilization
strategy with a wider comparative hold. Likewise, whether to stress its rhetoric or its praxis, the role of leadership mobilization vis-à-vis the weight of popular dissatisfaction and expectations, its democratic promise and sense of participation or the perils of its authoritarian seduction, to mention just some of the tensions inherent in populism (De la Torre 2000, 2015).

The recent global attention on the rise of a populist Zeitgeist on a global scale (Mudde 2004) has once more reawakened the relevance of understanding this phenomenon and the challenges it poses to the format of contemporary democracies. The phenomenon of populism has captivated the imagination of analysts for its capacity to redraw the boundaries of collective identity (e.g. Ochoa Espejo 2015); for its discursive stress on the “popular will”, triggering expectations, emotions and shifts in the sense of participation, while projecting a contradictory divisiveness and Manichean discourse (e.g. Armony and Armony 2005; Hawkins 2009); for its impact on mobilization practices and setting alternative criteria of regulation of access to power and resources (e.g. Jansen 2015; Roberts 2015; De la Torre 2017); and last but not least, for its effect redrafting the rules of distributive justice and equity (e.g. Ooxhorn 1998; Ellner 2005; Harnecker 2010).

Because of its complexity and inherent tensions, populism challenges several salient analytical perspectives in social science and particularly, political science. First, it defies institutional analysis as it focuses attention on the role of individual and mass agency subverting institutions, thus stressing the unstable balance between the regulation of power and the construction of trust and legitimation, which do not always go together. Second, it defies an analysis in terms of ideologies and doctrines, as populism just projects a “latent set of ideas” (Hawkins 2009: 1045), many of them pragmatic and confrontational, sometimes even conspirational. At best, it can be considered following Cas Mudde, just

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

(Mudde 2004: 543; see also Panizza 2005)

That is, a phenomenon not determined by constitutions or coherent ideological commitments, but rather eliciting both emotions and rational calculation. Likewise, populism also defies class analysis, i.e. an equation of material interests and political moves, since populists mobilize support and participation across the social ladder, while once in power most populist leaders refrain from revolutionary transformations and rather remain reformists (Álvarez Junco 1994; De la Torre 2000; Weyland 2003; Freidenberg 2007).

Whatever the definition followed, there is wide agreement that Latin America has been a most salient regional setting of populism, as it witnessed wave after wave of populist leaders reaching state power and mobilizing wide sectors of the population. Indeed, while populism has been present worldwide, at least since the 1860s–70s with the Russian Narodnik movement and the 1880s–90s with the US populist movement and Populist Party (Canovan 1981; Collier 2002, 2015; Kazin 2014) among world regions, Latin America stands up comparatively due to the persistent yet intermittent emergence of populism throughout the 20th century and into the early 21st century. Few macro-regions have witnessed such crystallization of wave after wave of populist leaders and movements (Roniger 2013). Historian Alan Knight suggested once that, although not ubiquitous, its recurrence in the region indicated “some affinity with the Latin American reality”, reflecting “deeper sociopolitical relationships and perceptions” (Knight 1998: 224, 234). Populism first emerged in the region in the early 20th
century, with demands of political inclusion which were channeled by “early” or “proto”-populist leaders such as Hipólito Yrigoyen, Arturo Alessandri and Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre; followed by “classic” populists in the era of import-substitution industrialization of the 1930s–50s, such as Getulio Vargas, Lázaro Cárdenas and Juan Domingo Perón; “neo”-populists such as Carlos Andrés Pérez, Carlos Menem or Alberto Fujimori predicating a globalizing creed in the late 1980s and 1990s; and more recently, “radical” populists such as Hugo Chávez, Andrés Manuel López Obrador or the early Rafael Correa, carrying out a Left-leaning agenda. Beyond the shifting circumstances and political leanings of each populist wave, there has been a thread of continuity in the appeal of such leaders to turn the political arena of their countries into the setting of a moral-ethical struggle, in which—so they claimed—they stood as embodiment of the general will of the “people”, deemed to generate a more genuine and just democracy.

Recognizing this trend should not lead to presume that populist leadership has been universal in the region. Indeed, many Latin American politicians leading the third wave of democratization did not use a populist political strategy. Raúl Alfonsín in Argentina, José Sarney in Brazil or Patricio Aylwin in Chile, who launched the process of re-democratization in the 1980s and early 1990s, did not pursue such strategy, even though the first two carried out policies of over-spending, which analysts may define as economic populism. And neither were populists later presidents such as Fernando Henrique Cardoso in Brazil; Jorge Batlle, Tabaré Vásquez and José Mujica in Uruguay; or Chilean presidents Eduardo Frei Ruiz-Tagle, Ricardo Lagos and Michele Bachelet (for an attempt to identify and rank presidents’ populist discourse, see Hawkins 2009). Generalizing, there is also ground to assume that populist leaderships and movements are affected primarily by the structure and effectiveness of party systems (Roberts 2015); indeed, populist leaderships and movements have been less central in the region where strong parties have elicited the vast support of citizens, as in Colombia or Chile. Also, the cases in which populist movements endured are rather rare, being more common those cases of intermittent, truncated, failed or ephemeral populist leaderships (Knight 1998: 248, Roniger 2013). As Rovira Kaltwasser and Jansen have pointed out, it is important to consider negative cases, “since they show that the rise of populism should be seen not as a mechanical development, but rather as a process that is strongly conditioned by both political agency and the national and historical context (Rovira Kaltwasser 2015: 190; see also Jansen 2015: 176–178).

