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A Dangerous Excess? Rethinking Populism in the Americas

Abstract:

In this paper, I advocate a rethinking of the conceptualization of populism, a political phenomenon that is frequently discussed in inter-American debates, but rarely explained in a convincing way. The characterization of political actors as “populist” should not be considered sufficient. Sometimes, especially when it is used as an umbrella word for left-wing and right-wing mobilizations, it can even be an obstacle for the discussion of political contents. Based on the works of Ernesto Laclau, I propose to understand populism not as a type of regime, movement or person, but as a political logic that can occur in many different ways and contexts. This logic, which can reach different extents, starts with a crisis of the hegemonic power block and decreasing legitimation of its discourse. Heterogeneous demands of dominated societal sectors are expressed against the status quo. These demands have to be brought together for a broader mobilization and the possibility of a new hegemony. In the article, the example of the MAS in Bolivia is used to illustrate how the populist logic presents itself.

Keywords: populism, E. Laclau, political logic, MAS

Introduction – Overcoming the Condemnation of Populism

One of the terms frequently used in political and scientific debates, but rarely explained, is populism. Calling somebody a populist in many cases means to denounce his or her idea as irrational, mere rhetoric and evokes the image of a charismatic leader seducing the masses. Within the context of the Americas, this expression is often applied to Latin American governments. Today especially the governments of Hugo Chávez and now, after his death, Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela, Evo Morales in Bolivia, Rafael Correa in Ecuador and sometimes also Néstor Kirchner and now Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner in Argentina are being put in this category. Sometimes, analysts contrast these leftist regimes, which they denounce as demagogic, nationalist and populist, to a pragmatic, realist and modern Left, represented by Lula Da Silva and Dilma Rousseff in Brazil, the Frente Amplio government in Uruguay and the Concertación in Chile (Ramírez Gallegos 2006). In addition, the term “populism” can also be found in the language of Interamerican relations. The United States are concerned with the Latin American governments that are said to follow a populist agenda – the ex-secretary of state, Condoleezza Rize, even declared: “Our enemy in Latin America is populism (quoted from Follari 2010:47)”.

But what characteristics are these governments supposed to possess that other ones do not share? And why is “populism” declared an enemy? This becomes clearer if we take a look at an analysis of the changes in Latin America since the turn of the millennium, written by Hal Brands for the Strategic Studies Institute of the United States. Brands draws a negative image of populism when referring to the endangered implementation of US-American interests:

Leaders like Hugo Chávez, Evo Morales, Rafael Correa, and others angrily condemn the shortcomings of capitalism and democracy, and frame politics as a struggle between the “people” and the “oligarchy.” They promote prolific social spending, centralize power in the presidency, and lash out at Washington. This program is, in some ways, strategically problematic for the United States. Populist policies ultimately lead to authoritarianism, polarization, and economic collapse, and certain populist leaders have openly challenged U.S. influence and interests in Latin America (Brands 2009:V).

This example shows that the labeling of regimes as populist camouflages the debates over the actual political issues, in this case US-American interests in Latin America. By creating certain images connected to the expression “populism” or “populist”, the arguments made by certain political protagonists are in danger of being seen in another light because they are linked to an alleged dangerous ideological excess. It is not Brands’ criticism of the Latin American governments that catches my attention here, but the way he embeds his foreign policy analysis into nebulous references to populism.

Politics and science are often linked closely. In many cases, the same kind of strategic condemnation connected to the term “populism” that is frequently made in politics can be found in scientific analyses as well. In this article, I do not give an overview of all the existing literature on populism. Instead I wish to highlight certain tendencies in the analysis of populism and advocate for a rethinking of this phenomenon. I base my argumentation on the concepts of the Argentinian sociologist Ernesto Laclau who takes sides against the understanding of populism in many political and scientific debates as “[a] dangerous excess, which puts the clear-cut moulds of a rational community into question (Laclau 2005: X)”. Analytically it is not very constructive to simply label regimes, politicians or movements populist. The key element of Laclau’s analysis is not to think of populism as a characterization of a group or an actor – like for example liberal, conservative, socialist etc. – but as a political logic that can be of all shades. In this article, I present the key elements of this political logic and apply it to the case of the rise of the Morales government in Bolivia and the social movements attached to it.

