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- 1 Over the last decade populism has emerged as a frequently key notion when analyzing political and social evolutions in a large number of European and American countries. Its usage, however, is on the whole negative in that more often than not, it designates a direct appeal to the people based on the resentment of elites and/or other social groups while at the same time advocating a ragbag of so-called “simple” and demagogical measures. It is a notion mainly used to denounce adversaries and there are few political figures —with the exception of Jean-Luc Mélenchon, leader of the France Insoumise party, Hugo Chavez, or Podemos leaders in Spain (Chazel L., 2019)— who actually lay claim to the label with any pride<sup>1</sup>. In other words, populism is primarily perceived as a degraded form of political life in a democracy. Studying populism in that light, Pierre Rosanvallon (2011) sees it in terms of a threefold simplification, as a political simplification pitting a phantasmatic, homogenous people against corrupt elites, as an institutional simplification rejecting any counter-balancing of the popular will and as a social simplification conferring on the people a clear and clearly defined identity<sup>2</sup>.
- 2 Populism is also a notion that comes with a variety of styles and practices. In the Americas it has been invoked in recent times in reference to highly varied political currents and outlooks, designating movements, political players even governments, such as Occupy Wall Street, the Tea Party, Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump. In Latin America, the term has applied particularly to regimes, also referred to as national-populist: Chavist-led Venezuela, Bolivia under Evo Morales or Argentina under the Kirchner governments; at the same time, it is used to designate such ultra-conservative movements as that of Jair Bolsonaro, the current president of Brazil or the neo-liberal governments of the nineties (Fujimori in Peru, Collor de Mello in Brazil, Bucaram in Ecuador...). While governed by “strong men”, elected in crisis circumstances, these latter regimes also resurrected appeal-to-the-people practices involving an unmediated link with society by new means (via television, for example, in the nineties, via internet in the present day) and strong physical images of power, direct inheritors as they

sometimes were of older populist organizations (Menem in Argentina). But in as much as they have abandoned the redistributive policies and the practice of intervention in the economy characteristic of the “old populisms” in Latin America, they can be seen as manifestations of “neopopulism”, defined as the fusion of populism and neo-liberalism that they evince (Freindeberg F., 2007).

- 3 Given such variety, many are disinclined to recognize any substance in the notion of populism: if, then, it is not grounded ideologically, it whittles down to its multiple usages. And its ubiquity does indeed provide cover for a certain conceptual confusion (Mudde C., 2007, Hermet G., 2001, Taguieff P-A., 1997, Laclau E., 2004), compounded by the fact that populism may be seen as the shadow of democracy itself (Arditi B., 2004, Canovan M., 1999). Hence, though current populisms certainly vehicle the spectacle of democracy tottering under the weight of economic and social pressures, with demands centering on national identity and security, the attendant denunciation of elites and the defense of the people-as-virtuous, their actual substance remains unclear. This is the case firstly because the discursive levels of actors on the one hand and political or social science analysts on the other become mixed up in debate, and secondly because the transnational, multifarious nature of the phenomenon tends to mask real differences in national occurrences. The history of populism in Europe, for instance, differs greatly from its history in the United States, in Canada or in Latin America. On the Old Continent, populism has to do generally with far right movements (Mudde C., 2007), or else, as Georg Lavau (1970) puts it, with a “tribunistic function” of left-wing parties. But in the United States, home to the eponymous Popular Party, populism involves a political discourse of egalitarianism derived directly from the American Revolution (Kazin M., 1995). Again, in Latin America, often considered as populism’s “chosen land” (Hermet G., 2001), a fact which might well make it a “paradigm of modern populism” (Dorma A., 1999), the term designates not so much a “denunciative” or an “oppositional” (Rosanvallon P., 2011) populism but rather a populism of government, the diverse manifestations of which have left a deep mark on the 20th century history of the subcontinent (Marques Pereira B., Garibay D., 2011) and the heritage of which has remained potent in the opening decades of the third millennium. However, the “frequency” and the “imprecision” of the concept require a honing of the context in which it is used, leading to a pluralistic perception of movements and historically situated regimes all the more necessary in as much as no-one, with a few rare exceptions, “calls themselves populist or claims to be so” (Rouquié A., [1987] 1998).
- 4 Populism in the US has deep roots going back to the foundation of the country. Seen theoretically, the affinities between this, the first country whose constitution stipulated, in 1787, “We The People... Do” and populism, which lays claim to the basic principles of democracy (majority rule and popular sovereignty), confirm the extent to which populism does indeed follow democracy like its shadow (Arditi B., 2004). Yet the relationship between the two is fraught with tension, as the history of the United States abundantly attests. As early as 1780, the federalist Founding Fathers were denouncing the “tyranny of the majority”, an expression which is widely echoed in contemporary meanings conveyed by “populism”. It was to counteract this dreaded tyranny that the constitution conceived by James Madison and the delegates to Philadelphia set up a multiplicity of “checks and balances”. Since then, any number of populist movements, left or right wing, have criticized these institutional “counterweights” as so many means of muzzling the voice of the people. Populist movements, as Yves Mény and Yves Surel (2002) have written, all share the idea that democracy means one thing, the

