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4-1-2014

# Populism, Pueblos, and Plutocracy: Notes on Radical Democracy from Latin America

Grant J. Silva

Marquette University, [grant.silva@marquette.edu](mailto:grant.silva@marquette.edu)

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Published version. *APA Newsletter on Asian and Asian-American Philosophers and Philosophies*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (Spring 2014): 11-13. [Permalink](#). © 2014 American Philosophy Association. Used with permission.

# *Populism, Pueblos, and Plutocracy: Notes on Radical Democracy from Latin America*

Grant Silva

MARQUETTE UNIVERSITY

Shortly after the reelection of President Obama, the Filipino undocumented immigrant, journalist, and founder of *Define American* (an immigrant-awareness campaign), Jose Antonio Vargas, wrote:

The Nov. 6 election signaled a demographic tipping point: a record number of Latino and Asian voters, the country's fastest-growing voting blocs, formed a coalition with black and white Democratic voters to re-elect the country's first African-American President. A new American majority—a multiethnic majority—has not only arrived but is in fact reordering the political landscape.<sup>1</sup>

A multiethnic majority is something the United States has not seen before. Whereas most civil rights and social movements assumed that they stood for *minorities*, how will the call for social justice change once it is understood to be a demand from a coalition of seemingly disparate voices (and allies) now constituting the majority? How will this demographic shift affect our collective attitude and commitment toward the democratic process and the practice of politics in the United States? What divisive mechanisms will be concocted so as to dissipate the power of this fledgling group?<sup>2</sup>

In order to answer these questions, this project explores the nature of democracy in the twenty-first century in

the wake of shifting racial and ethnic demographics and popular social movements situated against oppressive political arrangements. Skeptics will suggest that a multiethnic majority will not necessarily vote unanimously, fail to achieve consensus, and perhaps even lack the ability to constitute change (especially in the wake of the repeal of parts of the 1965 Voting Rights Act).<sup>3</sup> Probably the most poignant reason to be skeptical reminds us that women have constituted a demographic majority in several countries throughout the globe for years, yet do not dominate elections as a women's movement.<sup>4</sup> These concerns are right to view the birth of this new majority with caution. Below, I mention one other reason for concern stemming from the history of nonwhite majorities in Latin America.

Amidst these worries, within the recent political works of Ernesto Laclau and Enrique Dussel, two Argentines by birth, one can find ample support for the possibility and importance of a multiethnic majority. These thinkers inspire new life in democratic theory in ways that are attuned to the reality of social movements and the workings of popular political coalitions throughout the globe. Laclau offers the theoretical mechanisms for "equivocating" or translating competing justice claims into strategic alliances seeking to overcome shared antagonisms. Rather than dissipate, these strategic popular movements provide an adequate *form* through which popular sovereignty becomes possible. While Laclau admits that it is no easy task to maintain populism, his work offers a starting point for the birth of political practices situated in the hands of those who are frequently quieted by oligarchical and plutocratic systems. Dussel provides an alternative global history of political philosophy that departs from Hellenistic and subsequently Western narratives, thus providing the opportunity for diverse political futures that make sense of recent popular movements and eliminating the sentiment that the Latin American or Arab Spring "came out of nowhere."<sup>5</sup> Dussel also highlights the material orientation underpinning all political thought and brings to light the inherent victimization of political institutions, which includes the eventual victims of democracy. Both thinkers fuse democratic practice with popular social movements in ways that give some reason to continue thinking about the possibilities of a multiethnic majority.

### **"THE REVOLT OF THE NONWHITE MASSES"**

Historically, nonwhite majorities connected to the idea of popular democracy have not fared well, especially in places like Latin America.<sup>6</sup> Time and time again, various social movements consisting of demographic majorities have attempted to wrest political power out of the hands of oligarchs and plutocrats to no avail. For a variety of reasons, white minorities have balked at the idea of "majority rule," especially when they control substantial amounts of economic, cultural, and political capital.<sup>7</sup> Through the pressure exerted by social movements and the embracement of politics by people typically alienated from the political scene, popular sovereignty and democratic rule has found a home in Latin America in the past decade. Nevertheless, it remains commonplace that politicians who emphasize the plight of the overwhelming poor, which happens to mostly correspond with indigenous, black,

and mixed-heritage populations, are typically labeled “populist,” *indigenista*, or some *other kind* of politician (and whatever it is, it is not the good kind—the point being that most mistake “populism” as supplying a socialist platform).