Moreover, for students of Latin American populism, its different waves posed a challenge in terms of interpretation, since the specific forms of mobilization and policies carried out by populists in positions of power and decision-making varied from one wave to another. Unsurprisingly, as Robert Jansen (2015) has indicated, the analytical lens approaching this phenomenon have changed. In the 1950s, both modernization theories and Marxism led to stress the economic and social components behind mass mobilization by leaders creating multi-class coalitions unsettling older elites. A generation later, in the 1970s and 80s, the emphasis moved to collective action and to populist discourse, the latter a trend anchored then in cultural studies and culminating later in Ernesto Laclau’s analysis of the logic of social and discursive action (Laclau 2005). Finally, a third generation of analysts were forced to address populist leaders enforcing neoliberal policies, thus shifting again analysis to a weak democratic incorporation by political parties and the top-down political mobilization by populist leaders (Jansen 2015). Debate did not conclude with the recent waves of populism. The rebirth of populism of very disparate political leanings in the 1980s–90s and in the 2000s had important theoretical implications, as it challenged representative democracy from within, among wide sectors of society, and allowed rethinking the workings of the mechanisms of representation in
the Latin American republics. Indeed, the rise and following deacceleration of Chavismo has once more projected analyses stressing the popular dissatisfaction with the workings of representative Liberal democracy and the expectations of inclusion, channeled into coalitions of fragmented elites and popular sectors, yet sustained by various mediating networks and mechanisms; that is, a “style of doing politics” that can “be appropriated by a wide range of political subjectivities, with distinct modes of political mobilization, participation and leadership” (Roberts 2015: 140).

As stressed by Carlos de la Torre, populism is parasitic to democratic legitimacy, and this opens the way for varied forms of “populist ruptures”, of construction of the category of “the people” and of populist performance, some leading to democratizing tendencies reinforcing autonomy or the more likely scenario of top-down controls and manipulation (De la Torre 2017; Rovira Kaltwasser 2015). Both in more traditional societies such as Bolivia and in more mobilized polities as Venezuela and Chile, leaders emerged, who – relying symbolically on a popular or even anti-establishment sentiment – launched promises of immediate solutions to old unsolved problems. Some of them, like Hugo Chávez of Venezuela, had a very personalist style of persuasion and control, and put forward an anti-neoliberal program and rhetoric. Others, such as Chilean Joaquín Lavín, the mayor of Las Condes and 1999 presidential candidate of the UDI, based their platform on a right-wing agenda, while still relying on a strong popular basis and populist rhetoric. President Alan García of Peru advanced anti-neoliberal populism, while presidents Carlos Menem (Argentina), Alberto Fujimori (Peru) and Fernando Collor de Mello (Brazil) were supporters of a globalizing model of economic development. Michael Conniff – the editor of two books on Latin American populism – concluded that, until the emergence of Chavismo, the wave of populist leaders of the 1980s–90s was characterized by their exposure to the international arena, their mastery of “global talk” and their ability to portray themselves as the embodiment of the new global trends, including the use of political marketing as part of their strategy of being in touch with the “people”. The “unlikely” emergence of populist leaders adopting neoliberal policies gave credence to research lines stressing style and discourse over policy content. Yet, soon after the publication of Conniff’s second collection of essays in 1999, the rise of the so-called radical, Left-wing populist figures, starting with Chávez, moved back the balance to the question of policy strategies and their implementation by populist leaders, thus recreating the ambivalence in the populist equation of leadership styles and policy contents.

