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'Kicking in the Worker's Backside'. A Reflection on Latin American Populism

I was of born of the people,
I have the people in my hearth [...]
But the people's language was inaccessible to me.
I have not been able to make the people speak.
(Michelet, [1869], Nos Fils)[1]

'What, then, is so perilous in the fact that people speak,
and that their discourse proliferates to infinity
(M. Foucault [1970], The Order of Discourse)[2]

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to foster the introduction of some analytical tools for the study of populism in Latin America. I argue that a post-structuralist approach to the question of representation and subjectivity can provide us with a range of concepts to grasp the specificity of populist politics in Latin America. The paper has three sections. Firstly, I critically revise some works on classical populism focus-

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[1] Quoted in Barthes, R. *Michelet* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell), p. 199.

[2] Foucault, M. 'The Order of Discourse' in Young, R. *Untying the Text: a post-structuralist reader* (Routlegde Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 52.

ing on how both political subjectivity and the question of representation were inscribed in that body of literature. Secondly, I present an analysis of how both representation and subjectivity would be theorised from the point of view of post-structuralist political theory. And finally, I scrutinise two cases of populism putting at work the theoretical framework developed in the second section. I take as case studies two exemplary phenomena of populism in Latin America: Getulio Vargas in Brazil and Juan Domingo Perón in Argentina.

Key words

Populism, Vargas, Perón, representation, subjectivity, post-structuralism.

Abstract

El propósito de este artículo es el de promover la introducción de herramientas analíticas para el estudio del populismo en América Latina. Argumento que un acercamiento post-estructuralista hacia la pregunta sobre representación y subjetividad puede proveernos de conceptos útiles para poder comprender las especificidades propias de la política populista en América Latina. Este artículo en sus tres secciones revisa primero, trabajos sobre populismo clásico, con el fin de enfocarse en la manera como la subjetividad política y la cuestión de la representación desempeñan papeles fundamentales en esta literatura. En segundo lugar, analizo la manera como a subjetividad y la representación pueden ser teorizadas desde la perspectiva post-estructuralista, y finalmente, estudio dos casos de populismo poniendo a trabajar el marco teórico desarrollado para tales fines. Los casos en los que me concentro son los del populismo de Getulio Vargas en Brasil y de Juan Domingo Perón en Argentina.

Palabras clave

Populismo, Vargas, Perón, representación, subjetividad, post-estructuralismo.

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to foster the introduction of some analytical tools for the study of populism in Latin America. I argue that a post-structuralist approach to the question of representation and subjectivity can provide us with a range of concepts to grasp the specificity of populist politics in Latin America. The paper has three sections. Firstly, I critically revise some works on classical populism focusing on how both political subjectivity and the question of representation were inscribed in that body of literature. Secondly, I present an analysis of how both representation and subjectivity would be theorised from the point of view of post-structuralist political theory. And finally, I scrutinise two cases of populism putting at work the theoretical framework developed in the second section. I take as case studies two exemplary phenomena of populism in Latin America: Getulio Vargas in Brazil and Juan Domingo Perón in Argentina.

Theoretical Context and its Problems

The existing relevant literature about Latin American populism can be organised along two dominant theoretical perspectives: the structural-institutional and cultural-ideological approach.[3]

The Structural-Institutional Approach

This approach privileges the role of political and social institutions, like unions and workers' organisations, political parties and the state.[4] Populism was viewed as a political regime with an ambiguous relation with democracy and authoritarianism. This perspective focuses onto the *object-side* of the populist phenomenon. Thus, party and union enrolment, state-centred policies, political leadership are seen as 'an object' of analysis, with objective rules of behaviour and system of incentives and punish-

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[3] For a similar classification of approaches to populism but with a different analysis see Cammack, P. 'The Resurgence of Populism in Latin America', *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 19 (2000), pp. 149-161.

[4] From a neo-Marxist perspective see Vilas, C. 'Latin American Populism: A Structural Approach' in *Science and Society*, 56 (Winter, 1992-93), pp. 389-420. From an historical perspective on urban social policy see Conniff, M. *Urban Politics in Brazil: The Rise of Populism 1925-1945* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1981). Most significantly from the point of view of 'corporativism' Erikson K.P. 'Populism and Political Control of the Working Class in Brazil' in Corradi, J. Nash, J. and Spalding, H. A. (ed.) *Ideology and Social Change in America Latina*, (New York: Gordon and Breach, 1977) and Erikson, K. *The Brazilian Corporative State and Working-Class Politics* (London, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977).

ment. An element of normativism is introduced when the two competing mechanisms for popular recruitment, unions and political parties, are assessed. The latter is viewed as better for the degree of democratisation of the political regime. The unions were subjected to divisive/divisionist practices from state agencies, causing the formation of an emerging 'union aristocracy' functional for the stability of the populist regime. In his analysis of *Varguismo* in Brazil, Francisco Weffort affirmed: "it is true that populism implies, in whatever of its forms, a *treason* to the popular mass. Even when it would have a more or less wide popular basis [...] the typical political pattern remains limited by the horizons of the petty bourgeoisie [...] in this way populism carries within itself an inconsistency that leads unavoidably to a treason".[5] Along the same lines, K. Eriksson characterised the "classical populism" that predominated in Brazil under Vargas as a regime in which "politicians grant workers benefits such as legal recognition for labour organisations, minimum wages increases and social legislation –*but all the while they keep tight control so the workers themselves do not gain any real political power"* [6] and Stein, in his study on Peruvian populism, sustained that social control was a way to maintain "passive, non-revolutionary popular masses".[7] Consequently, the structural-institutional perspective sustained the view that populism was the product of a disciplinary intervention 'from above', the establishment of a new (welfare-state) policy paradigm and the employment of police-like mechanisms for the control of political mobilisation and *manipulative strategies for a domesticated and indoctrinated mass support*. In these studies the 'structural' variables are privileged over the actors involved. Actors are seen as 'not gaining real political power' and the relationship between populists and the masses is recurrently grasped as corporatist domination, elite manipulation and/ or sinister co-optation.

