

**Seeing and Not Seeing Populism in Latin America<sup>1</sup>**

**Jeffrey W. Rubin**

Boston University

*Populism in Latin America*

To understand the current global surge of populist governments, scholars and commentators have pointed to the harms of neoliberalism, the breakdown of democratic norms (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018), the characteristics of populism and how they differ from fascism (Finchelstein 2017)), and the affects and experiences that drive support for nationalist leaders (Mazzarella 2019).

I suggest a different, if complementary approach to understanding populism by turning to the specificity and complexity of Latin American politics in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century histories. First, I view populism in the context of Latin American nations' failures to achieve equality and inclusion as they modernized. In so doing, I consider together what I call "the first coming of the people on the scene," between the Mexican Revolution and the military governments of the 1960s and 70s, and the "second coming of the people on the scene," between the 1980s and the present. I suggest that we are

---

<sup>1</sup> This is the text of a presentation made at the Presidential Panel entitle "From Populism to Fascism? The Americas in the Era of Trump," Latin American Studies Association Congress, Boston, May 24, 2019.

seeing today *a repetition of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century experiences and that the present should be seen as a replay, with key differences, of the 1960s and 1970s.*

Second, and following from the first, I consider the heterogeneity of urban poor and lower-middle class populations. I do so by addressing the experiences of poor people who gained new, modest-but-significant material and cultural resources during Latin America's Pink Tide governments and commodity booms of the 2000s. I suggest that this group—dubbed “the new middle class” by policymakers and marketing consultants, and seen in Brazil as one base of 2018 electoral support for President Jair Bolsonaro—*is far more heterogenous and changing, and more robust and diverse in its actual and potential political identities*, than most analyses of populism suggest. Understanding this presses us to understand today's “populism” in Latin America as contingent, partial, and rooted in a range of histories and experiences.

### *Seeing and Not Seeing Populism*

The scholarly and political approach I am articulating might be called “seeing and not seeing.” By that I mean, on the one hand, “seeing” what is clearly in front of our eyes, be it leaders, armies, police forces, social movements, or environmental destruction—seeing those things, which legislate or murder or march or bring life-threatening drought or storms—while, on the other hand, “not seeing” these actors and phenomena so that we can discern the many forces, representations, and processes out of which they are constituted, in and behind and around and through them.

As we are “seeing and not seeing” in this way, the second move I employ is one of holding—holding all of these multiple actors, forces, representations, and processes in view. From that position of holding, how do we act politically, how do we intervene in the world? I am wondering how, as scholars and activists, we can make use of the many pathbreaking insights in academic research and theorizing, as well as on-the-ground in social movements, developed in recent decades to contribute to a different form of progressive politics today. I suggest that by “seeing and not seeing,” we can interrogate our collective processes of seeing, explaining, representing, and intervening in ways that might contribute to such a politics-for-our-time.

Using a seeing and not seeing approach, I argue that the crisis of populism in Latin America today represents the continuing, unresolved crisis of post-World War II visions and projects of development. The populist surge grows out of an enduring and critical dilemma: How can all people live decently in modern, industrial societies (or create alternatives to such societies)? The characteristics of the recently formed “new

middle class,” in Latin America and across the globe, demonstrate vividly the hopes and difficulties of achieving such a goal, one that became newly tangible in the course of the second coming of the people on the scene. By considering the many people who have begun to experience dignity, rights, and a decent standard of living in the peripheries of Latin America’s cities over the last two decades—and how those in city centers have responded to them—we gain understandings of the social and emotional experiences of individuals and families and the forces at play in electoral politics. These are people urgently affected by the processes of modernization and globalization and the promises and needs of politics in the cycle of democracy that began in the 1980s.