Before we move on, we should characterize succinctly what has been the common denominator of both the new and old forms of populism in Latin America. Irrespective of the theoretical perspective adopted, and each has its pros-and-cons, both the new and old forms of populism exhibit a series of recurrent key components in the region:

- populism usually arises following crises of representation by political parties and socio-economic predicaments, with the populist leader claiming to be the voice and incarnation of “the people”;
- the movement seems to address the expectations of those social forces feeling excluded or hit hard by macro-economic policies, thus projecting promises of existential short-term solutions, even when in practice most of them did not disengage from the systemic adherence to free market policies;
- popular sectors are mobilized by leaders appealing to their fears and expectations and enabling a sense of participation in public affairs, unlike “elitist” politics. The leader-masses bond seems rooted not only in cognitive-rational elements but often in emotive
bonds and existing discourse frames, buttressed by a certain style of addressing the masses, directed at the most popular sectors of the population;

- the discursive construct of “the people” – as standing opposed to the elite – follows lines of socioeconomic and political exclusion, not ethnic or other primordial terms. This stands in sharp contrast with populism in Africa or Europe, where ethnicity and race often define the boundaries of who is perceived as belonging or alien to the “people” (see e.g. Jansen 2015);
- populism relies on multi-class support and concomitantly a tendency to detachment from coherent, clear-cut ideologies, albeit not lacking, however, ideological tone;
- the result is a “politics of anti-politics”, which may weaken even further some of the basic institutions of representative democracy; in some cases, a foundational impetus is reflected in constitutional changes, thus buttressing a more general trend, in which political parties cease to be the promoters and mediators of utopia, in the terms of Manuel Alcántara Sáenz (2003), with individual leaders replacing them;
- a correlate appropriation of voice by the leader occurs, based on an existing frame of thought and discourse, may reinforce authoritarian tendencies, top-down controls and what Guillermo O’Donnell (1994) once defined as “delegative democracy”;
- almost in contrasting direction, there is a tendency toward a permanent call to plebiscitary-like decisions, based on hitherto unfulfilled expectations of political and social inclusion. There is a symbolic empowerment of popular sectors through these calls to return power to “the people” instead of citizenship, thus obviating horizontal and vertical accountability. In this context, it is important to remember that leadership is bolstered by and relies on mediating structures and brokerage networks, as stressed by Alan Knight (1998) and Raanan Rein (1998, 2008), many of them of a clientelistic structure (Roniger 2012);
- consequently, an emphasis on executive power overrides other branches of government, the rule of law and the division of powers, and often leading to “legislation by decree” and, more recently, to “(re)foundational” constitutional changes.

Both in the old and the more recent formats, populism is parasitic to the paramount place of democratic legitimacy in the region, following the demise of dictatorships and authoritarian interregnums, while reflecting a persistent widespread dissatisfaction with the unfulfilled expectation of democratic inclusion. In addition, populism has implied a renewed projection and reconstruction of the category of the “people” as sovereign and a republican commitment to entitlements and social justice, which contradicts the logic of the free market, often burdened by political corruption. That is, even when betrayed as some populist leaders reach power, populism expresses visions of communitarian and participatory democracy, buttressed by recurrent outbursts of occupation of public spaces, which the combination of populist rhetoric and ineffective policies recreate from time to time at the center of the public arena. Consequently, populism has also involved a persistent threat to the institutionalization of representative democracy in its minimalist, liberal electoral version.

Connecting the new forms of populism to the early and mid-20th-century forms, one may conclude that the renewed emergence of populism is at the core of “doing politics” in Latin America. These persistent dimensions of populism are important as we try to assess the seeming absence of populism in Central America, which contrasts with its recurrent presence identified in most South American nations.

**A lack of populism or a myopia of analytical lenses?**

The lack of works on Central American populism is astounding. Illustrative perhaps is the Library of the Ibero-Americanisches Institut in Berlin, where one finds several dozen works...
on Latin American populism, yet almost none devoted to populism in one of the countries of the Isthmus. Similarly, as one looks at collective volumes on populism in Latin America, only rarely one finds a chapter on Central America. Exceptional in this respect is William F. Robinson’s chapter on “Panama for the Panamanians”, on Arnulfo Arias Madrid (Robinson 1999). Furthermore, even when a work includes a specific chapter on Central America in a book on populism, as is the case of *Miraculous Metamorphoses*, the collective volume edited by Demmers, Fernandes and Hogenboom (2001), the analytical focus is biased away of populism. Specifically, in the case of Biekart’s contribution in that volume, the focus is the defeat of the revolutionary Left, in a line unrelated to theories of populism or findings about populism there (Biekart 2001: 182–200). In an otherwise very interesting paper by Kenneth Roberts on “Latin America’s Populist Revival”, the author refers in passing to Nicaragua and El Salvador, where ‘populist mobilization and social reform had been nipped in the bud by repression or cooptation during the ISI era” (Roberts 2007: 14). To base this statement, Roberts relied on a book by Charles Brockett (2005), which is completely silent about populism in Central America, prompting readers to question the evidence behind that assessment.

Silence is even more evident when shifting from works on populism to general treaties on Central American politics. One may check the table of contents and indexes of books on political parties and democracy in the region, and not find a single mention about populism as a concept deemed worth mentioning in the index, even in books with cursory mentions to populism in the text itself (e.g. Goodman, LeoGrande and Forman Johanna 1992: 216–217).

A review of Kees Bierkart’s contribution on Central America in *Miraculous Metamorphoses* – a book on populism – reveals the analytical tools commonly used to look at the political development of the region in the 20th century.