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[5] Weffort, F. *O Populismo na Politica Brasileira*. 4ta Edição (Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1979), p. 34.

[6] Erikson (1979), *ibid.*, p. 50. My emphasis. Another example: R. Schneider sates 'the populist authoritarian regime of Getulio Vargas [was] a system of tutelage and control', see his *'Order and Progress'. A Political History of Brazil* (San Francisco: Westview Press, 1991), p. 107. For the case of Peronism see Juan C. Torre Torre, J.C. (1990) *La Vieja Guardia Sindical y Perón. Sobre los orígenes del Peronismo* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, Instituto T. Di Tella), p. 81-2 where Peron's policies towards the unions are described as 'generous in manipulatory attempts'.

[7] Stein, S. *Populism in Peru* (Madison: University of Winsconsin Press, 1980), p 15.

The Cultural-Ideological Approach

The birth of this approach owns debt to social scientists that, trying to avoid the excess of formalism in the structural perspective, focused in the ideological production under populist times. This view is more rich and complex than the previous one, but at the price of a wider unevenness in research strategies. I think two analytical strategies can be differentiated within this approach. On the one hand, there is a line of analysis which starts with a study of different ideological formations like nationalism, socialism and liberalism and the core ideas they distinctively embody concluding that populism did not formed a 'pure' or an authentic or totally new ideology, being its only innovation the application of those already existent values from the state and putting them at work within distributive economic policies.[8] On the other hand, there is a line of research that sustains a kind of grass-root point of view in the

political meaning of populism, in the sense it highlights a process of an increasing autonomy and social redemption coming 'from below' and which populist leaders just only reproduce. In this second approach Populism is depicted as a moment of social advancement and progress in which civil society improves from different past conditions of demobilisation to a more autonomous form of self-consciousness. In the contextual discussion this paper fits in, J. French's study on the industrial workers of the Great São Paulo, Brazil, expresses this line of thought: "[a] convincing refutation of the corporatist synthesis could be achieved only by approaching the problem of workers and populism from the bottom up". In his model, the world of populism is turned upside down affirming that Vargas really "sought to awaken the sleeping giant of Brazilian politics, the people". Once the giant is moved, "new forces were unleashed that could no longer be controlled in the manner of the past".[9] In the case of Peronism, D. James had sustained that it

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[8] An exemplary case of a theory in which populism is characterised as an 'impure' ideology, then, lacking any differentiating key values is Canovan, M *Populism* (London: Junction, 1981). For the author, the only common element present in different types of populisms are the 'appeal to the people' and the 'distrust of the elites' (p. 264). In the case of Peronism, C. Altamirano has affirmed: 'Did the emergence of Peronism renovate the ideological landscape in the same way it did change the political and social field? The answer simply is no', '[...]most of the themes of Peron's discourse belonged to the nationalist discourse [...]' and 'Peron's thought was inscribed in the field of ideologies of industrialism'. See Altamirano, C. *Bajo el Signo de las Masas (1943-1973)*, Biblioteca de Pensamiento Argentino, Vol VI (Buenos Aires: Ariel Historia, 2000), pp. 20, 25, 26.

[9] French, J. *The Brazilian Workers ABC. Class Conflict and Alliances in Modern São Paulo* (Chapel Hill, London: The University of North Carolina Press), quotations respectively from p. 15-6, 121, 131.

"remained in a fundamental way, *a potential heretical voice, giving expression to the hopes of the oppressed* both within the factory and beyond, as claim for social dignity and equality.[10]

Towards a Critique of both Approaches

Beyond the differences described above, both approaches share a common analytical logic. The institutional as well as the cultural thesis are underpinned by a transparent, perfect, non-opaque, identifiably direct and essentialist conception of representation. Or, in other words, both approaches fall equally within what can be called the political ontology of a 'perfect representation'. This affects the way they think the constitution of a popular political identity. Let me present shortly the main elements of this ontology. A conception of representation which assumes itself as transparent and direct is one in which the parts involved in the relationship form their identity *before* entering into the relation itself. To re-present is to present again, in a different sphere, with a different language, something that was already submitted to formation in another place. As Laclau had pointed out "this pre-

supposes that the will is fully constituted and that the role of the representative is exhausted in its function of intermediation".[11] For the notion of intermediation would not exhaust everything that can occurs between the representative and the represented, the relation must involve a *moment of articulation, the creation of something new*. Thus, to think representation as non-problematic, as a natural bond, with no *decalage*, assumed by itself, as simple mediation is to forget the inherent productive and creative capability of representation as relation. In the case of the structural theories, they assume a political logic fully within the conditions of a perfect representation: the subject at stake (the workers, in this case) has a mandatory teleology: to develop naturally an autonomous consciousness, without any odd interference. Any interruption in this process must be marginalised, as a 'deviation', product of a manipulatory, fully heterogeneous, will. In the case of cultural-ideological theories, representation is seen as perfectly transparent because the populist leader expresses the people's hopes, realises them and the whole process of populist enunciation is described as a coming into terms, exhausting,

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[10] James, D. *Resistance and Integration. Peronism and the Argentine Working Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 38. My emphasis.

[11] Laclau, E. *Emancipation(s)* (London: Verso, 1996), p. 97.

absorbing and incorporating what was already there to be expressed. In this model, at the end, populist identification is explained in terms of a cogency: the leaders speaks into a language that it was expected to be spoken; the representative did what was expected to be done, etc. There is a clear assumption of symmetry underlying the whole explanatory logic. M. Conniff's populist 'formula' came to express the underlying similarity underpinning the different approaches on populism: "populism= leader ? charismatic bond + elections ? followers".[12] As we see, between the leader and the followers there is no possibility of a drift, the electoral process comes to re-affirm the strength of the charismatic link. The populist formula has a coherent underpinning logic: from the beginning to its end there is a one-to-one relationship between all the elements. There is no contingency possible between the leader and the followers.

