

Inclusion, exclusion and the persistence of integration in Latin American populism

[Draft, please do not quote]

Abstract. Over the last two decades, populism has been mainly studied from discursive approaches, which understand it as a radical, even moral, dichotomy between ‘people’ and ‘elite’. However, such a dichotomy tends to darken the concrete operations of people’s inclusion and elite’s exclusion. Stated in another way, only through semantics, it is not possible to know who are effectively included and excluded, neither how these processes operate. In this sense, systems theory provides us an adequate conceptual framework for studying inclusion and exclusion problems in current societies. Thus, unlike non-planned exclusion due to poverty as a consequence of development models, under populism the State tries to carry out a planned exclusion of some specific sectors of the elite; while populist inclusion is effectively developed in a partial and planned manner, which mainly reached unionized workers in classical populism, but expanded to include informal workers and grassroots organizations in Chavism.

Keywords: inclusion, exclusion, integration, systems theory, Latin American populism

Introduction

Since the 2000s, most of the research about populism has been conducted under discursive approaches, which have generally identified populism as a radical opposition between two antagonistic groups: a ‘pure people’ and a ‘corrupt elite’ (Mudde 2004: 54). This well-known definition tells us that the mainstream of populism have dropped those structuralist approaches (e.g. Germani 1962), conceiving populism in a mostly semantic manner. Notwithstanding the foregoing, it is still relevant to consider what the structural basis of populism is and how it operates, especially considering that the dichotomy people/elite of populist discourse is an imprecise indicator for assessing structural matters.

Nevertheless, if we pay more attention to the semantic distinction between the people and the elite, this leads us to ask ourselves what a conceptual framework would be useful in assessing Manichean differences among social groups, but mainly at structural level. In this regard, a strongly developed approach is based on the distinction between ‘inclusion’ and ‘exclusion’ that provides us systems theory. Highly inclusive projects of leftist political mobilization, as Latin American populism, also envisage the exclusion of several groups, under the assumption that every process of inclusion supposes the exclusion of others. If populism is then a phenomenon that is possible to assess in terms of inclusion and exclusion, it is relevant to wonder who included social groups are, who excluded ones are, and how this distinction operates.

But to better understand the functioning of the code inclusion/exclusion, it is relevant to outline the singular characteristics of functional differentiation in Latin America. For this reason, in the first section, this article describes some particularities of functional differentiation in the region. On this basis, in the second section, we characterize how inclusion and exclusion operate and what type of integration is throughout several subsystems. In order to illustrate the arguments of both sections, it is provided evidence, on a non-systematic basis, from paradigmatic cases of first Peronism (1945-1955) and Chavism (1998-), which are well-recognized examples of populism by an