Who Is Considered Populist in the Americas?

Peter Imbusch (2012) distances himself from universal definitions of populism because of numerous regional differences. Nonetheless he tries to find general characteristics and defines populism as

a widespread, but highly controversial, political phenomenon, which is not limited regionally, but which occurs most prominently in the Americas and Europe. [...] movements or groups termed as populist appeal to the population in contrast to the elites, speak to the ‘common people’ in a way which transcends class boundaries, present themselves as being anti-elitist and are against the ‘establishment’. [...] As a discourse strategy, it is compatible with both right-wing and left wing political matters.

This definition refers to important elements of populism and tries to establish it as a serious category of analyses without denouncing it as something dangerous, primitive or the like. Nonetheless, in my view, there are certain shortcomings in this definition. Throughout the article, I will make some suggestions how to rethink some of these aspects. At this point we avoid a further definition. We will first take a look at phenomena that are usually taken into account when talking about populism in the Americas and then formulate a critique of this kind of categorization.

Imbusch and others (for example Priester 2006:78-91) identify a protest movement from rural areas in the United States during the mid-19th century as an early form of populism. This so-called agrarian populism was a protest against the transition from competitive to organized capitalism. [1] The farmers involved tried to articulate their interests

against the political superiority of the larger cities [...]. The early American populism can [...] be understood as a revolt of small and medium-sized entrepreneurs against Big Business and the one-sidedness of a capitalist economic system, which might have failed as a revolt, but which enjoyed success as a persistent demand for reforms (Imbusch 2012).

This demand for reform could take all kinds of forms. It was present in the Roosevelt's New Deal policy after the world economic crisis at the beginning of the 1930s, as well as in the appearances of some famous political figures in the second half of the 20th century, like George C. Wallace, Ralph Nader, Henry Ross Perot and Jesse Ventura, whose discourses can be described as mixture of very different ideological elements (some argue for state intervention, others against). Imbusch (2012) stresses that “[c]ore elements of populism are found in all of these movements and parties [named above]; to some extent, populism has even become an integral part of US mass democracy”.

In Latin America, the notion of populism has for a long time been linked to the construction of a strong centralist state in opposition to the landowning oligarchy which controlled the post-independence integration into the world economy as suppliers of raw materials. In some cases – Irigoyen in Argentina, Ruy Barbosa in Brazil, Alessandrini in Chile, Madero in Mexico, Battle y Ordoñez in Uruguay – it was possible to absorb the increasing demands by the subaltern classes for social and political integration by introducing moderate reforms (Laclau 2005:192-193). These possibilities of absorption came to an end with the global economic crises after 1929, when the income of the exports fell and the economic situation worsened. Since this point in time, Imbusch proposes to distinguish between three major waves of populism in Latin America.

The first one is often referred to as “classical populism”. It occurred between the economic crises of 1930 and beginning of the neoliberal epoch in 1980. Carlos M. Vilas offers a list of characteristics of this “classical populism”: a strong political mobilization, the integration of the popular classes into a multi-class political project, industrialization, an interventionist state, non-alignment in foreign policy, nationalism and the existence of a leadership figure (Vilas 2004:136). The most prominent representatives of this first wave include Getúlio Vargas in Brazil, in power between 1930 and 1945 and again between 1951 and 1954, Juan Domingo Perón in Argentina, in power between 1946 and 1955 and between 1973 until his death in 1974, as well as José María Velasco Ibarra who was five times president of Ecuador between 1934 and 1972. [2]

Whether Imbusch's second populist wave during the 1990s, sometimes called neopopulist, can really be thought of in these terms, is contested. Different from the regimes that were listed as part of the first wave, its orientation was neoliberal, that is to say strongly market-oriented. Imbusch lists