A Post-Structuralist Theoretical Framework

In this section to follow, I propose an analytical approach to populism based upon a post-structuralist and anti-essentialist conception of representation.[13] To elaborate such approach, I resort to a set of theoretical concepts to strengthen the empirico-analytical power the framework proposed.[14] I shall use Derrida's categories of 'iteration' and 'supplementarity' in order to account for the complexity implicit in the relation of representation while Wittgenstein's concept of 'aspect dawning' shall be used to re-enter the *political subject* implicit in the populist bond and describe her action as a particular form of *resistance* by other

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[12] The 'populist formula' is in Conniff, M. 'Introduction' in Conniff, M. (ed.) *Populism in Latin America* (Tuscalosa, London: The University of Alabama Press, 1999), p. 7.

[13] I refer particularly to Laclau, E. 'Power and Representation' in *op.cit*. Ref 10, pp. 84-105. For ar introduction to post-structuralism and its application to political analysis see Howarth, D. *Discouse* (Open University Press, 2000) and the seminal work by Laclau and Mouffe *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London: Verso, 1985), esp. Chapter 3.

[14] It is important to note here that post-structuralists in general are criticised for both an excess of idealism and, connecting with this, low empirical power and weak applicability. Generally, most of the critiques to 'post-modernism' as an offspring of post-structuralism had followed similar practices of criticism. The ultimate aim of this paper is to contest the idea that the methodological 'weakness' of Discourse Theory has to do with its ontological assumptions. Among the critiques are the so-called 'materialist' and realist' sociological schools i.e. Geras, N. *Discourses of Extremity: Radical Ethics and Post-Marxist Extravagances* (London: Verso, 1990); Bhaskar, R. *Reclaiming Reality* (London: Verso, 1989); Woodiwiss, A. *Social Theory after Postmodernism* (Pluto Press, 1990) and the 'institutionalist' approaches like that of Jessop, B. *The Capitalist State: Marxist Theories and Methods* (Oxford, 1982) and Mouzelis, N. *Post-Marxist Alternatives: The Construction of Social Orders* (Macmilian, 1990).

means. At the theoretical level these three categories, which will be explained below, will be useful to scrutinise the 'reception' of populist discourses and how the emerging subject (Connif's 'followers') intervenes in it.

I argue firstly, that the official populist discourse did not assume an *a-priori* ideal meaning at its reception. In other words, the official populist discourse, that of its leaders and organisations, was subjected to processes of transformation and re-direction by the common people and by its followers. Secondly, the specificity of populism *becomes visible* with the role the political subject plays in the relationship. Populism specific feature is that the dawning of new aspects about political life can only be possible in the context of an uneven and out-of-joint relationship: *a relation in which an offer is given without any previous demand*. The populist offer, the discourse of a leader or of an institution, is one that not only satisfies its demand but supersedes it. It is in this specific sense that the populist enunciation is seen as incarnating a surplus, a supplement from its very beginning. An element of astonishment is implicit in its proposal, provoking the dawning of new aspects and meanings and, thus, making possible the re-constitution of the socio-political space around a newly disseminated language. Thirdly, these logics are clearly visible in both the cases of political leadership like the one of Getulio Vargas and Juan Peron.

The Post-Structuralist View of Representation

The initial lines of a re-worked concept of representation from a post-structuralist perspective can be found in Laclau, when he affirms: "a relation of representation [...] is a supplement necessary for the constitution of that identity. The crucial problem is to determine whether this supplement can simply be deduced [...] or if *it is an entirely new addition*. It is my view that the latter is the case".[15] From this guiding standpoint, a set of *workable and specifying conditions* can be elaborated:

Firstly, any representation is out of sync. The identity of both/either the representative or/and the represented change and is transformed in the very process of representation. This transformation is effected as an 'enlargement' and re-direction, expressing the unavoidable contingent character of the identificatory process. If that is so, it seems to be more proper to speak of *selective* iden-

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[15] Laclau, *op. cit.* Ref 10, p. 98. My emphasis.

tification because it stresses the activity of the subject developing a process of appropriation and re-employment of a certain discourse in a new way. The *selective* character of the identification goes hand in hand with the *articulatory* character of the practice involved: after the intervention of the re-creating practice of articulation at the level of the represented, some elements shall be eliminated and other re-directed with other aims. This is precisely why these theoretical considerations force us to put at the centre of the study *the different places of reception of the populist discourse* and the relations they establish with its very enunciation.

Secondly, the relation of representation is a relation of communication. The value of the enunciation is not taken at face. It is not *a-priori* assumed that its effect shall be coherent and co-incident with its literal content. The *intention* behind it was displaced and put into question. Those different places of reception facilitate, trigger off and open the *iteration* of the enunciated discourse. Iteration meaning here that a discourse is repeated, quoted, cited, but with a displacement of meaning. Derrida's own words are illustrative of this: 'the first consequence of this will be the following: given the structure of iteration, the very intention animating the utterance will never be through and through present to itself and to its content. The iteration structuring it *a-priori* introduces into it a dehiscence and a cleft [*brisure*] which are essential'.[16] Any relation of representation as relation of communication is, then, subjected to iterability. It is my contention that these *dehiscence*, *brisures* and blind spots can only be supplementary bridged.

As we shall see, Vargas' and Peron's discourse will be subjected to processes of re-definition and re-reading by the opposing *and* supporting political agents. Some elements will be eliminated and some others will be re-defined for its adaptability to new contexts. In this sense, it is perfectly possible to imagine the very field of representation as a *field of play*, a field in which the meaning is never fully constituted neither at the pole of the enunciation/ the representative nor at the one of the represented/ reception. To affirm the supplementary character of signification is one of the central points in Derrida's project: "this movement of play, permitted by the lack or absence of a centre or origin, is the movement of supplementarity [...] the movement of signification adds something, which results in the fact

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[16] Derrida, J. *Limited Inc* (Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), p. 18.

that there is always more, but this addition is a floating one because it comes to perform a vicarious function, to supplement a lack on the part of the signified".[17] *The populist relation as being presented here is one in which the centre for the production of a definitive meaning is always subjected to contestation and negotiations.* Neither populist leaders nor his standing institutional creations can be seen as infallible places for the production and circulation of signifiers. This ultimately a-centred character of representation as relation makes possible a discursive approach to the phenomenon of populist identification. The question that strike us here is: what are the 'nuts and bolts' of this creative capability on the part of the political actors? Or better saying, how might this enlargement and this addition be operationalised and what is the form that this selective identification takes? I answer these two questions next.

