The chapters in this volume show the diversity of populism globally, and how it challenges the theory and practice of democracy. In this concluding chapter we point to some areas for future research. We first explore whether it is desirable to agree on a minimal definition of populism. Then we look at the dynamics of populist diffusion and learning. The following section analyzes the advantages of looking at populism internationally and from the global south. The subsequent section asks questions for further research on gender and populism. Finally, we explore the relationships between populism, democratization, and authoritarianism.

Minimal or classical definitions

Despite the calls for minimal definitions of populism that would facilitate the accumulation of knowledge, or comparative studies (Anselmi 2018), the chapters in this volume illustrate that there is no consensus on one theory of populism. Some contributors adhere to and develop the main theoretical perspectives discussed in this volume. For example, the chapters by Kenneth Roberts, Raúl Madrid, Kurt Weyland, Steven Levitsky and James Loxton show the strengths of what Robert Barr in Chapter 3 characterized as studies of populism as political strategies. Felipe Burbano, Marco Damiani, Olivier Jutel, and Ritchie Savage critically engage with Laclau’s theory, which is the main point of theoretical reference for most of the contributors to this volume. Danielle Resnick and Dani Filc combine insights from two or more contemporary theories. Other authors like Ángel Rivero, Nadia Urbinati, Paula Diehl, Vedi Hadiz, Nic Cheeseman, Federico Finchelstein, Carlo Ruzza, Luis Roniger, Benjamin Moffitt, Marcus Mietzner, Silvio Waisbord, and Andrew Arato and Jean L. Cohen developed their own approaches to the study of populism.

The diversity of theoretical and normative approaches illustrates on the one hand the complexities of phenomena that scholars name populism. To capture its ambiguities, some prefer cumulative over minimal concepts. If for advocates of minimal definitions, the multiplicity of approaches is a handicap to the accumulation of knowledge, for others it is a necessary consequence of studying a complex phenomenon that could not be reduced to a historical categories, or to definitions that fit in one line or in a few sentences (Finchelstein 2017).
This volume shows the multiplicity and plurality of populisms. Populism is a response to different crises of political representation such as the first incorporation of previously excluded citizens, or the reaction to unresponsive political systems (Roberts 2015). Therefore there are multiple articulations of how citizens interpret the appropriation of power by elites, and the solutions they propose. To distinguish between populisms, it is important to differentiate whether citizens demanded to improve existing institutions, or to create a new order from the ashes of the old regime. The outcome of populism is uncertain. It depends on whether it emerges in parliamentary or presidentialist systems, and on whether political parties or all the institutions of democracy were in crisis.

To make sense of the varieties of populism, some contributors used ideal types: ethnopopulism, movement populism, technocratic populism, religious populism, Islamic populism, and so on. Yet despite the multiplicity of populisms, their diverse ways of understanding who “the people” are, their different class alliances, and their distinct economic policies all share what, following Laclau, could be called an antagonistic logic. All struggle against enemies, and consider that one part of the population represents the authentic people as a whole. To be effective, populists rely on charismatic leaders, and in this sense populism is more than a set of ideas; it is a political strategy to get to power and to govern in the name of the people. Populists in power follow the same playbook to attack enemies: concentration of power in the presidency, war against the media, control of civil society, and attacks on pluralism to attempt to build a unitary and homogeneous people.

How to account for the fact that populists in distinct regional and historical contexts share a similar logic, and follow parallel playbooks? The logic, strategy, ideology, or phenomenology of populism is based on reducing the complexity of politics to an antagonistic confrontation between two camps, on the transformation of democratic rivals into enemies, and in assuming that a section of the population represents the people as a whole. The specificities of who are the enemies, and who is the authentic people, as the chapters in this volume show, vary in different socio-historical and cultural contexts. Yet answers based on the formal components of populist discourses, ideologies, or strategies are insufficient because populism spreads in waves not only within geographical regions, but also across the world.