The core analytical framework portrays a long process of demands of political participation systematically denied by governments, which since the 1930s repressed the attempts of social reform. Increasingly, these governments were dominated by the military, which entered in strategic alliances with the oligarchy or dominated the state apparatus. The double denial of the dominant classes, refusing to introduce social reforms and unwilling to open the political arena to new reformist parties (e.g. of the urban middle sectors), led to political radicalization, escalation of violence and armed struggle reaching its climax in the civil wars and military interventions of the 1980s. Bierkart acknowledged the country differences in the Isthmus, but the general framework of analysis built up a narrative of unfulfilled expectations, struggle and repression, anchored in class analysis and claiming that much of this inability to reform was due to the virtual absence of an independent middle class in Central America.

The problem does not stem from following a path-dependent line of analysis. Indeed, such an approach has been applied to Central American countries with success, for instance, by James Mahoney’s comparative, long-term analysis of the region. Mahoney focused on choices of key actors at critical junctures, which in turn led to the formation of institutions with self-reproducing properties, shaping a series of reactions and counter-reactions that culminated in the creation of major regime outcomes. Specifically, as he looked at the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Mahoney identified a major differentiation under the Liberals, between countries in which the Liberal rulers faced intense political threats and accordingly built powerful militaries while pursuing radical policy options (Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua); and those other countries in which none of this occurred, namely, Honduras and Costa Rica. Per him, this led to the emergence of three types of Liberal reform – a radical type in Guatemala and El Salvador; a reformist type of Liberalism in Costa Rica; and an aborted type of Liberalism in Honduras and Nicaragua. The latter two types lacked the polarized rural class structures and coercive military apparatuses of the first, while in addition
the third type lacked emergent agrarian elites with significant political power and a centralized state apparatus, as typical of the reformist type.

The analysis then moved to the 20th century, assessing if major democratizing episodes occurred in the aftermath of the liberal reforms and whether these were successful or not. Per Mahoney, military-authoritarianism became the regime outcome in Guatemala and El Salvador, as major democratizing episodes failed. Liberal democracy was the regime outcome in Costa Rica, as the major democratizing moves were successful, and traditional dictatorship was the regime outcome in Honduras and Nicaragua as there were no major democratizing episodes in their 20th-century development (Mahoney 2001).

With all its sophistication, again such a line of analysis does not address populism. At most, the framework could predict populism only in Costa Rica, where liberal democracy was the regime outcome. Since, as we know, populism exists because of the legitimating principle of popular sovereignty, which is at the core of representative democracy but falls short of being implemented (Prud’homme 2001). In dictatorships – whether military-authoritarian or traditional – this mechanism of “auto-correction” of the gap between the promises and their fulfillment, is likely to be excluded from the start. And yet, as I shall try to show later, the cases of populism in the region do not follow this scheme of analysis, begetting the question of the analytical optic adopted.

A word of caution is needed on the use of comparative analysis. Some observers would claim that each case is unique and therefore we should refrain from comparative analysis and from the vain expectation that certain categories as populism should retain their usefulness across borders. I claim that at least one should try to assess the comparative relevance of analytical categories. Much can be gained from comparative research, especially if related to more recent perspectives on transnationalism and connected histories (Werner and Zimmermann 2006; Iriye 2013). The question is how to proceed. Perhaps the initial decision is whether to take a most dissimilar-systems design or a most similar-systems design, which will lead to completely diverse lines of comparative research and generate different types of hypotheses.

An interesting study following the first perspective is that of Marco Palacios (2001), who contrasted 20th-century Colombia and Venezuela in terms of populism and violence. Building on two dissimilar and contrasting cases, Palacios reached the conclusion that Venezuela avoided Colombia’s violence due to its presence of populism. The claim was that if one brings populism into the political equation, one can avoid violence. Complementing this, one may suspect the inverse correlation: find violence and you may stop looking for populism, which may be true in some contexts and yet – as we shall see – inaccurate in others.

The contrast between Colombia and Venezuela led Palacios to suggest some hypothesis about Central America:

Once we have formulated the Colombia-Venezuela contrast as an option between populism and violence, we should mention already now that the revolutionary guerrillas and the diverse forms of counter-insurgency seem to settle better in countries such as Nicaragua, Guatemala and El Salvador that, similarly to Colombia, were characterized by the inexistence or failure of populism.

(Palacios 2001: 328)

The preceding “inexistence or failure” clause was rather ambiguous, since these two are radically different situations. Moreover, Guatemala and El Salvador have had radically different experiences from Nicaragua in terms of the focus of this chapter. The problem with the most
dissimilar systems design strategy is that, in addition to populism, there are many other variables that could explain the dependent variable. To mention but just two: take the diverse party systems or the degree of regional autonomy. And there is no possibility of triangulation. Relying on what seemingly are just two totally opposed cases, we may fail following multiple comparative angles.