The Place of the Subject in the process of Representation

In my view, A. Gramsci presented *in nuce*, even when in an underdeveloped and impressionistic way, some preliminary thoughts about the supplementary enlargements constituting any kind of uneven political representation. In the *Prison Notebooks* he says about the Jacobins:

> [They] imposed themselves on the French bourgeoisie, leading it into a far more advanced position than the originally strongest bourgeois nuclei would have spontaneously wished to take up [...] forcing the situation, creating irreversible *faits accomplis* [...] driving the bourgeois forward with kicks in the backside [...] for not only did they organise a bourgeois government, they did more. They created the modern bourgeois state,

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[17] Once identification is not assumed but problematised and a de-centred conception of the subject in brought back into the analysis of populism, it becomes possible to say, with Derrida that "a sort of non-locus in which an *infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play*. This was the moment when language invaded the universal problematic, the moment when, in the absence of a centre or origin, everything became discourse -provided we can agree on this word - that is to say, a system in which the central signified, the original or the transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences. The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely" in 'Sign, Structure and Play in The discourse of the Human Sciences' in Derrida, J. *Margins of Philosophy* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982), p. 280.

made the bourgeois into the leading, hegemonic class of the nation [...].[18]

For Gramsci, the supplementary character of the Jacobin offer is present in the fact that they propose more of what the petty bourgeoisie was demanding them to do. According to him, the Jacobin collective will is structured over an excessive offer, over an '*ex-novo* creation',[19] which enabled them to 're-awake the French popular energies'.[20] Gramsci's analysis helps us to highlight the supplementary element present in the discursive enunciation. I think that Wittgenstein may be of help to provide an answer for the form the selective identification takes at reception.

In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein uses the example of the duck-rabbit image to put forward his idea of language as aspect perception. Language is aspectival in the sense that it perceives selectively objects in the world. Some aspects of an object, depending the relationship we establish with it, the distance at which we are placed, remain unnoticed and concealed, while some others become our very description of the object. The duck-rabbit image can be, at once, a duck if we remain captive of the duck-like dominant element of the image or it can be a rabbit, if the rabbit-like aspect of the image is more seductive for us. But we can also pass from one perception to the other. As Wittgenstein affirmed: "I must distinguish between 'continuous seeing of an aspect' and the 'dawning' of an aspect".[21] This movement at the moment of aspect perception is, in Wittgenstein's view, the initiation of the 'aspect dawning' process: "the aspect of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity (one is unable to notice something because it was always before our eyes). The real foundations of our enquiry do not strike us at all. Unless that that fact has struck us at some point. And this means: we fail to be struck by what, once seen, is *most striking and powerful*".[22] How does this striking event affect us? He says:

> when a dream is interpreted we might say that it is fitted into a context in which it ceases to be puzzling. In a

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[18] Gramsci, A. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. Q. Hoare & G. Smith (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971), p. 77-9. My underlined, italics in the original.

[19] Gramsci, A. ibid., p. 130.

[20] Gramsci, A. *ibid.*, p. 82. My underlined.

[21] Wittgenstein, L. *Philosophical Investigations* (London: Blackwell, 1953), p. 194.

[22] Wittgenstein, *ibid.*, p. 129. Italics added.

sense the dreamer re-dreams his dream in surroundings such that its aspect changes [...] and the result is that we say: *'Ah, now I see why it is like that, how it all comes to be arranged in that way, and what these various bits are...'* and so on.[23]

The *'now I see'* opens before us a new landscape that involves –following the example- symbolic and imaginary elements. A new feature in an image becomes now perceptible and also a new way of reading certain image shall be available to us. The Wittgenstenian *'now I see'* makes visible the process of articulation, makes evident that a transition is starting and that the picture that was holding us captive is basically *contingent,* our bewitchment finishes when we start perceiving things differently after the 'now I see'.[24] The perceiving/reading/receiving/interpellated subject is awoken for the perception of a new side (until now unperceived) of an object or of a dominant discourse. *The dawning of a new aspect presents itself to the subject as an unlimited offer for which he had not submitted any question, for which it was no previous demand.* A change in the way an object (the public sphere/

the political world/ the state) was perceived by the subject is motivated by the fact that he is being subjected to an offer for which it was no pre-existing request. In this sense, the 'aspect dawning' marks a rupture in the continuum of perception. The very supplement implicit in the relation of representation –to which we refer above- is here acting as a surplus, as an excessive supply, striking the subject, and opening the way for its *appropriation* and its *re-direction* in a new way. Consequently, it shall be possible to say that after the emergence of the first awakening experience, different forms of appropriation follows. Both the idea of aspect dawning and its successive shifts and changes go hand in hand with the conception of an agency that emerges in a context of *partially constituted identities.* The subject is structured over a lack, something is lacking in it and this triggers off the identificatory process. It is this void, this lack in the subject that shows us that there is *still room* in the subject for an 'aspect dawning'. Those different (past) experiences of identification –the different pictures that hold us captive- were not definitive and totalising and that (any) new picture shall

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[23] Wittgenstein, *ibid.,* p. 129. Italics added.