The diffusion of populism

Populism was diffused, in part, because some leaders wanted to export their models of political, economic, and social change. Juan Perón aimed to make Buenos Aires the center of diffusion of justicialismo as an alternative to Communism and liberal democracies in the 1950s. Despite counting on the resources of an economic boom, Perón’s first populist international failed. The right feared his pro-labor policies, and the left saw in him a fascist. Hugo Chávez was far more successful in promoting his Bolivarian revolution. He became the icon and symbol for a successful alternative to neoliberalism, bourgeois formal democracies, and third-world unity against American imperialism. His socialism of the 21st century did not abolish private property completely, but put the state at the center to regulate the economy made of communal, private, and state forms of property. His model of participatory democracy aimed initially to complement liberal with participatory democracy, and later to create the communal state that would replace the institutions of liberal democracy with direct pyramidal democracy (López Maya 2015). With Fidel Castro he created the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA) as an alternative to neoliberal trade agreements. Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Honduras, Dominica, Saint Vincent, the Grenadines, and Antigua and Bermuda joined ALBA. Chávez gave subsidized oil to Caribbean and Central American nations, and by the power of his charisma and verbal defiance to the U.S. he became an anti-imperialist icon worldwide.
Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (2015, 206) writes that the diffusion of populism relies on different mechanisms like “personal ties (relational diffusion), indirect devices as the media (nonrelational diffusion), and third actors or mediators (mediated diffusion)”. Bolivarianism was disseminated by close contacts between populist presidents and their cabinets, advisors, and consultants. ALBA presidents met in 16 summits between 2004 and 2015. This organization had political, economic, social, and social movement councils. ALBA Ministers and lower state officials were constantly convening on how to implement ALBA’s model of political and economic development. ALBA meetings also included politicians and leaders of social movements that supported these governments. ALBA became a sort of epistemic community where presidents and state officials jointly defined solutions and strategies to deal with all kinds of problems (de la Torre 2017a, 1276). Similarly, rightwing European populist parties regularly convene in the Europe Freedom for Direct Democracy in the European Parliament. Donald Trump invited several rightwing European populists to his inauguration, and he is an inspiration for rightwing European leaders. Geert Wilders considered that Trump’s election was a “revolution”, and Marine Le Pen talked about the “emergence of a new world”. Washington is becoming the new center of diffusion of rightwing populism (Finchelstein 2017).

The media and particularly populist media venues were used as channels of diffusion. Benjamin Moffitt in Chapter 15 explains that online publications like Breitbart News or the British Westminster emerged as forums for rightwing European pundits and politicians to exchange views. Transnational leftwing populist groups like DiEM25, headed by the former Greek Minister of Finance Yanis Varoufakis, used the new media to speak for “[w]e, the peoples of Europe”. ALBA launched teleSur as an alternative to U.S.-dominated media like CNN.

Chávez’s Bolivarian revolution had a demonstration effect to the world’s left. His model of revolutionary transformation based on convening a participatory constituent assembly to draft a new constitution, and later his playbook to confront critics in the media and civil society, was partially emulated by Latin American leftist leaders like Evo Morales and Rafael Correa. Bolivarianism also spread across the Atlantic with Podemos, whose leaders were advisors and consultants of Bolivarian regimes. Podemos and Bolivarian leaders influenced Jean-Luc Mélenchon, leader of La France Insoumise. He even pledged in the 2017 presidential campaign to join ALBA. Left populism was also diffused, as Pedro Zúquete shows at universities in Madrid and Thessaloniki. Similarly the thought of Alain de Benoist, the intellectual leader of the Nouvelle Droite, is influential in rightwing intellectual populist circles.

More studies of the regional and global diffusion of populism are needed. We need to know better how different networks link populist actors, institutions, media venues, and intellectual communities. We also need to explain why and how leaders as different as Orbán, Erdogan, Chávez, Trump, Sata, and Shinawatra used a similar playbook when in power. Did they learn from each other, or can we explain these similarities by how the political logic of populism was adapted to different political, cultural, and socioeconomic environments?

Looking at populism from the global south

The study of populism has been plagued by stereotypes. Mass society theories used old 19th-century images of the poor as irrational crowds. This label continues to reappear in politicians’ depiction of populist followers as ignorant, emotional, and non-rational. Hillary Clinton referred to Trump’s supporters as “despicable”, and the media and scholars sustain that the voters for European and American populists are the uneducated poor.

Images of colonial origins sometimes appear disguised as scholarship. For instance, in an otherwise excellent introductory volume Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017, 77) wrongly and
stereotypically assert that “the populist strongman is more likely to be attractive to people in societies with a more traditional machismo culture” such as Latin American nations. Unless Donald Trump and his followers are considered to be Mexicans, this assertion based on old images of the Latin American primitive and macho other is inaccurate. How to account for the fact that Trump emerged to use Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser’s argument in a “more capitalist and materialist culture”? Populist macho leaders appeared in Italy with Berlusconi, and with Duterte in the Philippines.

Studying populism globally helps to avoid falling into Orientalist stereotypes. For instance, the populist politicization of religion, and the antidemocratic exclusions it entails, is not only present in Islamic populism, but also, as Arato and Cohen show, in the U.S. and Western Europe, the cradle of secularization. Similarly to Islamic populism, religious views of the people in Israel exclude religious minorities.