Carlos Saúl Menem in Argentina, president between 1989 and 1999, Alberto Fujimori, Peruvian president between 1990 and 2000 and Fernando Collor de Mello, Brazilian president between 1990 and 1992 as representatives of this second wave. [3] Carlos M. Vilas does not consider these regimes populist because he thinks that this would be a reduction to the self-presentation of these presidents, leaving aside their actual political program. Vilas agrees with Denise Dresser (1991) in stating that this style of government “was a remake of populist practices which tried to improve the governability of the neoliberal reform process (Vilas 2004:137)”. For Vilas, Latin American populism is clearly defined by its classical historical examples and their interventionist, progressive politics. These argumentations are of some importance for our topic and I will come back to it during this article when I criticize the misleading direction of these kinds of debates.

The third populist wave is again closer to the tradition that Vilas and others see in “classical populism”. It is situated at the turn of the millennium, after strong popular resistance against the neoliberal model. When describing these governments, Roberto Follari (2010:103-104) uses similar attributes like the ones suggested by Vilas to describe “classical populism”. Differences in comparison to the latter are the economic focus in the neo-developmental or neo-extractivist approaches and the importance of regional integration. As already mentioned above, usually Chávez respectively Maduro in Venezuela, Morales in Bolivia, Correa in Ecuador and sometimes the Argentinian Kirchners are considered representatives of this third wave.

As we have seen, there are several attempts to classify movements, governments or politicians in the Americas as populist. For the US-American case, social movements and certain persons are usually considered populist and for Latin American cases, this notion is often used to characterize governments. (In his definition, Imbusch refers to movements and groups in one sentence and in another one to discourse strategies, but his examples rather refer to the first, not the latter). But what enables us to consider these actors as part of one analytical category? What are the differences to actors that we do not consider populist? I agree with Laclau when he states that “[a]ll the attempts at finding what is idiosyncratic in populism in elements such as a peasant or small-ownership constituency, or resistance to economic modernization, or manipulation by marginal elites are [...] essentially flawed: they will always be overwhelmed by an avalanche of exceptions.” That is why he refuses to understand populism as type of movement or regime, “identifiable with either a special social base or a particular ideological orientation”. Populism should instead be seen as a “*political logic*” (Laclau 2005:117). To different extent, this logic is present in all political struggles. With this understanding of populism, it would not make sense to label some political actors as populist and others not. It would rather be about looking at the extent to which the logic is present in different political lineups. Let us now have a look at what the elements of this logic are.

Populism as a Political Logic

The approaches on populism by the two well-known sociologists Gino Germani (1965) and Torcuato di Tella (1970) are criticized by Laclau because of their teleological approach. The two authors perceive populism as the political expression of groups from underdeveloped countries that do not possess class consciousness. But if populism occurs more often in peripheral countries, this does not mean that this is due to a certain level of development. It is rather that they are affected by more political crises because of the way they are integrated into global capitalism. These crises are the starting point for the emergence of populism. It “can either be a result of a fracture in the power bloc” or of problems “of the system to neutralize the dominated sectors – that is to say, a crisis of transformism. Naturally, an important historical crisis combines both ingredients (Laclau 1977:175)”. [4] Argentina, as well as other Latin American countries, experienced this kind of crisis from 1930 onwards. In these cases, the dominant power bloc at that time, the landowning oligarchy, and its liberal discourse had increasing legitimization problems.