[24] The idea of 'aspect change', correlative but not identical, to 'aspect dawning' is being fruitfully used in political theory. For its application to an analysis of multicultural societies see Tully, J *Strange Multiplicity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) and for its use to understand questions of subjectivity within the debate of deliberative democracy see Norval, A. 'Wittgenstein contra Habermas' (Department of Government, Essex University, mimeo, 2000).

be subjected to the contingency of the dawning of a new aspect. We can, then, use the analysis above to refer to the theory of the subject.

When Laclau affirms that the subject is the distance between the structure and the decision, or that the proper place for the subject is between the totally structured and the undecidable[25] he is saying that the *partial structuration* at the level of the subject was not possible to be represented without unevenness, without dehiscence. The concept of a partially constituted subject can only be intelligible in a context of an out-of-joint relationship in which the subject neither is a product of a dominant discourse s/he repeats and automatically reproduces nor is s/he a (new) author of a total and radical displacement of the origin. The singular detour has to do with the *resistance* of the subject to a certain enunciation. It is possible, then, to link the partially structured intervention on the part of the subject within a more general concern for *political resistance under populism* and problematise, thus, both the *manipulatory*-institutional and the freedom-au-

thenticity cultural approaches placing the question of resistance in a half a way between the two. Concerning resistance, Foucault affirmed:

> discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, anymore than silences are. We must make allowances for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse tranvests and produces power; it reinforces it but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwarts it.[26]

The logic of resistance is here theorised as the tension between total control-manipulation and freedom-autonomy. In this precise sense, it implies the possibility of an appropriation of the political power and its redirection with different purposes. We shall see in the analysis below to what extent the subjects that were interpellated by the official discourse and words of both Vargas and Peron were able to produce that singular-reemployment even

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when that was their own -and probably the only allowed- way of resistance. The surface over which any process of representation is developed is not a homogenous surface. It is a discontinuous and -say- full of holes.

Interpreting Varguism and Peronism

This section aims to scrutinise two cases of what the literature has considered as exemplars of Latin American populism. I will apply the categories introduced above to disentangle the process of representation and the emergence of the subject under Latin American populism.

For an old Peronist militant,

> Peron screwed the oligarchy... When Peron took office, *everything changed* because the worker ceased to be a slave of the rich people. He *awoke* the workers.[27]

Peron's offer, his political promise for social and political emancipation, enacted the *dawning of* *an aspect* about the political life of the workers. Doña Maria, in her story says:

> They [the bosses] no longer treated us like an animal, [...] like something that you use. We were treated as you should treat other human being. *These changes* we were feeling *gradually*, but we definitely *noticed* them after 17 October 1945[28], when the Argentine people and well-intentioned foreigners went into the streets to demand liberty of a man imprisoned by the armed forces, who was called Juan Domingo Peron, *from that moment we noticed the difference.*[29]

This testimony presents, in a strikingly wittgenstenian language, what Peron was for them, what was precisely the change he introduced in the life of the workers. Expressions like 'from that moment we were more respected' were common in workers' declarations and unions manifestos. Now, the 'big change that came with Peron'[30] shall be re-articulated in different ways, even within the same context, i.e. the

[27] Quoted in Auyero, J. '(Re) membering Peronism: an ethnographic account of the relational Character of Political memory', Paper presented at Latin American Studies Association, U.S.A, 1998, p. 15. My emphasis.

[28] The 17th October 1945 more than 1 million workers mobilised in Argentina to support the imprisoned leader. It is known in the historiography of the country as the birth of Peronism as a political movement.

[29] Quoted in James, D. (2000) *Doña Maria's Story. Life, History, Memory and Political Identity* (Durham, London: Duke University Press), p. 47. Emphasis added.

[30] In James, *ibid.*, p 51.

workplace. In this sense, the shift supported a new attitude at work ('we did enter the plants with certain cockiness, a certain pride')[31] but also legitimised the application of constraints by workers / union organisers over workers themselves ('we had to force people to stop [working] [...] because it seemed to people that working more was better. It cost us a lot, the internal struggle with our own *compañeros* [...] it was tougher than struggle against the boss himself'.[32] The change that Peronism brought about was a complex one and it implied the reconstitution of a new identity using contradictory, at first sight, dispositions as resources. The *matoneria* [heavy attitude] was combined with a secular attachment to work and an internalisation of work duties. These particular combinations in the structuration of a typical kind of personality is important once it shows that the change introduced had to do with the combination of different values under the same harbouring discursive formation.

This role of *interpellation as empowerment* can also be traced in Varguismo in Brazil. A worker recognised that in 1930, when it was launched the electoral campaign of the Liberal Alliance around Getulio's candidacy, the Communist Party did not mobilised the workers, but

> Getulio *stimulated* [*empolgou*] the workers [...] we must have supported Getulio. We must have sided with his program for the interest of the worker and the people in general.[33]

The social and welfare laws protecting labour Vargas sanctioned in 1943 were explicitly presented not as a social conquest of the workers but as a 'gift from above'. Marcondes Filho, Vargas' Ministry of Labour, affirmed defending official propaganda programs on social laws:

> considering that this is a new legislation that objectifies (*sic*) the great proletarian mass, the microphone of '*Hora Do Brasil*' was a modern and convenient media to offer, from North to South, and at the same time, the exact interpretation of a right that, *for not being conquered but granted*, will need some explanation to be understood.[34]

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[31] James, *ibid.*, p. 49.

[32] In James, *ibid.*, p. 50.

[33] Quoted Castro Gomes, A. (ed.) *Velhos Militantes* (Rio de Janeiro: J. Zahar Editor, 1988), p. 134. My italics.

[34] Marcondes Filho in *Boletim do Ministerio do Trabalho, Industria e Comercio*, nº 101, Janeiro 1943, Ano IX, p. 367. My italics.

The official discourse presenting the Labour Laws as a *grant* for which there had been no previous justifying demand, as an absolute surplus offer, was interpreted by the Brazilian workers (a Communist in this case) in a quite different way. Elvira Boni tells about her life under Vargas' times:

> I think we advanced a lot, because if we had not been there, Getulio Vargas would have never given the Labour Laws he finally gave[35]

The ex-worker shows here a strategy for the appropriation of the offer. It is not that Vargas came to recognise and incorporate old claims already present in the communist movement in Brazil but that the workers pressed him/ imposed upon him that demands. In that sense, the worker's own interpretation runs along the lines of the official discourse, that there was an unexpected offer, but in the worker's view it was not Vargas' innovation but their own political conquest.

