

Bringing culture back in: Latin American populism in historical perspective

1st draft [words count: 11,124].

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Abstract. Culture as an independent variable has been generally neglected by mainstream studies on Latin American populism, which has entailed a decrease of explanatory potential in the majority of them. In trying to close this gap, this article presents some theoretical arguments related to the cultural construction of a Latin American *ethos* during colonial times. In this sense, an important question is: what is the role of culture in unraveling populism? Culture would correspond to a long-term cause, among several recent causes, which has a demonstrable effect on populism. In order to support this assertion, this article also provides some essential theoretical distinctions and empirical evidence for addressing how distinctive and contradictory repertoires of the Latin American *ethos*, created in days gone by, can affect a current social phenomenon as populism.

Keywords: Latin American populism; *ethos*; cultural sociology; comparative-historical analysis

Introduction

Some recent studies consider that populist phenomena could be caused by several factors, including ‘populist discourse’. This latter has been understood as a ‘structural frame of reference’ (Laclau 1977: 167), a ‘worldview’ (Hawkins 2010: 29 ff.), a ‘rhetoric’ (Jansen 2017: 31-33, 180 ff.), or even as a ‘discursive strategy’ (Bonikowski & Gridon 2016), and so on, that essentially contains a radical opposition between two antagonistic groups: a ‘pure people’ and a ‘corrupt elite’ (cf. Mudde 2004).

For instance, Hawkins, who defines his approach as ‘ideational’ (cf. Hawkins & Rovira 2019), argues that leaders can be bearers of a worldview, which, subject to certain social conditions, can construct ‘populist’ organizations and institutions. In this sense, a worldview would be “(...) a set of fundamental assumptions about how the political world works” (Hawkins 2010: 30), providing, inter alia, “(...) prescriptions for behavior” (Ibid.). Similarly, Jansen asserts that ‘populist rhetoric’ plays an important role in explaining ‘populist mobilization’, because it encourages, and is channeled through, several mobilization activities by a leader and his/her dedicated supporters. Based on Brubaker’s (1996; 2004) work, Jansen states that “(...) populist rhetoric represents an attempt to forge a solidary “people” through his rhetorical invocation” (Jansen 2017: 31). ‘Solidarity’ for Jansen would then be a complex, contingent and fluctuant process (cf. Brubaker 1996: 18-22) that does not so directly involve production relations or the position of workers on the market, but he gives more importance to ‘leader’s rhetoric’ as explanatory variable.

Nevertheless, even though there is little consensus concerning what the content of this worldview or rhetoric is, these two outstanding studies on populism, as well as the vast majority, are not asking from which these ideas are originated neither how these were constructed. In our opinion, these questions set us on the path towards ‘culture’. In other words, this leads us to wonder about the cultural particularities of Latin America as a region —characterized by that phenomenon called ‘populism’— and its singular origins.

Thus, this article seeks to make a contribution in explaining this set of populist ideas, but attempting to change its conceptualization as discourse given by mainstream studies on populism. As a consequence, we are not intended to operationalize it —because it already has been achieved by such studies—, but rather to reconstruct the origins and historical development of these ideas in Latin America. By observing from a historical perspective, it besides allows us to distinguish what distinguishing cultural features would belong to Latin America. In carrying out this task, we can accurately trace the effect of certain cultural patterns on populism, which contributes to enrich the causal range of scholarly literature on populism.

Henceforth, the inspiration of this article is both theoretical and empirical. On the one hand, the aim is to propose alternative theoretical bases for conducting further empirical research about Latin American populism, specifically explanatory studies. On the other hand, it should be noted that analyzing cultural factors implies to change the focus of the historical scope —from mainstream research based on the study of those short-term causes to research that takes long-term social changes into account— that is precisely what we aim to do.

Having regard to the above, in the first section, this article tries to clarify what the cultural causes of populism are and how to understand Latin American culture in a historical and causal context; while in the second and third sections, we outline a historical and explanatory proposal about how a long-term cultural cause, shaped during colonial times, would be connected to a more recent phenomenon like populism. For conducting this analysis, we base on some premises of ‘cultural sociology’ and ‘phenomenological sociology’, as well as we draw upon some elements of Braudel’s approach concerning ‘historical time’ and of ‘comparative-historical analysis’. In addition, we provide several evidences for the historical period under consideration in this article.

1. Culture and Latin American populism

The social sciences generally do not take a cultural approach to study populism as such, except in a few works. Two of these works can be attributed to both influential Brazilian and Spanish thinkers, respectively, who asserted the relevance of traditional patterns in explaining current political and social matters in Latin America. Freyre (2003 [1933]: 114-115) and Medina Echavarría (1980 [1963]: 43) argue that the liberal tradition of the Independence succumbed to the colonial *ethos*, which was developed inside *haciendas* and *engenhos*, explaining many current social phenomena of the region¹. A few years later, from the influential book on populism edited by Ionescu and Gellner, Stewart (1970) asserts that there is not a set of characteristic or factors that define populism, but it is an ideal type of social relationship raised in some traditions lost in the past. And in more recent decades, Cousiño and Valenzuela (1994) also posit that Latin American populism inherited several cultural features from Colonialism, which contributed to shape the phenomenon of populism². Nevertheless, even though all these authors posit a

¹ We have identified similar arguments in the works of Ebel and Taras (2013), Morse (1954) and Wiarda (2013), among others.

² Ostiguy (2017) also postulates a ‘socio-cultural’ approach for studying populism. He understands political landscapes as ordered through two axes: the traditional left/wing axis and the high/low one. Thus, populism is founded in this latter axis, specifically at the ‘low end’, which would involve a ‘cultural’ level

cultural approach for populism or for present political situations, their research still do not represent an entirely empirical body of work. For this reason, this article aims at delivering some theoretical elements and evidence to move in this direction. In this section, we specifically address two theoretical issues: firstly, providing a definition of culture that may be historically studied and, secondly, discussing the need to move from an analogical thinking to another approach based on the historical-causal connection between cultural elements and populism.