When the power bloc is not able to marginalize anti-status quo activities, the opportunity for a change in the societal power relations is given. In order to replace the power bloc and establish a new hegemony, heterogeneous social demands have to be brought together, so as to define what *the people*, “a concept without a defined theoretical status” (Laclau 1977:165) is supposed to mean in a specific context. “The people” is a part of society that claims to be the only legitimate representative of society as a whole (a *plebs* that claims to be the *populus*). It is “not a *given* group, but an act of institution that creates a new agency out of plurality of heterogeneous elements” (Laclau 2005:224). Who “the people” are and what they represent cannot be said a priori because it depends against which hegemonic bloc their demands are directed. It is, first of all, something negative that allows different actors to form a populist alliance: “their opposition to a common enemy (Laclau 1996:40-41)”. This lets us rethink one of the aspects in the discussion on populism mentioned above. Populism is not, as in Imbusch’s definition, necessarily a left-wing or right-wing phenomenon. Every form of populism forms itself through its antagonistic opposition to the dominant discourse. It certainly *can* have what one might consider left-wing or right-wing tendencies, but it can also be a mixture of contradictive elements. This means that, different from what Vilas suggests, we are also able to discover the populist logic in Imbusch’s second populist wave in Latin America which ended up being neoliberal (here, just to name an example, a new fiscal policy is presented as an opposition to the hyperinflation during the mandate of the regimes that were in power before). [5]

In the next step, we have to observe, if and how heterogeneous social demands, that are isolated from each other, become unified. For this matter, empty signifiers are used. According to the Swiss

linguist Ferdinand de Saussure one has to distinguish between the signifier and the signified. In the act of articulation the former is the expression used and the latter is the object described (the signifier would be the word “flower” and the signified would be the mental image of a flower). What does this mean for politics? In Laclau’s theory empty signifiers are not “a signifier without a signified” because

it could only mean ‘noise’ and, as such, would be outside the system of signification. When we talk about ‘empty signifiers’, however, we mean something entirely different: we mean that there is a place, within the system of signification, which is constitutively irrepresentable; in that sense it remains empty, but this is an emptiness which I can signify, because we are dealing with a void *within* signification (Laclau 2005:105).

Empty signifiers like “justice”, “progress” or “democracy” – expressions which possess connectivity to many different parts of society – are used during the forming of a political identity. The empty signifiers can also be described as antagonistic in the Aristotelian sense, that is to say “those terms which have quite distinct meanings, but in which we can find reference to a common element which constitutes the analogic basis of all possible uses of the term” (Laclau 1977: 164-165). For Laclau, the use of these empty signifiers is a necessity to unify demands and does not stem from an ideological underdevelopment, for example one could not claim that “peace, bread and land”, which constituted the famous revolutionary Bolshevik slogan, were

the conceptual common denominator of all Russian social demands in 1917. As in in all processes of overdetermination, grievances which had nothing to do with those three demands nevertheless expressed themselves through them (Laclau 2005:97-98).

I wish to illustrate this process with an example from the Americas of somebody who usually is not declared populist: Barack Obama. After eight years of the Bush-Administration, many different social groups found themselves in a dissatisfying situation. The tactic of Obama’s 2008 electoral campaign was not to make detailed references to every possible reform for each of these groups. Instead Obama’s campaign chose a phrase that was supposed to express the desires of all these groups in a very vague way. In the slogan “Change we can believe in” (as well as “Yes, we can”) it found a formula to represent the heterogeneous demands and to create the idea of what “the people” might be. This example strengthens Laclau’s thesis that “any popular identity needs to be condensed around some signifiers (words, images) which refer to the equivalential chain as a totality” (Laclau 2005:95-96).

All this should not be considered as some purely linguistic operation. Certain rhetoric is important for populism, but it is more than a certain use of verbal and non-verbal communication. Populism is

more than a kind of “political style” (like suggested by Alan Knight (1998)). There are many different struggles that can lead to (re-)definitions of a “people”. It is rather a wide range of political practices that builds identities and constructs hegemonies. [6] Laclau’s understanding of discourse (that he also uses to explain populism) “involves the articulations of words and actions, so that the quilting function is never a merely verbal operation but is embedded in material practices which can acquire institutional fixity” (Laclau 2005:106).