Particularly in the cases under consideration, what merits a most similar-systems design to be complemented by a transnational perspective, is the existence of various countries in the Isthmus, five of which trace their origins back to a single political entity in late colonial and early independent times and since then being involved intermittently in transnational dynamics (Roniger 2011). Such strategy, involving the analysis of various countries and multiple situations, avoids looking for contrasts and a single-sided explanation, and may allow to trace both negative cases and various populist manifestations, including recurrent, transient and truncated forms of populism.

**Central America: a multiplicity of political scenarios**

Reviewing the occurrence or lack of populism on a country-by-country basis reveals a variety of political paths and strategies of control and mobilization in the region. Through such review, the disjuncture between analytical binary conceptualizations and the political strategies followed intermittently, including populism, stands out.

Our inquiry should start with Guatemala and El Salvador, which seem to fit within Palacios’ thesis. The early 20th century popular mobilization met harsh repression already in La Matanza of 1932 in El Salvador. In Guatemala, the general strike that ended Jorge Ubico’s rule in 1944 and opened a decade of reforms with Juan José Arévalo and Jacobo Arbenz, came to an end with the intervention of 1954. Accordingly, these two countries experienced waves of mobilization and repression, failed attempts at insurrection (e.g. in El Salvador), guerrilla movements (earlier on in Guatemala) and massive human-rights violations related to the counter-insurgency strategy of the power-holders and their US allies (with a typical genocidal character in Guatemala). They only emerged partially from this violent dynamic in the 1990s, in 1992 in El Salvador and 1996 in Guatemala. This dynamic of repression of popular demands indeed nullified the emergence of populism.

It is in Costa Rica where, at least in terms of Mahoney’s analysis, we should expect to find populism. Reinforcing this expectation, one can find documents by international observers, as in the following excerpt from a report by the Mission of the Socialist International to Latin America in March 1978:

> The Partido Liberación Nacional of Costa Rica has the élan of being a “classic” social-democratic party of Latin America, a party that was once within lines that were formerly characterized as “populist” or of “democratic Left”.

*(Socialist International 1978: 20)*

Liberación Nacional was intimately tied to the figure of José Figueres. Contrasting with Somoza, one of his most hated enemies, Figueres had no wish to encourage a personalist, caudillo-like style of politics. While he was the dominant figure in the PLN, he encouraged a plural executive and his co-founders and close associates did not idolize him. Influenced very early on by Raúl Haya de la Torre (the founder of APRA, the American Revolutionary Popular Alliance), he emphasized nationalism, continental solidarity with anti-dictatorial movements and anti-imperialism, although not anti-yankee sentiment. In the domestic front,
he prioritized a commitment to social justice, multi-class harmony (*solidaridad multi-clasista*)
and cultural advancement.

In style, however, as Charles Ameringer indicated in a political biography of Figueres
written in the late 1970s, by the early 1950s that leader resembled a schoolteacher more than a
politician: he lectured citizens and explained his plans for Costa Rica. Still,

> [A]lthough he tended to talk down to his audience, he had the common touch; without
regard for time or schedule, he mingled freely in crowds, visited private homes, and took
*arroz y frijoles* with the people of the villages and towns. He was at his best among the
rural folk of the Central Plateau but seemed unable to reach effectively the urban poor of
San José and the banana workers of both coasts.

*(Ameringer 1978: 104)*

It seems that in terms of his rhetorical and discursive styles, Figueres did not feign being
one of the people. His speeches were indeed self-reinforcing from the perspective of the
rank-and-file *ticos* and *ticas*, but he avoided focusing on an external enemy (e.g. the US) to
rally his supporters. He also did not predicate class struggle, and being himself a member of
the landed class, he rather focused on social justice and multi-class solidarity, a position
close to the paternalist attitudes he learned to hold dear in his own estate of *La lucha sin fin*
(Guerra 1997).

In terms of policy content, the combination of political democracy and socioeconomic
issues was not new to Costa Rica when Figueres first became a political figure of national
projection, following his radio speech against President Calderón Guardia in 1940 and his
subsequent forced exile for two years. In WWI, President Gónzalez Flores first talked of an
integral democracy that should address the socioeconomic status of its citizens. To carry his
policies, he clashed with the “block in power” that included agro-exporters, importers-traders
and bankers. It was Gónzalez Flores – who was deposed by Federico Tinoco in 1917 – who
triggered the connection between nationalist and progressive principles in Costa Rica
(Rodríguez 1990). Furthermore, this combined emphasis on the creation of a socially
responsive state and an anti-oligarchic and anti-imperialist stance was rather widespread
throughout the entire Isthmus, at least among the networks of unionists dreaming of
recreating the Central American union in the last decades of the 20th century (García Giráldez
2005).