1.1. Deeper cultural structures and *ethos*

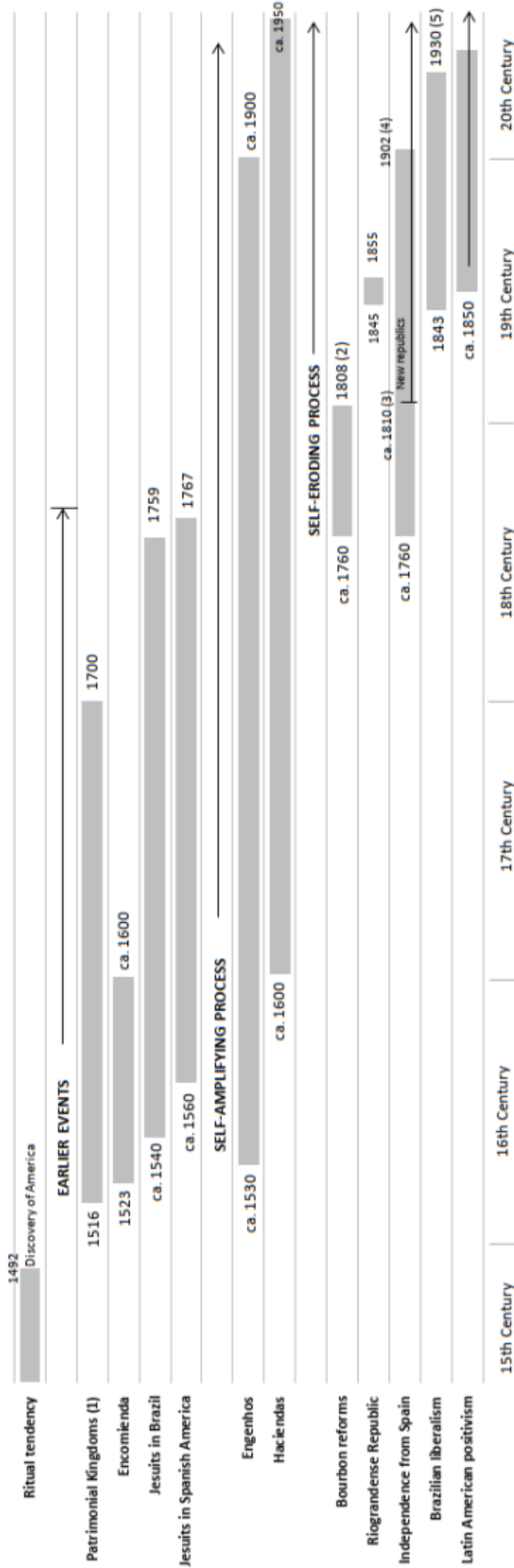
A wide range of definitions about culture in social sciences have provoked that it becomes a conundrum. But, cultural sociology provides answers to grasp it. In fact, it is possible to understand culture in at least two ways (Spillman 2002). Firstly, culture has been understood as an element that characterizes societies and social groups as a whole, which corresponds to values and beliefs that are shared in everyday life. Under this definition, cultural differences inside a society tend to fade away, because the research focus is on pursuing general frameworks. Secondly, culture has also been understood as a separated realm of human expression generally associated to arts, which is different from politics, economy and so forth.

Spillman (2002: 4-5) also claims that cultural sociology has developed a third perspective for understanding culture as referring to processes of meaning-making. This offers a view that integrates both former approaches and provides an important contribution: to change the preconception of culture as static and naturally given phenomenon. These meanings could be indeed socially constructed through the interrelation among social action, social structures, and deeper meaning structures or culture (Kane 2000: 312). Then, culture has not only been understood as an element influenced by other social factors nor as a dependent variable —what Alexander calls ‘sociology of culture’—, but culture can be assessed and understood as an explanatory variable as well, which can affect individuals, social groups or even other social structures. Alexander (2003: 5) refers to this latter as ‘cultural sociology’. For this reason, and similar to what Kane (2000) has maintained, we assert that culture is characterized by being a dynamic process of meaning construction that can contribute to explain historical processes and phenomena in Latin America.

But then, what is culture in more precise terms for this research? In our view, an appropriated definition should be based on the first sense of culture above mentioned, namely as an element of society as a whole. However, it is also considered the third perspective of culture, in other words, recognizing that a dynamic process of meaning-making is an essential assumption. In addition, that begs the question of how it would work. According to Alexander and Smith (2002: 234), culture is composed by deeper, meaning and nonmaterial structures of symbolic sets. These structures, which are generalized throughout societies, providing elements for understanding social life, are larger and more powerful than human will, but even though these are not compulsory,

as such. It corresponds to the ‘popular’ dimension, i.e. where emotional bonds between people and leaders are founded; instead, the ‘high end’ involves the performance of rational institutions, where emotions are largely absent. Nevertheless, despite the novelty of Ostiguy’s ideas, these move further away from the aim and approach of this article.

Figure N°1. The historical path of the Latin American *ethos*: 1492 - ca. 1950



Notes: (1) Correspond to the period of Hapsburg Spain. (2) Abdications of Bayonne.
 (3) The founding of new Latin American republics. (4) Cuban Independence. (5) The end of República Velha.

more accurate explanations of populism, the convergence between ‘cultural origins’ and ‘causes placed in recent times’—such as macro-structural causes and the role of leadership—, as well as the inquiry into ‘causal mechanisms’ —that connect these causes and populism—, appears to be highly necessary for further research.

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