The case of Barack Obama mentioned above brings us to the next aspect which is often associated with populism: the role of a single charismatic person or a leadership figure. Without a doubt, this is a very problematic aspect of many movements or regimes and they can be criticized for a cult of personality or simply for the focus on this single person from all kinds of perspectives. As we can currently observe in Venezuela, for instance, the focus on the figure of Hugo Chávez brings his movement into trouble after his death. Nonetheless, what we are asking for here is the analytical suitability for the study of populism. Like the special role of Obama as a person shows, we should not simply relate this aspect to authoritarian or totalitarian experiences. To use a different example: who could deny the role of leadership figures like Mahatma Gandhi or Nelson Mandela for their emancipatory movements?

If we apply Laclau’s concepts of populism, we describe a process. We go beyond simply labeling a regime as populist – and also beyond calling a person populist. This is also where Laclau lacks clarity when he, in one of his works, states that “it is possible to call Hitler, Mao and Peron simultaneously populist” (Laclau 1977:174). This evokes certain critique, for example Karin Priester accuses Laclau of overstressing the definition of populism: “It is misleading to evenhandedly refer to Hitler, Mussolini, Mao, Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, Fidel Castro, or de Gaulle as populists (Priester 2006:43)”. It is quite obvious that it is foolish to refer to all these names in the same way and the politics attached to these persons are very different. But this is an important point that was mentioned before: by referring to somebody as populist, we are not able to know what the politics attached to him or her are. So it is not fruitful to study these persons as populists, but the role these persons play within the populist logic. Often the leadership figure has the task to bring the heterogeneous parts of a group together, be it through concrete actions or in a symbolic way. In some sense, he or she has a similar task to the empty signifiers – there are even cases in which the person him- or herself can become the empty signifier. With the help of the case of Perón during his exile from Argentina, between 1955 and 1972, Laclau demonstrates that a person him- or herself can become the populist empty signifier. The person Perón was the only aspect that somehow glued together the very different leftist peronist guerilla and the rightist peronist trade-union bureaucracy in the political struggle of that time (Laclau 2005:214-221). As we have seen by now in various examples, populism can occur in very different manners. Laclau states that

“[p]opulism starts at the point where popular-democratic elements are presented as an antagonistic option against the ideology of the dominant bloc. Note that this does not mean that populism is always revolutionary (Laclau 1977:173).” So while Laclau thinks that Populism *can* be revolutionary, Slavoj Žižek denies this. In his opinion, “for a populist, the cause of the troubles is ultimately never the system as such but the intruder who corrupted it” (Žižek 2006:555). Žižek criticizes the focus of Laclau’s theory on social demands and asks critically: “Does the proper revolutionary or emancipatory political act not move beyond this horizon of demands? The revolutionary subject no longer operates at the level of demanding something from those in power; he wants to destroy them (Žižek 2006:558)”. At this point it would be difficult to discuss the meaning of revolution or the different opinions of Žižek and Laclau about leftist politics which are connected to their different attitudes towards Marx and Hegel as well as their readings of Lacan. What is important for us is that Žižek’s critique made Laclau elaborate in more detail about the different paths populism can take. Laclau takes the ambiguous meaning of the word “demand” in English as a point of departure: it can mean “request” as well as “claim”. For Laclau, the transition from on the first to the latter is important:

[...] when the demands do not go beyond the stage of mere requests, we have a highly institutionalized arrangement. Social actors have an ‘immanent’ existence within the objective locations delineating the institutional order of society. (Of course this is a purely ideal extreme; society is never so structured that social agents are entirely absorbed within institutions.) The second scenario is one in which there is a more permanent tension between demands and what the institutional order can absorb. Here requests tend to become claims, and there is a critique of institutions rather than just a passive acceptance of their legitimacy. Finally, when relations of equivalence between a plurality of demands go beyond a certain point, we have broad mobilizations against the institutional order as a whole. We have here the emergence of the people as a more universal historical actor, whose aims will necessarily crystallize around empty signifiers as objects of political identification. There is a radicalization of claims that can lead to a revolutionary reshaping of the entire institutional order. This is probably the kind of development that Žižek has in mind when he speaks of not demanding anything from those in power, but wanting to destroy them instead. (Laclau 2006:656).