*The Two Comings of the People on the Scene*

I date the first “coming of the people on the scene” to the Mexican Revolution, when *campesinos* across Mexico took up arms to reclaim their land and communities. For much of South America, a more accurate starting point for the entry of the people on the scene would be the years of industrialization and nation-building that followed the Great Depression. None of this is to say that ordinary people, activism, and politics-from-below were not present in the 19<sup>th</sup> century—or that a variety of strategies of resistance and protest did not elicit dramatic backlash during that time—but rather that in the decades after 1911, and especially after 1929, large numbers of Latin Americans began to claim—and were rhetorically seen by national leaders to have a claim to—forms of political voice and economic well-being. This began under a variety of reformist, centralized governments, such as those of Lázaro Cárdenas, Juan Perón, and Getulio Vargas and increasingly assumed forms of grass-roots and electoral pressure in more democratic or quasi-democratic political systems in the 1960s and 1970s. When growing activism and expanding citizenship produced significant results, in pushing governments to the left and establishing policies that challenged economic norms and distribution—all in the context of the Cold War—murderous military dictatorships took over virtually everywhere in Latin America.

I see the period from the 1980s to the present as a replay of this set of events in a different context. During this more recent period, Latin America’s limited and uneven democracies deepened, securing more rights and improving living standards for many people, as groups and movements organized in the streets and entered political institutions, and as left-wing parties won elections and governed. One key difference between the mid-century and end-of-century comings of the people on the scene is neoliberalism. Over the last thirty years, most Latin Americans have come to have

more-or-less real democratic rights, to voting and also, if unevenly, to speech and assembly. But during much of this time, there hasn't been even the rhetorical commitment, on the part of governments, to a right to material well-being, which arguably existed, as a rhetorical strategy, in the mid-century period. Rather, late-twentieth century democracies forged individual, market-oriented citizen subjectivities, with policymakers speaking of safety nets to offer protection against the harms of globalization. Still—or *and*—a relatively coherent set of “deepenings” of democracy—including electoral moves to the left and modestly redistributive and inclusionary economic and social policies—occurred over this 30 year period, largely under Pink Tide governments in the 2000's.

The longstanding question regarding this “second coming of the people on the scene” has been what would happen when things heated up—which is arguably now. What happens—at a time when multiple groups of formerly-excluded people have been successfully making claims, and having those claims recognized—when the economy takes a nosedive? So that there are again now, as there were in the 1960s and 1970s, claims on the part of governments and policy analysts of immutable economic exigencies, of the impossibility of left-of-center or alternative economic policies. And this present-day scenario includes as well the expansions of voice and rights engendered by race-based affirmative action, by powerful indigenous movements, by #NiUnaMenos, and by growing LGBTQ presences and cultures, as well as powerful backlashes to the presences and gains of these groups.

So here is the question: Have 30 years of democratic practices—with all their limits—changed anything fundamental in who key powerholders are in Latin America and how they interact, in comparison to the 1960s and 1970s? My own research has shown that both businesspeople and social movements have changed since the earlier period, each *at times* willing to engage politically with the other in moderately progressive ways (Rubin 2015). Over the same period, changing religious beliefs, practices, leaders, and institutions have shaped personal and political subjectivities, and this has occurred much less monolithically than is often supposed (Rubin, Smilde, and Junge 2014). Has democracy then, in the diverse ways it has been lived, fostered any possibility of new, reformist negotiations, rather than clampdown and repression? Or will Latin Americans experience a return to forms of control, domination, and exclusion, perhaps with different contours, but with more or less the same kinds of effects, as those wrought by the 1960s-1980s military governments?

What putting things this way does is change somewhat the sorts of questions generally posed about populism and fascism, in terms of their characteristics as political forms, as well as the breakdowns of democracy that facilitate them. We might ask, instead or in addition: How do basic issues of well-being and political and cultural inclusion play out over time in democracies, South and North? Putting the question this way resists subsuming the dynamics at play in the Americas today to the “global populist surge” and locates them instead in long-term conflicts over inclusion and well-being, in Latin America and globally. Furthermore, in Latin America since the 1980s, alternative experiences, practices, movements, and knowledges have been fostering resistance, pushback, and innovation, just as new forms of resistance and opposition have been developing in the US. The seemingly world-wide, Trump- and US-enabled surge of “populism”—or anti-democracy—exerts a set of dangerous pressures in the Americas. However, in the context of new forms of resistance, these pressures will shape, but not necessarily determine, what happens here.