If populism is studied in its global connections, the triumph of Donald Trump or the continuous strengthening of populism in Europe is not such a big surprise. Populism has been part of American politics and European politics since the 19th century (Álvarez Junco 1990), and European fascism had a populist moment (Eley 2016; Fritzche 2016; Finchelstein 2017). What is new is that populists are winning elections in consolidated democracies. Americans and Europeans could profit from learning from the failures of the anti-populist oppositions in other parts of the world, and from the processes of democratic erosion produced by populists in power. Even though well-functioning parliamentary democracies are shields to populist authoritarianism, the resistance to populism might learn that democratic institutions could deteriorate when politicians follow the populist playbook of polarization and the transformation of critics and democratic rivals into enemies of the people. Like scholars working on the transition to democracy in the global south learned from the experiences of Southern Europe, scholars working on European and American populism would benefit from learning how populist regimes simultaneously threatened and challenged liberal notions of democracy in the periphery.

**Gender and populism**

Gender continues to be a relatively unexplored topic in populist studies. This is surprising because populist leaders display images of hyper-masculinity. Erdogan, for example, was constructed by his followers as a masculine figure with the following traits:

- ‘the Chief’ (Reis) referring to his paternalistic leadership;
- ‘the Tall Man’ (Uzun Adam) referring to his height;
- ‘the Conqueror of Davos’ (Davos Fatihi) referring to his bold stance against Israel during the 2009 World Economic Forum;
- ‘the Master’ (Usta) referring to his political skills.

(Selçuk 2016, 6)

Populist leaders like Silvio Berlusconi and Donald Trump bragged about their hyper-masculinity as the privilege to have access to any women they want, whenever they please. Trump and Abdalá Bucaram talked about the size of their genitals to question their rivals’ masculinities. Trump, Berlusconi, and Shinawatra used their successes in the business world to claim their superiority. Fernando Collor used his success in the world of sports. Perón and Chávez presented themselves as successful military men who sacrificed their military careers for their nations. Jean-Marie Le Pen said that France is at war, and formed battalions of militarists of the National Front. Perón referred to his followers as Peronist soldiers, and Chávez organized his supporters in battalions and squads for epic wars against imperialism.
The image that most populist leaders share was their claim to be the fathers of their homelands. Getúlio Vargas was transformed into “the father of the poor”, while Lázaro Cárdenas was “tata Lázaro”. “The father metaphor”, as Karen Kampwirth (2010, 12) wrote, “turns citizens into children. It turns a politician into someone who understand the interests of citizens – even when they do not – and who may punish wayward children who fail to recognized their wisdom”.

If leaders are the fathers of the homeland, women’s role is to be good mothers. The dominant view of women of populist leaders like Perón, Chávez, Morales, and Correa was motherhood. Yet these Latin American populist presidents included women in positions of visibility in the public sphere, and used gender quotas in the elections of representatives. Their postneoliberal redistributive policies benefited women’s socioeconomic inclusion. Chávez, for example, created the state’s women’s bank, and promoted social programs that targeted women.

Global studies of populism should focus more on how gender is used to include and exclude followers, and to transform a politician into an extraordinary figure. Men in some nations tend to vote for populist candidates that promise law and order, yet Alberto Fujimori had a strong base of female support. Hopefully the proliferation of studies of gender and populism globally will avoid falling into culturalist stereotypes of colonial origin.

**Populism, authoritarianism, and democratization**

Luis Roniger writes in Chapter 29 that populism challenges several dominant social scientific, and in particular political science, perspectives. 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.

Populism could not be reduced to class analysis and to the pursuit of material interests, or to particular economic policies. It also questions ideological interpretations because it is not explained by adherence to “coherent ideological commitments, but it rather elicits both emotions and rational calculation”.

The scholarship of populism has advanced in theoretically exploring the definition of populism and its relationship to democratization and authoritarianism. Populism twists and at times deforms fundamental categories of social and political thought like democracy, civil society, constitutionalism, or representation. It forces scholars to put to the fore their normative views, and analytical categories. What we need are more comparative studies. Populism is attempting to redefine democracy, and is pushing democracies in crises into authoritarianism. In what follows we point to some areas for further research on populism, democratization, and authoritarianism.

Populist polarization reduces spaces for pluralism and contestation. It transforms rivals into enemies, simplifying and even brutalizing democracies. How did democratic institutions respond to these processes of democratic erosion? When and how did democratic actors use national and supranational institutions, and why were they successful or not in resisting processes of democratic erosion (Taggart and Rovira Kaltwasser 2016)? Are parliamentary systems shields to populist autocracy? How do social movements and other organizations of civil society respond to populist attempts to transform diverse and plural populations into a homogeneous people? Why and how did most populists fail in their attempts to manufacture the people-as-one?
We know that populism is a product of the erosion of intermediate institutions like the middle class, and the welfare state that produced social polarization, and of the crises of political parties and democratic institutions. In Venezuela, for example, the middle class was dramatically reduced from 37 percent in 1989 to 18 percent in 1989, the year Chávez won his first election (Anselmi 2018, 95). We need to learn more about the concrete mediating mechanisms and institutions created by populists in power. Are they promoting alternative institutions to improve representation and participation, or are they eroding democratic institutions to promote plebiscitarian democracies?