As Laclau points out, the transformation of isolated demands into “a large set of simultaneous demands presented as a unified whole” (Laclau 2005:82) is necessary for the success of the forming of a “people”. Like this a broad mobilization and a challenge of the status quo can be achieved.

It was now mentioned several times, that heterogeneous demands have to be brought together. But the very success of this operation bears dangers. Laclau describes why the alliances formed within the populist logic can be fragile:

Let us suppose that a workers' mobilization succeeds in presenting its own objectives as a signifier of 'liberation' in general. (This, as we have seen, is possible because the workers' mobilization, taking place under a repressive regime, is also seen as an anti-systemic struggle.) In one sense this is a hegemonic victory, because the objectives of a particular group are identified with society at large. But, in another sense, this is a dangerous victory. If 'workers' struggle' becomes the signifier of liberation as such, it also becomes the surface of inscription through which all liberating struggles will be expressed [...]. As a result of its very success, the hegemonic operation tends to break its links with the force which was its original promoter and beneficiary (Laclau 1996:44-45).

So what is described here is how the process of becoming the signifier of a political struggle can turn into the change of the original content of the signifier or an alienation of the group behind this content. This is also a reason why the constructed "people" in populism is usually unstable. In addition, the dependence on a common political enemy can turn into a problem for an alliance based on heterogeneous demands as soon as this enemy is defeated:

There is no clear-cut solution to the paradox of radically negating a system of power while remaining in secret dependency on it. It is well-known how opposition to certain forms of power requires identification with the very places from which the opposition takes place [...] (Laclau 1996:30).

If the heterogeneous demands only function as an opposition and do not transform themselves sufficiently into a new political identity, the alliance behind these demands might fall apart easily under a new power constellation.

The Case of the MAS in Bolivia

After these theoretical elaborations, in the following we will see how the populist logic works in a specific case. I chose the case of the rise of the MAS (Movimiento al Socialismo) party in Bolivia. Its candidate, Evo Morales, was elected by overwhelming 54 % of the voters in the elections of December 2005. He became the first indigenous president of this country. This was not simply the consequence of a good electoral campaign, but the result of a complex process. Ethnicity does play an important role here, but nonetheless we can observe far more than voting along ethnic lines. In addition, it is misleading to only speak about "the indio" in general since there are about 35 different cultural identities in Bolivia. It was the achievement of the MAS to align diverse indigenous movements, nationalist, trade unionists and leftists (in the broader sense) for a new political project.

The Bolivian Revolution of 1952, led by the MNR (Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario), can be seen as the establishment of nationalism in the political scene of the country. The MNR, at least in its early phase, represented developmentalism, nationalization of national resources, universal voting rights and a critical stance towards liberal democracy and its institutions. Since the 1952 Revolution, indigenous people were increasingly integrated into the political system without becoming a central actor in it. The MNR changed overtime and split up into different political projects. After being elected president in 1985, Paz Estenssoro guided a neoliberal turn of the MNR which constituted the definite break with the parties' roots. There were also leftist parties who participated in neoliberal policies, like the MIR (Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria) and the PCB (Partido Comunista Boliviana). Those of the Bolivian left who were not willing to contribute to these political contents, either reaffirmed their orthodox (for example Trotskyist) position or amplified their vision towards rural-indigenous and nationalist topics. This latter left became an important part of the MAS, most prominently represented by Álvaro García Linera, vice president of the Morales government (Salerno 2007).

The economic results of Bolivia's neoliberal phase were disastrous and worsened the situation of this poor country even more. The privatization programs were backed by a wide range of political parties. Protest against this free market fundamentalism was labeled anti-democratic. Within these political circumstances, it was not just neoliberalism which entered a severe crisis but also the institutions of this limited democracy and even politics themselves (Carrizo 2009). The preconditions for populism were clearly given.