#### *The So-Called New Middle Class*

A second way to complicate our understanding of the populist surge is to recognize the heterogeneous and changing character of the so-called “new middle class”, or more aptly put, the “once-rising poor,” such as the approximately 20% of the Brazilian population that gained new economic resources and room-for-maneuver under the PT administrations of Lula and Dilma. In characterizing this demographic group, I draw on new work by Charles Klein, Sean Mitchell, and Benjamin Junge (2018), as well as the insights of commentators on their work who gathered in April 2019 for a seminar at the School for Advanced Research in Santa Fe. In their ethnographies of peripheral urban neighborhoods in three Brazilian Cities, Klein, Mitchell, and Junge show that the label “new middle class” was quite literally invented by policymakers and marketing specialists. The term does not describe what was happening on the ground, but rather information that could be packaged and sold, for votes or for profits from the sale of consumer goods and credit.

What was happening on the ground in Brazil consisted of multiple and complex mobilities. Thirty-five to forty million previously poor people were better off in many ways from approximately 2003 to 2013—in areas such as access to housing, electricity, and jobs, as well as, for some, to universities (mostly private) and air travel. Attending university, even private universities whose degrees did not bring better employment, changed people, as did knowing someone who had traveled farther than

in the past, by air and perhaps outside of Brazil. Horizons and expectations changed. This large demographic group cannot be seen as a class, but rather as multiple groups in the process of becoming, and not in any clear or predetermined way. Many poor urban residents, as they gained incremental resources, created new meanings and values on the periphery. Expectations about violence and where to secure protection from violence changed; authority relations in families began to shift; LGBTQ identities and practices claimed new spaces.

It is not at all clear what the subjectivities of these once-rising-poor people are or how they have or will engage politically. What is clear is that in Latin America, differently from in the US and Europe, the “backlash” we are seeing today follows a period of *rising* living standards and geographic, class, and cultural mobilities among the poor, not stagnancy or decline. Jair Bolsonaro was elected in a context of relatively positive change and mobility—indeed a decade or more of multiple, cross-cutting *mobilities*—along with more recent precarity and fear, at the borders of poverty and middle class-ness.

If there is a worldwide populist surge that offers languages and economic resources across the global south, there are also, in Latin America, innovative recent experiences of politics in and beyond civil society and liberal citizenship, often uncontained by them (Thayer and Rubin 2017). And there are multiple mobilities among previously poor or precariously middle class citizens—including, of course, mobilities of citizens across national borders—whose politics are in the process of becoming. If we can see and *not see* populism, we may discern new political strategies with which to understand and perhaps combat anti-democratic politics and right-wing backlash.

### Bibliography

- Finchelstein, Federico. *From Fascism to Populism in History*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017.
- Klein, Charles H., Sean T. Mitchell, and Benjamin Junge. “Naming Brazil's Previously Poor: “New Middle Class” as an Economic, Political, and Experiential Category,” *Economic Anthropology*, Vol. 5, Issue 1 (2018).

- Levitsky, Steven and Daniel Ziblatt. *How Democracies Die*. New York, Crown Publishing Group, 2018.
- Mazzarella, William. "The Anthropology of Populism: Beyond the Liberal Settlement," *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 2019.
- Rubin, Jeffrey W. and Vivienne Bennett. *Enduring Reform: Progressive Activism and Private Sector Responses in Latin America's Democracies*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015.
- Rubin, Jeffrey W., David Smilde, and Benjamin Junge, eds. *Lived Religion and Lived Citizenship in Latin America's Zones of Crisis*, a special issue of the *Latin American Research Review*, 2014.
- Millie Thayer and Jeffrey W. Rubin. "Uncontained Activism," in Alvarez, Rubin, and Thayer et. al., *Beyond Civil Society: Activism, Participation, and Protest in Latin America*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017.