Let me show how that logic operated under Peronism.

The CGT (General Confederation of Labour) was debating in October 1945 whether to go or not into a general strike. After two years in the Secretary of Labour and Welfare, Peron was in prison. In that meeting, dated the 16th October 1945, a union leader said:

> The bosses declared the war to Colonel Peron, not due to Peron himself, but because of what Peron made for the workers, to whom he gave improvements in welfare they were claiming for *and he gave also others with which the workers never ever had dreamt with*, like the Statute of the Rural Woker [...].[36]

Peron referred in his speeches to the fact that his public policies of social welfare were a recognition of the historical demands of the workers. He was insistent upon that they were a 'social conquest' and not a gift or a product of the leader (his) altruism but of the worker's own struggles and to the fact that he did that in order to avoid the danger of class struggle and social disorder. As we see from the quotation above, the workers' re-interpreted Peron's own words, changing his literal value and giving to it an exceeding, surplus value: that some of the benefits received from the government were not demanded, they never had dreamt with them.

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[35] In Castro Gomes, *op. cit*, Ref. 31, p. 67.

[36] CGT, [General Confederation of Labour, Argentina 1945] 'Minutes of the Central Committee Meeting', October, 16th 1945 (mimeo).

Peron's own *words of order*, very much emphasised in those studies that approached the question of Peronism through a study of Peron's own speeches and policies, were also subjected to a supplementary re-employment. These studies, without noticing the reception and the impact the content enunciated had in the wide spectre of social agents, underestimate, at the end, the political importance of the Peronist intervention.[37] Even though it is not my aim to analyse Peron's conception of society and his idea of organisation, his conception of the inorganic masses was tied to that of the social order. As he said, "the inorganic masses are always the most dangerous both for the State and for themselves... an inorganic worker's mass, as it was fostered by some people, it is an easy place for the growing of strange political and ideological conceptions".[38] But the rich dissemination of Peronism alongside of the variety of intervening social subject positions produced a signification *in spite of* his very idea of order. What becomes evident is that Peronism was received as a menace for the present state of social relations. Business organi-sations and economic groups re-ferred to the phenomenon of Peronism in the following way: 'the crisis is in the atmosphere. It is possible to perceive it at home, in the church, at school, in the streets, at the workplace and in the leisure activity places. One worry dominates everything. Only one issue, only one concern absorbs our thinking: the social peace is disturbed and hates that our history did not even know emerged'.[39]

Now, both the Socialist Party (SP) and the Communist Party (CP) had *equivalent* perceptions and employed a similar logic of argumentation to that of the powerful economic groups in their assessment of Peronism. The official press of the CP asked itself "Who are those identified with Peronism?" and the answer provided is "by one hand, it is the 'lumpen', the de-classed; and by then other hand, the young 'deceived' worker [...] who is the mercenary, the resentful and the degenerated".[40] Only after the political re-activation of those people, the social order and general harmony of society could be put at risk. The origin of the risk of disorder must be found in the

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[37] See for example Sigal, S. & Veron, E, *Peron o Muerte* (Buenos Aires: Hyspamerica, 1987) and Ben Plotkin, M. *Mañana es San Peron* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1991).

[38] La Nacion, 18/11/1944.

[39] Document of the Union Industrial Argentina (UIA), *Revista de la UIA*, n° 925, January 1946, p 13.

[40] La Hora, 11/11/1945.

formalisation of the intervention of the state in the re-structuring of social relations in general and those between the bosses and the workers, in particular. It is, thus, perfectly intelligible that the leader of the SP affirmed "the solution must be found in the normal play of institutions, in the regular process of a healthy economy and the free expansion of the talents of the people".[41] It is easy to see here that different orders of discourse are supplementary linked one to the other facing the Peronist phenomenon. The critique to a dis-ordering intervention becomes attached to a proposal for a free-market society.

Even though different contexts of emergence characterise Peronism and Varguism, equivalent processes happen at the level of the political subject and the articulatory practice it put forward. A worker of Porto Alegre, being opposed to the governor of the State, wrote to Getulio Vargas, the President, a letter asking for an employment and saying:

> Because I am in the opposition, I see myself eligible to ask for an employment to Your Excellency, the Presi-dent. To ask for a job is the most natural thing of the world; nowadays it is not the time of the Old Republic in which it was not possible for an agent of the opposition to do that [...] the New Repu-blic *is changing that mental-ity* thanks to the ideals of Getulio Vargas.[42]

Operating with the categories established above, the worker repeats the official argument, that Vargas brought about a sort of change in the worker's ideas, but repeats it in a different way. The iteration of the official dis-course of the revolution of 1930 as a ruptural change with the Old Republic (1889-1930) is appropri-ated by the worker and submit-ted to a particular re-direction. This redirection has the form of a *selective reading of the revo-lutionary imaginary*. The revolu-tionary official discourse was established as the legitimising ideology in the post-revolution-ary period, but the worker raises to it a conditionality of validity: to improve his own position, to be advantageous for him. The worker's reception focuses onto the 'kinks' in the discourse of the revolution but put them to work in his own favour. The iteration of the revolutionary discourse

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[41] Nicolas Repetto in La Vanguardia, 27/12/1945.

[42] Ferreira, J. *Trabalhadores do Brasil, o Imaginario Popular, 1930-1945* (Rio de Janeiro, FGV, 1997), p. 25. My emphasis. I draw here on Ferreira's careful analysis about the worker's perceptions of the official discourse under Vargas. But I place the discussion in the wider theoretical context of populist identification in general, displacement that leads my study to emphasise the logic of populist identification as a more complex and multidimensional activity than a simple quest for political autonomy, as he seems to imply.

assumes the form of something useful for the private life of the worker.