As we have already seen, parts of the nationalist and leftist forces found their place in the dominant block and its ideology, others did not. In the 1990s, there were also intends to absorb demands of indigenous groups by promoting multiculturalism and giving land to indigenous peasants. In addition, Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada, president between 1993 and 1997, chose an Aymara, Víctor Hugo Cárdenas, as his vice president. In the end, these measures could not rescue the dominant block. Isolated demands could not be absorbed. In the next step, we can observe how heterogeneous demands were united.

The 1980s and 1990s changed the role of nationalist and leftist forces in Bolivia. Those in opposition to neoliberalism were not able to create a new influential political project. But ultimately, their classical topics like redistribution and economic nationalization could be expressed through indigenous social movements. One of these movements, the Coca peasant syndicates of the Chapare region, gained influence and attention during the 1990s. Their political actions were directed against the violent elimination of coca fields which was promoted by the Bolivian and the US government (because of the latter's involvement the tone of the protest was often anti-

imperial). It was also this context of the coca syndicate struggle, in which Evo Morales as their speaker became an important figure. Morales as a person combines trade unionism with indigenous issues as well as anti-colonialism and in this way brings the different demands attached to the MAS together. This is what allowed him to fulfill the special role of a leadership figure in the populist logic discussed above.

In addition to the coca issue, there was a whole series of protests that spread all over the country since the year 2000 (García Linera 2010:72-76). The most prominent event was maybe the so-called “water war” which had its origin around the city of Cochabamba in April 2000, when the government of Hugo Banzer wanted to privatize water supply. Throughout a whole month, rural workers blocked the main roads of the country. Evo Morales negotiated the renunciation of this privatization with the government. Other protests followed which were violently suppressed by the government, especially in El Alto in 2003 with at least 67 people killed.

There have been protests for a long time in Bolivia, but it was since these years that they formed a common picture. Different from the past, the protests were now under indigenous leadership and parts of the urban middle class joined them. The protests against the neoliberal destruction of local economic structures (like the coca agriculture) were taken to the regional and national level. Morales’ anti-imperialist discourse, in which the notion of “national sovereignty” functioned as an empty signifier, was not only seen as the expression of local coca peasant protest. Instead it became a signifier for the national sellout to foreign interests in general. Something similar happened with the protest against the privatization of water: it was considered as the expression of the struggle against the commodification of basic requirements at large.

The antagonistic enemies, which Laclau defines as a crucial element in the process of forming a new ‘people’, were in this case the Bolivian oligarchy (situated in the resource-rich Eastern provinces, the so-called Media Luna) and the governments which collaborated with the USA. [7] Morales’ party, the MAS, capitalized from the neoliberal turn of the MNR and other nationalist and leftist parties and renewed their classic demands (the nationalization of gas, for instance) within a wider anti-colonial discourse. The MAS is not a party in the traditional sense, but rather a collecting pond for various political struggles and movements. In 2002, Morales, as the presidential candidate of the MAS, almost won the elections and in 2005, with more time for preparation, he and his party achieved this aim.

Now we have seen, along general lines, how the rise of the MAS and the election of Evo Morales were possible. But, as Laclau points out, there are certain dangers in the very success of creating a new “people”. In the Bolivian case, there has been a restructuring of the organizational form of

the state and later on, in 2009, a new constitution has been established. Nonetheless, there is a steady tension between the establishment of a strong state in contour to the neoliberal model and the state as a historical symbol of colonial and neocolonial exploitation (Carrizo 2009, Svampa 2010:40). It remains a question of continuous negotiations which role the state and which role other forms of indigenous political organization may play. The same can be said about social movements in general. Since they brought the government to power, they are not willing to accept an exclusion from the important decision-making processes. The new regime often calls itself “a government of the social movements”. Vice President García Linera (2010:87) recognizes the contradiction in this expression but nonetheless defends it. He thinks that the Bolivian state on the one hand needs a strong influence of social movements to circumvent the building of a new bureaucratic political class but on the other hand needs a strong administration for important decisions.

In addition, conflicts about the economic model can be observed. Despite the government’s references to an indigenous ecological consciousness, the main characteristics of the economic policy can be described as developmentalist, based on the extraction of natural resources. In this sense, the MAS represents far more its classical nationalist and leftist elements than new forms of an ecological communitarianism (Svampa 2010: 42-50). These tensions can be observed, for instance, when the government plans to build highways through nature protection areas.