power of the people. In consequence of which, they are quick to exploit the gap between democratic ideals—one example being the famous Lincoln quote from 1863 in praise of “government of, by, for the people”— and the elitist functioning of representative democracy as analyzed by successive political thinkers and “realist” theoreticians from Joseph Schumpeter to Robert Dahl or Giovanni Sartori, not omitting Bernard Manin. This critical stance has been a constant presence in American political life, resurfacing at regular intervals, with, however, one singular unifying characteristic, the fact that populists never criticize the constitution itself. They might call for constitutional reform (the case on the left) or demand greater respect of the constitution (the case on the right), but they never seek its abolition.

- 5 The particularity of the US lies also in the fact the populism is associated with progressive movements, whereas in European democracies populisms are overwhelmingly right wing. The first use of the term “populism” was indeed by a Kansas journalist in 1890, in reference to the People’s Party, a third political party which became a major political force with over 8 % of the vote in the 1892 presidential election. The emergence of this protest movement in the heart of rural America at a time of transition from an individual owner capitalism towards a capitalism dominated by large corporations has given rise to wide historiographical debate. Richard Hofstadter, taking his cue from the Frankfurt School, portrayed populism as an irrational, pathological reaction against economic modernization. It exemplified in his opinion the “paranoid style” of American political life, the potential of which was illustrated by the libertarian right as traduced by Goldwater (Hofstadter R., 1955, 1964). Historians following the lead of Lawrence Goodwyn effectively disputed this thesis, pointing out the extent of the movement’s democratic impregnation, with its strong associative component and legislative influence visible not only in the first laws setting out factory worker rights but even in certain New Deal enactments (Goodwyn L., 1978, Postels C., 2007, Sanders E., 1999). Although in the 1930s populism took on threatening, even fascist-like tones, with men like Huey Long and Father Coughlin, it retained, as Alan Brinkley has shown, a democratic dimension and incited Roosevelt and the New Dealers to promulgate important social reforms (Brinkley A., 1982).
- 6 The difficulty posed by the analysis of populism in the US derives from the great complexity of its manifestations throughout the 20th century. For Michael Kazin, a careful distinction must be made between the People’s Party and the populist language (in the sense that historian Gareth Stedman Jones provides for this term) that it bequeathed to American political life. Setting the people, virtuous and hard-working, representing the essence of America, against a parasitical elite that threatens it, this language functions, argues Kazin, as a substitute for an assumed rhetoric of class, but it is not exclusive to the Democrats and the American left since, starting in the 1950s, populism became an essential ingredient in the reconfiguration of the American right which began to use the same rhetoric to condemn progressive intellectual elites and their social engineering projects, thereby appealing to a section of the working class electorate. In a context of growing tensions arising from conflicts to do with racial and gender discrimination in the work place, from the culture wars and the economic crisis of the 70s, populism became a defensive rampart for white, conservative America. From George Wallace to Ronald Reagan and Pat Buchanan, this right wing populism sang the praises of working America while occasionally sniping at K Street lobbies, but both its ideological content and its relationship to social class were ambiguous and led in the

end to reforms enacted in the interest of the economic elites, thus participating in the rise of neoliberalism (Kazin M., 1995, 2017, Frank T., 2004).