In the same line, President Calderón Guardia is to be credited with a wide work of reform.
A young president, elected at 40 and inspired in the early 20th-century social doctrine of the
Catholic Church, he introduced social security, a system of prevision to support incapacity,
old age and death, especially aimed at improving the living conditions of the working classes.
Similarly, he introduced the minimum salary and a working day of eight hours, and
recognized the right of joining a trade union. As part of this ambitious program, President
Calderón also expanded the state administration and the presence of the state in outsourcing
contracts, which in turn served the opposition to decry bureaucracy and favoritism. His
alliance with the Communist party, to carry out his reformist program, further enraged those
willing to depose him, including the young Figueres, who opted for the option of civil
disobedience and an armed rebellion, paying for it with exile.

The principled point here is that Figueres did not invent the program of social justice and
of economic opportunity, but rather claimed to be the first to take these reforms seriously as
to implement them in fact, making them a permanent feature of the Costa Rican institutional
framework.
This leads to a third point regarding the atypical character of Figueres as a populist leader. He created a set of autonomous institutions to carry out this program and abided by the democratic process in the form of respect for the electoral procedures. Although he feuded bitterly with other politicians to continue leading his political camp, he did encourage public administration by civil service and promoted the organization of labor and other groups in society. In short, he seemed to have been a social democrat focused on institutional building, a fact also reinforced by his move to cancel the military after the short civil war of 1948.

Yet, if one needed evidence to reject the thesis suggested by Palacios based on the seeming contrast between Colombia and Venezuela, one could look at Honduras, in which there was no violence equivalent to that of Guatemala or El Salvador. Albeit the case of Honduras is the most unclear in terms of populism, mostly due to a lack of scholarly attention, as far as I can assess what characterized Honduras were reformist attempts that did not make use of populist strategies but relied rather on clientelism and/or the repression of the opposition. Even if lacking in populism, Honduras witnessed a series of reformist and developmental waves, some of them led by civilians and others, by the military in power (Barahona 2005). In 2009, democratically elected president Manuel Zelaya was removed from office for trying to go forward with a “consultation” that could lead to a referendum possibly launching a constitutional assembly to reform the constitution, thus allowing presidential re-election. The fear of Congress, the Supreme Court, most of the media, and even politicians in his own party that Zelaya intended to take a populist turn and imitate Hugo Chávez’s control of power led to his removal from office and exile, with relatively little popular resistance (Corrales 2013: 37–38).

On the other end of the populist spectrum we find Panama, where we already mentioned the work on Arnulfo Arias as populist leader and where also Omar Torrijos seems to have followed a similar strategy of political mobilization. Arnulfo Arias started his political career in 1932, as he led a successful popular uprising which opened the political system. In his first term as president, he served for one year in 1940–1, changing the Constitution and introducing reforms at a hectic pace, creating social agencies, organizing services, reforming the administration. While then, his severe and authoritarian character was unpalatable and led to the coup d’état only one year and eight days after his inauguration, his exile and later imprisonment (after his return in 1945 and a failed coup) projected his image as a popular leader ousted by the ruling elite. Arias’ strategy was to rely on the sense of political exclusion, on the patriotic irredentism of Panamanians regarding the Canal and on the interested support of the administration’s personnel, mobilized through a series of political parties he founded, such as Partido Revolucionario Auténtico, the Partido Panameñista and the Panameñista Auténtico. In later years, he reached the presidency time and again, being robbed once again of the electoral results or deposed, as in 1949 and in 1968 (after 11 days in office).

Even his opponents, as the powerful head of police General Antonio Remón, who placed him in power and soon dethroned him in 1949, or Omar Torrijos, who deposed him in 1968 and became the de facto ruler of the country until his death in 1980, copied his patriotic nationalist emphasis on Panameñismo and his organizational strategies, in the parties that they founded, the Coalición Patriótica Nacional and the Partido Revolucionario Auténtico, respectively (Priestley 1986). None of them, however, had the prestige and mobilization capacity of Arias (Porras 1990). In the literature one finds the claim that all his life, Torrijos considered Arias (who passed away seven years after Torrijos’ deadly air flight accident) his nemesis, envious of the popular support of Arias and unable to gain it himself, thus prone to use repression more widely in addition to cooptation (Velásquez 1993: ch. 3). Suspicious as the claim is coming from those opposed to Torrijos, Arias enjoyed wide support, especially as...
he was denied his political rights and ostracized, becoming the embodiment of exclusion and of the drive for anti-establishment politics.