The *change of perspective,* the emergence of new/another possible aspects about the public sphere in Brazil that Vargas effected, becomes fully visible at reception. A worker affirmed: "with the coming of the *Estado Novo*, finished the protocols that were not allowing the government to identify itself with the people. Today poor Brazilians, like myself, feel themselves encouraged to ask something directly for their own benefit".[43] The Propaganda organs, serving a very strategic mission in Brazil after 1937 and the implantation of the *Estado Novo* dictatorship, popularised several forms to nickname Vargas: "Father of the Poor", "Great Father", "National Apostle", "Guide of Brazilian youth", etc. Again, the appropriation of the dominant ideological discourse at the moment of reception produces an effect that was not intentionally planned for its very enunciation. This re-appropriation displaces the expected result of it. In a letter, a woman makes visible that 'singular re-employment':

> Because of that I beg you excellency to attend my demand, as Chief of the Nation, as Father of Brazilians, *because I consider myself your daughter and a father must never be indifferent to his daughter's demands*, even more when she is in the most distressing moments of her life".[44]

This good example of how the monstrous power of an official propaganda can be manipulated and contingently re-employed by its reception, re-sending its dislocating power towards the state/locus of enunciation. Those grandiloquent nicknames which were condensing a variety of particular meanings (fatherhood/poverty/command/sanctity) and were, in the last instance, showing the essentially creative power of the dominant ideology, were elaborated at reception by the humble woman and processed for, in this case, more welfare and commodious living in her everydayness. *The language of Varguism came to fill a lack in the subject, but the subject is not at all passive in front of it, developing strategies of re-elaboration and reworking over the interpellation.*

Both Peronism and Varguism sustain the principles that give specificity to the populist relationship: *they both start with an exceeding offer that provokes an*

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[43] Quoted in Ferreira, *ibid.*, p. 48. The *Estado Novo* was Vargas' dictatorship from 1937 to 1945.

[44] Quoted in Ferreira, *ibid.*, p. 53. My italics.

alteration in the way the subjects place themselves within the public sphere. Peron was perceived differently as the oligarchy was perceived. Vargas also marked a discontinuity with the pre-existing discourse of the Old Republic (1889-1930) in Brazil. However and precisely because of this they were also affected, in their turn, by the very articulation they inaugurated: *a multiplicity of practices of creative resistance and supplementary employment were carried on by different actors in order to find their proper place within the social formation.* I turn to a detailed scrutiny of those sorts of appropriations.

The work of the 'rural surplus'

Peron's initial recognition of the dignity of the worker had to do with the fact that Peron granted them with more of what they were expecting to be granted. An example of this was the *Statute of the Rural Worker*.[45] Through it Peron established, among other things, the regulation and fixation of minimal wages and better living conditions for the workers in the coun-

tryside. The Statute introduced a visible antagonism within the existing network of social relations. Examples of this range from the very argumentation with which Peron justified its necessity ("the rural worker lives in a situation even worst than slavery itself") to the way the Statute was received by other economic groups. The Argentine Rural Society (SRA)[46], in a letter to the president, affirmed

the farms had always been imbued with an atmosphere of respect and mutual affection, not only without the slightest disagreement but also without complaints and union action [...] because of this it has no repercussions neither ideas of class struggle nor the so-called 'workers' demands [...] it was not necessary the introduction of conflict in order to establish principles of solidarity and social harmony.[47]

The document of the SRA would make evident the surplus articulating Peron's own proposal: the countryside was a realm of harmony and cohesion and no labour-based demands were a customary practice in there. The Statute came to inaugurate the

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[45] The decree-law n° 28.169 was sanctioned the 17/10/1944. It regulated resting times, stability, waged-holidays, medical assistance and hygienic conditions at workplace. Concerning this last point, Peron said that in the countryside one could find 'milk blended with shit'.

[46] The Argentine Rural Society was the pressure group of powerful landowners and stockbreeders and had a nation wide organisation.

[47] SRA, *Proyecto Alternativo al Esatuto del Peon* in La Nación 26/11/1944.

rural question as a debatable is-
sue in Argentina's public sphere
in late1944. It is in this sense
that the CGT reminded it as
'something with which we never
had dreamt with'.

It is possible to show how the
symbolic space around the 'ru-
ral discussion' becomes dissemi-
nated by the interpretative
participation of a common rural
worker, effecting a displacement
of the coordinates of the debate.
This displacement shall assume
the form of a 'double surplus' in
the sense that both the discourse
of Peron and of other interven-
ing major actors were subjected
to a creative re-appropriation. In
the official newspaper of the
Communist Party appeared a let-
ter written by a rural worker. Let
me quote it at length:

> They promised the earth to
> us and it will not be possible
> to fulfil all those promises if
> we are not strong enough
> and struggle. We must learn
> from farmers of other re-
> gions [...] who demanded to
> the government the expro-
> priation and division of many
> large states. I do not speak
> of this as an abstraction. At
> the end, anybody can have
> the same experience I had: I
> was evicted and they stole
> the few things I had [...] in
> the last 5 years I could not
> find such 'social justice' to
> protect myself [...]. I think

the problem small farmers
and rural workers face is
lack of organisation and be-
cause of that we are unable
to assert our rights in front
of landowners and manag-
ers; at the end we realise
that because of the lack of
association, many peasants,
instead of wining, they in-
spire shame to the man-
ager.[48]

The logic implicit in this letter is
what I call the 'rural surplus'. It
marks the dislocating interven-
tion of a supplement that pro-
duces a serie of displacements:
of Peron's own discourse, of the
Communist Party's discourse
—with which the worker is in
contact through the newspaper-,
and of the SRA's discourse.
Peron's discourse is supple-
mented with the demand for a
social fact, for a rural reform ("ex-
propriation and division of large
states"), and in this sense, the
worker is demanding *more* than
what was literally present in
Peron's proposal and even what
Peron was himself disposed to
grant. In the production of this
displacement, the worker re-ap-
propriates the meaning of '*social
justice*', now implying thé
achievement of a factual redistri-
bution of the land. But also the
worker actively re-appropriates
the language that bewitches him,
that of the CP, overloading it with
a different usage. The worker in