- 7 Overall, the forcefulness of populism in the US is a factor of the absence of any important Marxist tradition —the marginalization of Marxism after the Bolshevik revolution was compounded by the Cold War— and of the resulting discredit attached to arguments involving class. However populism’s plasticity and its right leaning anchorage over the last sixty years suggest the need to clarify its links with the political and social history of peri-urban America and the anti-state ethos of the middle classes which there form the Republican party’s electoral base (McGirr L., 2001).
- 8 This being so, it is no easy task to insert Donald Trump into the weave of American populism, which is perhaps why many observers tend to revert to Hofstadter’s theory which currently has a new impetus. Trump was written off by many as an anomaly of US political life, having conquered the Republican party and gained the presidency by virtue of mere circumstance. But the Trump phenomenon is rather more complex than such explanations allow for, notably because his electorate, in spite of local shifts in the rust belt, corresponds to the traditional Republican electorate and also because Trump’s position on immigration and in favor of protectionism echoes policies carried out by the Republicans since the end of the 19th century. Coming after years of populist-leaning conservative mobilization, Trump may well represent a bleeding out of the “conservative revolution” of the last decades. But more especially he is a perfect example of what P-A Taguieff defines as a *populisme-attitude*, a posturing populism (1997, p. 15), independent from more or less structured visions or traditions, politically indeterminate, but idealizing the “popular”. Furthermore, the Trump administration constitutes a crucial stage in the American history of populism in that populism is no longer a mere extra-institutional movement, it sits square at the heart of power.
- 9 In Latin America, on the other hand, the experience of populism in government is greater by far. The context in which the term populism emerged has to do with the development of social science throughout the sub-continent at the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 60s. Sociologists and political theorists appropriated the concept in order to analyze the authoritative, nationalist regimes that inaugurated the policies of regulation and redistribution characterizing the sequence that had just unfolded (Quattrocchi-Woisson D., 1997). Initially applied to Peronism in Argentina (Germani G., 1962 ; di Tella T., 1964) and to Getulism in Brazil (Cardoso F., Weffort F. (eds), 1970), the concept was rapidly extended throughout the entire sub-continent in order to deal with situations in the 1920-1960 period in which political parties (such as the APRA in Peru, the Febrerist party in Paraguay, the RNM in Bolivia), leaders never having exercised power (Cesar Sandino in Nicaragua, Jorge Eliécer Gaitán in Colombia), and governments (post-revolutionary Mexico, Gualberto Villaroel in Bolivia, Velasco Ibarra in Ecuador) produced responses to the dual institutional (a democratic fiction) and economic (the agro-export model) crisis of oligarchic republics. The common denominator here was the central inscription of the “people” in mobilization discourse, from the Peronist *descamisados* in Argentine to the *olivados* in Ecuador under Velasco Ibarra, to the “poor” and their “father” Vargas in Brazil, to the Colorado party’s “barefeet” (*py nandí*) in Paraguay.
- 10 Beyond all the diverse national experiences, several elements may be invoked to characterize the singular nature and the historicity of these Latin American populisms. As a general rule, leadership was sustained by a democratic dynamic linked to

extensions of suffrage. Leaders initiated developmentalist policies based on state regulation and social redistribution. Mobilization discourse depended on a dual polarization: the people against the elites, the nation against all imperialism. These were indeed mobilizing regimes, in tune with social movements and based on effective trade union and/or partisan cadres. For the most part, they entered upon limited transformations of socio-economic structures where nationalizations of strategic sectors were rarely accompanied by corollary agrarian reform. Consequently, they achieved fragile equilibrium by setting up a “State of compromise” aimed at preserving the property of the elites while responding in part to the social hopes and expectations of the popular and middle classes.