Amidst these concerns, the idea of a multiethnic majority points toward the future of democratic thought. Rather than representing the needs of oppressed or alienated groups piecemeal, the kind of majoritarian politics I have in mind calls for the formulation of coalitions, blocs, or translatable justice claims united in their marginality, victimization, or “alterity.” These alliances strive to represent the needs of various groups within the larger collective, a balance that will never be perfect and constitutes an ongoing challenge rather than the outright failure of popular movements.

From the onset of *On Populist Reason*, Laclau states that his concern is “the nature and logics of the formation of collective identities.”<sup>8</sup> Rather than harboring some kind of ideological commitment, populist political practice unites heterogeneous elements in ways that constitute hegemonic change. Laclau describes a means through which different perspectives and concerns unite so as to combat a shared antagonism. In order to effectively promote change within the prevailing political order, this movement must crystalize into a single voice that is “inscribable as a claim within the ‘system’.”<sup>9</sup> Attempts to differentiate, equivocate, and negotiate various claims within the movement give way to the use of “empty signifiers”—i.e., abstractions or variables that make use of “chains of equivalence” in order to arrive at a level of generality that unites the people (e.g., ideas like “freedom,” “economic justice” or even “the 99%”). This is not to say that all social justice claims are generalizable, nor does it hold that a true referent for populism is possible. While acknowledging that the process of representing particularity through universality will be difficult and at times result in ambiguous, “blurred,” or vague referents, Laclau thinks that populism is “a way of constructing the political” that is characteristic of any communitarian space.<sup>10</sup> Populism, rather than having an ongoing monolithic concern at its core, attempts to *mediate* the particularity of differing justice claims amidst the need for sufficient universality.

Similar to Laclau, Dussel describes the creation of an “analogical hegemon,” a strategic *bloc* of marginalized *people* who realize their continued misrepresentation and victimization amidst the newfound ability to constitute political change. In *Twenty Theses on Politics* he writes,

From among the diverse systems of government (monarchies and republics), *democracy* came to emerge as the only feasible form for the achievement of legitimacy. Today, the task is to assess and improve upon the various types of democracy: republican, liberal, social democratic, welfare State, post-colonial populist, etc. Existing *empirical* democratic systems are always concrete, inimitable in their entirety by other States, and always open for improvement. Democracy is a perpetually unfinished system.<sup>11</sup>

As “unfinished,” democracy attempts to secure the legitimacy of political institutions in a way that is inherently unique and ongoing. Rather than identify any kind of universality in the process of legitimation—which is a point that perhaps runs counter to Laclau’s emphasis on the need for a level of generality that can unite a plurality of views under a single banner of the “people”—Dussel advocates for a kind of universality associated with the content of politics (i.e., the need for political institutions to ensure the material well-being and survival of the people it serves).

According to Dussel, as the product of finite human beings, all political institutions will cause victims; even the best or most just political institutions will be unfair or harm someone, somewhere (both within their boundaries and outside).<sup>12</sup> Political institutions are but a moment in the attempt to formalize or capture *potentia*, the will-to-live of the political community. In order to do this, institutions rely upon a “snapshot” of the dynamic needs of community and are bound to fail in some degree since the life of the community will always exceed attempts at totalizing its existence. *Potentia* is always too rich for *potestas* or institutionalized power. Political philosophy assumes a *universal content* when it takes material well-being as its central concern and the need to ensure the survival of people (which includes animals and the environment). This material focus directs the institution’s attention towards those denied the ability to continue living (i.e., victims). While the form of addressing the plight of the suffering will vary (on account of democracies being “inimitable”), the inability to live—which is the ultimate foundation for political institutions—will bring the people together in a way that unites their concerns along a universal material ground. Arising from the position of marginalization, alienation, and victimization, the people harbor a “reason or rationality from beyond” or “the reason of Other situated beyond the self,” what Dussel calls analectical political thought (“analectics” is derived from Greek particles *ano/a* or “beyond” and *logos* or “reason”). Given that victimization is inevitable, analectical politics is thus an ongoing process and drives the institution toward a more just situation. Dussel expresses this idea at the end of the *Twenty Theses* when he writes, “It is true that the bourgeois Revolution spoke of *liberty*, but what is necessary now is to subsume that liberty and speak instead of *liberation* (as in North American pragmatism, one does not speak of *truth* but *verification*). So now we do not refer to liberty but instead to liber-ation as a process, as the negation of a point of departure, and as a tension pressing towards a point of arrival.”<sup>13</sup>