Surprisingly enough, Arias seems to have been unattached to discursive manipulation and was rather hierarchical and authoritarian in his personal outlook. Trying to explain his enormous popularity and long standing political leadership in Panama, César Quintero drafted in 1988 the following picture:

[His popularity and leadership] have been rooted in his extraordinary capacity to take decisions and carry them out; his absolute lack of hesitation and timidity; his incapacity of giving up or accepting defeat by his enemies; his personal and civic courage; his natural authority and capacity to order others; his steady conviction of assessing what the country needed. The Dr. Arnulfo Arias was not an elaborate speaker or writer. And neither was he a sweet or adulating politician. He was not a leader of *parrandas* and neither a *populachero*. He detested flattering and politically motivated embraces, and demanded that everyone should keep distance and his place. In sum, Arnulfo Arias was not a demagogue. As a statesman, his image was not of the good-hearted leader, tolerant and forgiving, but that of an energetic, sever and even authoritarian leader. Well known and proverbial are his acid replies to improper petitions or propositions by the unavoidable opportunists and ambitious individuals who always roam around persons of prestige or power.

*(Quintero 1990: 614)*

Nicaragua is commonly put together with Guatemala and El Salvador in terms of repressive rule and lack of populism. Yet, the work done by Jeffrey Gould (1990) revealed that from 1936 to the mid-1960s, the Somozas attempted to develop passive or active labor support as part of a populist strategy to establish a hegemonic control over Nicaraguan society. As part of this strategy, they appropriated the very language and symbolic imagery of *obrerismo* – the political idiom of the popular classes – and coopted labor leaders. Anastasio Somoza García attempted to portray himself as the guarantor of labor aspirations in the face of Conservative opposition. Gould showed that Somoza García was allied to the Conservatives, he repressed labor strikes, but when he lost that support in 1937–44, increasingly he relied on the labor movement and moved to unify it, as he attempted to wrest control of the unions from the Socialists.

Labor organization was part of the Somoza’s strategy – as much as Perón’s in Argentina – to politically debilitate the landed oligarchy and establish his hegemony over the Nicaraguan political system. Only when the Somoza’s economic interests increased, the ruler and his son Luis after him moved to repress autonomous labor leaders, even those who were Somocistas, while trying to maintain the loyalty of the rank-and-file workers. Repression increased after the assassination of Somoza father in 1956 but still in 1958–9 Luis Somoza Debayle, like his father, tried to maintain elite support while at the same time coopting the popular movement, alternating, ignoring or repressing the peasant movement. Per Gould, only Anastasio (Tachito) Somoza Debayle made no serious effort to develop or control popular movements, since as commander in chief of the Guardia Nacional, he was aware that the labor and peasant movements had already escaped Somocista political discourse (Gould 1990: 250).

This move away from the populist strategy of Somoza father, together with the evident loss of elite and popular support in the 1970s, especially after the 1972 earthquake in Managua, will solidify the opposition forces and led eventually to the only case of a successful insurrection in Central America, that of the FSLN in 1979. The events of the Sandinista
Revolution and the subsequent Central American transnational conflict would relegate the memory of Somoza’s populism to almost oblivion, as reflected in the way most monographs in the 1980s and 1990s analyzed Nicaragua’s political development. Nonetheless, studies such as Victoria González-Rivera’s, done in the 2000s, revealed the vitality of reconstructed and invented memories of Somocista populism, particularly but not only among those women who had benefitted from the modernizing impetus and clientelistic policies of those “better times”, which were seen as a striking contrast to the neoliberal policies of dismantling of the state apparatus and growing unemployment, carried out by the Liberal administrations of Arnoldo Alemán and Enrique Bolaños (González-Rivera 2010). Moreover, the Nicaraguan case indicates that one can have populism and still violence and revolution in the same case.

The return of Daniel Ortega to power following the 2006 election, resembled in many ways the earlier pattern of populist leadership. As Karen Kampwirth showed, after losing presidential campaigns in 1990, 1996 and 2001, Ortega had moved from collective revolutionary leadership to an increasingly personalist and populist style, that allowed him – following private pacts with Arnoldo Alemán’s Partido Liberal Constitucionalista leading to share in the spoils of power with both leaders avoiding criminal trials, in Ortega’s case due to his stepdaughter’s accusation of year-long sexual harassment and rape – to win the presidency with only 38% of the vote (Kampwirth 2010). Rising in the wings of Venezuelan financial support and using it in partisan and often discretionary ways through the newly created Citizen Power Committees and the Cabinet of Citizen Power led by his spouse, Rosario Murillo – currently elected as Vice-President of Nicaragua – Ortega accumulated power to the detriment of other branches of government and the fragmented political opposition, that was unable to recover from the weakening of Alemán’s PLC. Once in power, Ortega continued to draw on populist rhetoric of defending the poor against Somocistas, the oligarchy, imperialists and the elite, while resorting to partisan, clientelistic tactics and moving to marginalize autonomous mass media and neutralize mechanisms of control and independent accountability (Chamorro, Jarquín and Bendaña 2009; Foro 2016). Still, a different transnational support for representative democracy, along with Ortega’s pragmatism – evident in supporting the Catholic push to ban therapeutic abortion and in maintaining macro-economic policies and cooperation with the USA and international financial organizations, following the loss of Venezuelan support – likely deterred him for almost a decade from taking the repressive road that his populist predecessor Somoza García and his sons adopted in detriment of previous populist cooption in the 20th century. More recently, however, popular protest against the project of building a mega-canal connecting the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean (Amnesty 2017) and against the 2018 reform of the pension system has been met with repression, signaling that after a decade as president, Ortega may be relying more on a top-down, personalistic and rather authoritarian exercise of executive power.