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[48] Orientación, 5/6/1946

the letter is in fact demanding for more state regulation and intervention ('in other regions ...[they] had demanded the government'). Alongside this appropriation, the possibility for 'social justice' comes to be supplemented and attached not to the freedom of contract between bosses and workers (or landowners and peasants) but to the idea that the conflicts that arise between them need the bureaucratising intervention of the public office. The SRA's image of a self-regulated society and a free-market style model for labour relations, not only without the intervention of the state but without any kind of labour organisation is not asserted by the worker. He sustains, agreeing both with Peronism and the CP, that social relations are conflictive and based upon an antagonism[49]; but disagrees with the solution the CP hoisted for that conflict.[50]

It is visible, then, to what extent the reception supplements the enunciating discourses in a highly creative way, transforming, re-directing and moulding them into different forms. The creativity of the represented/receptor does not take place in an empty void, *but within the existing interpellations of both Peronism and Communism*. But those interpellations does not exclude room for a singular intervention on the part of the subject that manipulates them for her own purposes building a new symbolic space for her self-recognition. The subject places herself in a sort of 'quilting point'[51] that resists the acceptation at face value of the literal content of the enunciation.

'From Revolution to Organisation'

In February 1946, Peron won his first presidential election supported by a coalition of forces among which were dissident sectors of other parties and the Labour Party (PL), the latter formed in October 1945. Just

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[49] It is not the place here to scrutinise and map the placing of the political frontiers fostered by Peronism and Communism, which were very different.

[50] For the Communist Party, the agrarian reform was not an object of justice but of economic development: "the great democratic tasks today in Argentina are to suppress the feudal and quasi-feudal backwardness, doing the agrarian reform and developing the industry and the national economy in order to guarantee our economic independence", Orientación, 27/3/46

[51] The supplementary additions to 'social justice' across different social contexts mean that the signifier 'social justice' operates in Peron's Argentina as an *'empty signifier'*. The signifier acquires that function when it starts to stand in for 'the absent fullness of a society'. It is precisely in the material body of that signifier, in its use by different subjects, that the discursive struggle for giving sense to the political situation acquires full visibility. For the usefulness of this concept for socio-political analysis see E. Laclau 'Why do empty signifiers matter to politics?' in Laclau, E, op. cit. Ref. 9, pp. 36-47.

soon after the electoral victory, the leader said that the 'moment of revolution is finished and is time to begin the moment of organisation.'[52] Peronism must organise itself into a unified political party. In May that year, an incipient party-form started to emerge from the political movement that took Peron to power. This party was named 'United Party of the Revolution' (PURN) and its reason was to be the 'official' Peronist party. The organisation of a heteroge- neous movement would allow Peron to do what he once stated 'I make believe them I am going where they want to go but in the meantime I make a turn and I end up going where I wanted'. Even the dissident sectors of the Labour Party saw the PURN as blind followers of Peron's or- ders.[53] But this was not the case. Peron, at calling to the organisation of the movement and forming the PURN, triggered a process it was impossible for him to control. The new party started to speak in the name of Peron, even when that very speaking would come to dis- cuss Peron's own authority. The National Executive Committee of the PURN said against the dissenters of the PL:

It is unacceptable that mani- festing public support to General Peron, on the other hand they disobey his or- ders [...] the only authority existing today with such a right is this National Execu- tive Committee.[54]

So, the argument to attack those attacking Peron was that the only authorised to attack the leader was the PURN. Once organised, the Peronist masses started, at least for some time, to speak in their own terms. Another manifestation of this surplus enacted at reception was the extension of Peron's words, even critically, *beyond* the 'official' limits. The PURN's newspaper affirmed:

The President of the Nation, in his speech at the Con- gress, stated that he would establish both "price fixation and an increase in employ- ers' contributions in an equal proportion" [...] With a pro- verbial moderation, that the very oligarchy does not de- serves, General Peron spoke of 'equal proportion'. To tell the truth those words must have been a consolation for those usufructuary of popu- lar needs, who deserve a more damaging decision against their exorbitant af- fairs and business.[55]

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[52] Meeting at the *Circulo Militar*, La Prensa, 22/4/1946; La Nación, 1/6/1946.

[53] See Gay, L. *El Partido Laborista en la Argentina,*[ed. J.C.Torre] (Buenos Aires: Biblos/ Fundacion Simon Rodriguez, 1999).

[54] El Laborista, 9/7/1946.

Conclusions

This paper allows us to affirm that Latin American populism implied something more complex than either strict manipulatory relationship or an authentic popular mobilisation, as some theories sustain. The whole aim of this paper was to place the question of populist identification in a terrain dominated by an uneven and broken conception of representation and the idea of the subject as an incomplete and lacking formation. On this basis I tried to identify forms of supplement operating in the demands of those *selectively identified* with Peronist and Vargas' political discourse, to stress the moment of reception of a political ideology and to describe the process of its dissemination. Overall the conceptual setting introduced in this paper served, then, three theoretical purposes: i) to introduce within a post-structuralist framework a bold conception of the subject, and thus, giving empirico-analytical power to the abstract concept of a 'partially structured subjectivity'; ii) to emphasise the moment of the reception of a political discourse, drawing attention on how a political enunciation is transformed and re-enacted by its audience and to what extent this

practice might be seen as a creative *resistance* to power; and iii) how these processes are particular features clearly visible in populist regimes allegedly governed by strong charismatic leaders, like Vargas and Peron, in which the leader-mass relationship itself seems to be dominated by surplus and displacements. As we said, representation is full of holes, holes that sometimes became traps, even for Vargas and Peron.

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[55] El Laborista, 26/8/1946.

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