Like shown above, there are conflicts in the heterogeneous alliance that brought Morales to power. Nonetheless, the regime was able to consolidate its position and was reelected in 2009 with an even better result than that of 2005 (64 % of the votes). The alliance is not only held together by the reforms of the regime, but also by the still existing social antagonism between itself and the local oligarchies. The latter and their political representatives steadily try to destabilize the country and even attempted a coup d’état.

Concluding Remarks

In some debates, populism has become a swearword for an alleged dangerous ideological excess. These condemnations are not helpful for any kind of analyses. In this article, I formulated suggestions on how to establish populism as a fruitful scientific category for various disciplines (I especially think of sociology, political science and history). Following the argumentation of Ernesto Laclau, we are able to describe a certain political logic with it, which I explained in outlines in this article. This logic, which can occur to different extent, starts with a rupture between the dominant power bloc and parts of the population, that is to say a crisis of the hegemonic political-ideological

discourse (for our Bolivian example, neoliberalism). The movement that tries to establish a new hegemony uses interpellations to bring together the heterogeneous demands of different parts of society. For this purpose, empty signifiers are used, that is to say certain words or images which possess connectivity for different societal groups. This connectivity is sometimes also provided by a leadership figure. Although this can be a problematical aspect for political groups, we are not able to exclusively link this to authoritarianism.

Populism can occur in all political entities – for the Americas, that is to say that we cannot distinguish between a populist south and a non-populist north or vice versa. Peter Imbusch's doubts about the possibility of a universal definition of populism are understandable and should be taken seriously. But the conceptualization of populism as a political logic is a possibility to pay tribute to all kinds of regional differences that should be considered in every analysis. Used in the way proposed here, populism is not an umbrella word for the characterization of regimes, persons or movements but an analytical tool for investigating power relations and the practices behind them.

The concept can be applied to various political struggles in the Americas in past and present, for example to the way parties absorb, successfully or not, demands of different social groups or movements. In this article, I mentioned how Obama was able to bring different demands together in his campaign, but the Republican Party also offers possibilities to observe populism. In current US-politics one might ask for the tactics of the Grand Old Party to deal with the agenda of the Tea Party movement. In many Latin American countries one might study the relation of social movements and the governments they brought to power. This is a tension already mentioned in our Bolivian example, but, in a very different constellation, already existed in historic examples (I think, for example, of the relation between the leftist Peronist guerilla and the relation to Perón's government after his comeback from exile). Those are a just some of the numerous possibilities for analyses of populism in the Americas that allow us to get a better idea of important aspects within the political logic called populism and how they change in different places and times.

Endnotes

[1] While Imbusch (2012) characterizes the farmers as people with „backwards-looking, anti -modernist traits“, Priester (2006:79) states: “The attitude of the populists towards the initiating industrial society was not reactionary and backwards-looking. They only criticized the excrescences of industrial capitalism and the banking system connected to it.”

[2] Roberto Follari (2010:102) also adds Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán in Guatemala (president between 1951 and 1954) and Paz Estensoro in Bolivia (1952-56 and 1960-64) to this list. Often the Mexican president Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940) also appears in the considerations about classical Latin American populism.

[3] The Mexican president Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994) is also often mentioned in this context.

[4] “Transformism” is a term used by Antonio Gramsci to describe the assimilation of rivals or subaltern sectors of society by the power block.

[5] All this does not mean to deny the disastrous results of this neoliberal phase that later orcaused new centrifugal social forces.

[6] María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo (2002:297-303) gives an interesting example of what a signifier can be. She shows how silence became the signifier of Indian difference in the discourse of the Zapatistas in Mexico.

[7] Morales’ confrontations with US-ambassador Manuel Rocha reminded of Perón’s conflict with the US-ambassador in Argentina, Spruille Braden, in 1945.

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