Analectically situated around a material content that places the community’s well-being at the forefront of its concerns (which necessarily includes those deemed not officially part of the community), and charged with the task of mediating particular interests with generalizable claims, Laclau and Dussel provide a means through which we can view the birth of the multiethnic majority as a popular social and political movement that does not fall prey to the tendency for political institutions to disassociate themselves from the needs of the community. This tendency for there to be a *will-to-live* of the institution that divests itself from the *will-to-live* of the political community it serves represents

the ultimate fetishization of politics, a point that Dussel clearly worries about.<sup>14</sup> Laclau and Dussel remind us that under popular rule, the institution is made up of this “new” community. While popular government will be no easy task, their work indicates the challenge of popular sovereignty in an age of the multiethnic majority and not the result of this practice.

## NOTES

1. Jose Antonio Vargas, “Viewpoint: the Power of the Asian and Latino Vote,” *Time*, November 8, 2012, <http://ideas.time.com/2012/11/08/viewpoint-the-power-of-the-asian-and-latino-vote/>.
2. I would argue that the focus on legal-status and citizenship in light of “illegal” immigration debate is divisive tactic. See Carol M. Swain’s response to Joseph Caren’s *The Case for Amnesty* at <https://www.bostonreview.net/forum/case-amnesty/apply-compassion-offered-illegal-immigrants-most-vulnerable-citizens-carol-swain>. Swain’s response is also in Carens, *Immigrants and the Right to Stay* (Cambridge, MIT Press: 2010), 65.
3. [http://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/12pdf/12-96\\_6k47.pdf](http://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/12pdf/12-96_6k47.pdf).
4. For reasons why, see Naomi Zack, *Inclusive Feminism: A Third Wave Theory of Women’s Commonality* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005). While Zack’s views have been criticized along the lines of failing to supply an adequate basis for defining women, her reasons for why women tend to be alienated and excluded from the political arena have not been given sufficient examination.
5. For sake of space, I will not expand on his views regarding the history and significance of a global history of political philosophy. See Enrique Dussel, *Politics of Liberation: A Critical World History*, trans. Thia Cooper (London: SCM Press, 2011).
6. Probably the most notorious critique of democracy in Latin America can be found in José Enrique Rodó, *Ariel*, trans. Margaret Sayers Peden (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988), and Simón Bolívar, “Address to the Angostura Congress, February 15, 1819, the Day of Its Installation,” *Nineteenth Century Nation-Building and the Latin American Intellectual Tradition*, eds. Janet Burke and Ted Humphrey (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2007). While Bolívar does not mention democracy *per se*, his rejection of popular suffrage and desire to implement a hereditary senate are clear indications of his disapproval of popular sovereignty, amidst his acknowledgement of the heterogeneity of Latin American populations.
7. For more on the history of and contemporary challenges facing democracy in Latin America, see Martin Edwin Anderson, *Peoples of the Earth: Ethnonationalism, Democracy, and the Indigenous Challenge in “Latin” America* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2010); Howard J. Wiarda and Harvey F. Kline, *A Concise Introduction to Latin American Politics and Development*, 2nd ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 2007), 185–244; Laura Tedesco and Jonathan R. Barton, *The State of Democracy in Latin America: Post-transitional Conflicts in Argentina and Chile* (London: Routledge, 2004).
8. Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005), ix.
9. *Ibid.*, x.
10. *Ibid.*, x–xi.
11. Enrique Dussel, *Twenty Theses on Politics*, translated George Ciccariello-Maher (Durham: Duke, 2008), 51.
12. *Ibid.*, 69.
13. *Ibid.*, 137.
14. *Ibid.*, 30.

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