- 11 These “transitional” regimes which attempted to “integrate popular sectors into the political order” (Rouquié A., 1998) represented an essential stage in the construction of democratic process in Latin America. The calling of elections and the extension of suffrage were part and parcel of Peron’s accession to power by in Argentina in 1946 and 1952, of Estenssoro’s in Bolivia in 1952 and of the return of Vargas in Brazil in 1951. In this way, the “populist” governments of Latin America generally initiated and maintained the indigenist policies of the first half century with the perspective of weaving their nation more closely together and crystalizing a sense of national identity rooted in territory and founded on autochthony but also of integrating all popular sectors, Indian, Afro-Latino American (Andrews G.R., 2007) or immigrant in origin. However, the diverse conflicts of the 60s revealed the ideological limits of the historic Latin American populisms. The Cuban revolutionary way and the quest for social change, of which agrarian reform was one of the key elements, destroyed the equilibrium obtained by the State of compromise and broke up populist movements whose unity frequently depended on nothing more than the expression of loyalty to the leader. The Cold War dictatorships of the 70s then proclaimed their intention of jettisoning the “populist aberration” (Quattrocchi Woisson D., 1997).
- 12 The reformist governments of the 2000-2010 period, though often called “populist” by their critics, can only be considered in a very limited measure as the inheritors of the 20th century regimes and any filiation with the “old populisms” is even more problematic with regard to contemporary “neopulisms” attempting to articulate an appeal to the people with neoliberal policies favoring big corporations. The reformist governments were nevertheless initially the fruit both of the consolidations of democracy, which put an end to the Cold War dictatorships, and the practice of alternation rendered necessary as a result of the social crisis brought about by two decades of structural adjustment policies and neoliberal deregulation. Aside from redistributive policies and the real action against poverty conducted by left wing governments in the 2000s, certain leaders have indeed resumed the practice of divisive personal power and unmediated relationship with “the people”, while articulating governmental action with base organizations which are associative, community- or union-based, or part of local administration. These factors may be seen as characteristic of a new Latin-American populism. But, in contrast to their polyclassist and “national-popular” predecessors, reformist regimes have functioned in a consolidated democratic context and position themselves clearly to the left on the national and international boards of players.
- 13 All this being so, is there a populist model? an American populist model? Or should we rather speak in terms of a laboratory of the Americas, with its diverse populist

experiences and its many national specificities, placing particular emphasis on questions such as the links between populism and the construction of democracy, between populism and electoralism, between populism and popular participation?

- 14 This issue of *IdeAs* proposes an off-center approach to the problem by bringing together studies situated locally thereby showing how historians, sociologists and political theorists working on North and South America make use of the notion of populism with regard to social, political and economic phenomenon for which it may account. What in a democracy differentiates populism from the appeal for votes made to electors, and in particular those of the popular classes? As Yves Mény and Yves Surel have written (2002), populist movements express themselves and indeed behave as if democracy is reducible to the power of the people. But that is an overall diagnostic and requires finer definition in as much as populisms, far from being systematically in opposition to the sophistications of liberal, representative democracy (Manin B., 2005), must be conjugated along a continuum. The forms populism can assume may well at times be toxic for democracy, but at other times they may bring to life what James Monroe (1990) calls the “democratic wish”. Thus, as Joseph Lowndes puts it in the chapter he contributes to the *Oxford Handbook of Populism* (2017), “it is perhaps better then to analyze not what populism was but what populism did”. The aim in this issue is therefore, in that perspective, to make a contribution to the characterization of populist criteria using experiences and studies relating to the American continent, from Canada to the Southern Cone.

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## NOTES

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