Conclusions and a call for further research

The preceding analysis uncovered a complex constellation of populist instances in Central America: a case typified as populist that turns on closer analysis to be a case of social-democratic reformism building institutional autonomy, which is rather atypical of populist leaders and movements (Costa Rica); and cases of recurrent emergence of populist leaders in Panama and Nicaragua. In the latter, from the mid-1930s to the mid-1960s we identified a clear-cut case of traditional dictatorship passing through a decade-long populist phase, albeit combined with a repressive apparatus; and in the 2000s, a personalist populist leader as head of state, which has increasingly controlled the other branches of government and used social
justice rhetoric and corporatist mobilization to maintain power. Three societies in the region do not seem to have been fertile grounds for the emergence of populism: Guatemala and El Salvador, involved in radicalized and polarized struggle in the framework of Cold War strategy and Honduras, where reformist waves were led in the context of traditional domination.

Thus, we recognize a dividing line between El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, where there seems to be no populism at all, and Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama, with indications of populism. In the first set stand out El Salvador and Guatemala, where hegemonic social and political structures resisted attempts at reform and stiffed mass protest through increasing repression and militarization from the 1970s to the 1990s. Contrastingly, the combination of authoritarianism and mild reforms characterized the Honduran scene, obviating major outbreaks of violence.

The other set of countries can be divided into two different constellations: on the one hand, Costa Rica, where populism was subsumed under the logic of a party system working effectively, due to the commitment of a charismatic leader – Don Pepe Figueres – to representative democracy. On the other, Panama and Nicaragua, where leaders followed populist strategies both rhetorically and organizationally to sustain themselves in power, with Arias never being able to capitalize on it on a sustained basis, Somoza managing to do it for a relatively long period, shifting intermittently between populism and repression, and Torrijos making a similar attempt in Panama, cut by his accidental death. The recent style of doing politics in Nicaragua recreated that pattern, as Daniel Ortega came back to power in November 2016 for a third term in office, still projecting social rhetoric while following top-down strong personalistic tendencies, albeit tempered by pragmatism in macro-economic policies.

Looking at these cases, it seems that, at least until recently, research has largely ignored the occurrence of populism in Central America. Even if not universally present in these countries, there are important cases of populist leadership in the Isthmus. As Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser indicated, “the rise of populism should be seen not as a mechanical development, but rather as a process that is strongly conditioned by both political agency and the national and historical context” (2015: 190). Likewise, there is much variance in the incidence and forms of populism – in some instances, populism was a tactical means toward institutional building, as was the case with Figueres in Costa Rica. In other cases, populism has been part of a leader’s personalistic and authoritarian strategy, as in the cases of Arias and Torrijos in Panama and of Somoza and Ortega in Nicaragua.

A parallel distinction, no less germane, is that differentiating between leaders whose populism contributed to making it part of institutional continuity, as in Nicaragua and Costa Rica, with all their differences and distinct outcomes; and those cases where a truncated period in power by a populist leader led to attempts of “a second coming” – and a third and fourth coming in the case of Arias – and to the adoption of similar populist styles by political figures – e.g. Torrijos – opposing the “original” leader.

Populism maintains an ambiguous relationship with representative democracy, as much in Central America as in other societies. While it poses a persistent threat to its institutionalization in its minimalist, electoral version, it claims to be responsive to the “people” as sovereign and recreates a republican commitment to social justice, promising wider access to entitlements. Thus, its potential symbolic empowerment of popular sectors and reinforcement of the democratic predicament, which some populist leaders articulate into more open channels whereas others appropriate that voice and turn it into authoritarian channels to keep power and control. As we have seen, Central American 20th and 21st-century political history includes notable cases of populism, albeit not necessarily of a single character or similar dynamics.
The lack of systematic research attention to this phenomenon in Central America seems to have derived from the excessive emphasis on violence in the region, an optic probably still dominated by the images of the Cold War and the illicit networks of drug and human trafficking of the post-war period. More systematic research on populism in Central America is needed. At this stage, we may forecast that with the continuous regional support for democracy, along with persisting socioeconomic challenges and unsatisfied popular expectations from the representative electoral system, we should expect that the populist style of doing politics will keep emerging time and again, albeit assuming a varied and dynamic physiognomy in the societies of the region.

Note

1 I find much value in such a path-dependent line and took such an orientation in earlier works conducted on the Southern Cone (e.g. Roniger 1997; Roniger and Sznajder 1999).

References