Another line of inquiry is the impact of populist regimes in eroding the rule of law, individual rights, the separation of powers, accountability, and the respect for democratic procedures. Are populists generating alternative forms of democratization that promote social and collective over individual rights? Are they increasing equality at the cost of reducing the institutional spaces for contestation? Or are populists eroding fundamental democratic institutions and rights and transmuting democracies into hybrid regimes (Morlino 2009; Peruzzotti 2017; Levitsky and Loxton, and Weyland, this volume)?

Paul Blocker in Chapter 7 shows that populist constitutionalism is at the heart of processes of democratic erosion in Europe and Latin America. Populists see existing institutions as tools of domination of political and economic elites. They aim to transform the institutional basis of democracy, replacing exclusionary norms and institutions with mechanisms that will ensure the direct and constant plebiscitary consensus between the leader and his or her followers. There is a growing and fascinating literature on populist constitutionalism (Arato 2016; Bernal 2014). Yet we need more case studies and comparative work to spell out the promises and perils of this type of regime change.

To evaluate the impact of populism on democratization, it might be useful to focus on studies of the quality of democracy, and sociological analysis of citizenship. What are the effects of populist regimes on the rule of law, participation, electoral accountability, and interinstitutional accountability? Using the experiences of populists in power, their record is one of democratic erosion of the rule of law and accountability, and a mixed record in promoting participation as they increase participation while simultaneously transforming democratic rivals into enemies (Anselmi 2018, 106–107).

Populists also have mixed records in promoting citizenship rights (de la Torre 2017b). Whereas leftwing variants promote socioeconomic rights and challenge neoliberal models of citizenship as consumption, rightwing populists rely on the market. Some leftwing variants promote models based on the active participation of citizens in politics understood as mass demonstrations for their leaders, and experimentation with participatory institutions at the local level. Differently, populists that promise law and order restrict citizens’ participation and do not promote mass mobilization on behalf of their leaders. Populists in power have a negative record on the protection of and respect for civil rights. They aim to control and regulate the public sphere, and attack the independence of civil society. Some leftwing populists, though not all, promote collective, gender, and LGBT rights, while some yet not all rightwing variants restrict these rights.

When do populist hybrid regimes derive into full autocracies? Are we witnessing a return to fascism, or neofascism with Trumpism or other rightwing populist movements? Are populist regimes unstable forms of soft authoritarianism? How can democracy be reinstated after processes of populist democratic erosion? What explains the longevity of populism even when some leaders have bankrupted their nations?

Anselmi (2018, 100) writes that the study of populism is “necessarily an analysis of the forms of direct social expression of popular sovereignty in contexts where the classical
structures of democracies, based on institutionalized representation and mediation, are either not strong enough or in crisis”. Populists invoke the notion of sovereignty to delegitimize existing institutions as serving the interests of local and global elites. We need more comparative studies of the discourses and representations of populist notions of national sovereignty. Who can talk on behalf of the nation and what groups belong to or are excluded from the nation? Is anti-imperialism in the global south inclusionary and democratizing, or on the contrary are the nation and populism used to exclude those that do not fit into autocratic notions of who belongs to the nation, and what actors are servants of imperialism? How do excluded sectors of the population use the notion of sovereignty to challenge restricted models of democratization?

Populists question liberal models of democracy. They promise alternative conceptualizations of democracy as the direct and unmediated participation of citizens. Can we talk about models of populist democratization? Are these models a challenge to Eurocentric and restrictive notions of democracy? Or on the contrary do these views of democracy lead to process of democratic erosion, and closure of pluralism and the institutional framework of democracy?

Studies of populism in the global south show its inclusionary outcomes. Populists in the global south, at least during the first process of popular and democratic incorporation, included previously economically, politically, and culturally marginalized groups. They expanded the franchise, redistributed income and to a lesser extent wealth, and transformed the stigmas that elites used to marginalize the poor into sources of virtue. Yet inclusion is not the same as democratization. These notions need to be kept apart because some autocratic regimes could be inclusionary. Populist regimes assaulted the liberal framework of democracy, attacked autonomous social movements, and aimed to regulate the democratic public sphere. They restricted the possibility of democratizing existing democracies. Yet their critiques pointed to real problems that could not be dismissed.

Finally, as pointed out in Chapter 1 of this volume and as discussed by several contributors, while the populist critique of the deficits of democracy needs to be taken seriously, their solutions are problematic and in the end autocratic.

References


