Part 4
Discourse

Populist elements in contemporary American political discourse

Ritchie Savage

Abstract: Granted that it would be absurd to characterize Obama as a populist president, this paper proceeds from Ernesto Laclau's conception of populism as consisting of 'the formation of an internal antagonistic frontier separating the "people" from power' and 'an equivalential articulation of demands making the emergence of the "people" possible' (2005:74). In the 2008 election, Obama was able to articulate a series of empty signifiers, found in such slogans as 'Yes We Can,' which came to represent a new collective identity of the 'people', thus constituting an instance of populism *par excellence*. As support for this theory of populism and its implications for contemporary American political discourse, this paper deconstructs the previously held functionalist assumptions and modernization theories – especially those propagated within Latin American case studies – that consign populism to a developmental stage in the capitalist mode of production or a historical outcome of underdeveloped democratic institutions in order to imagine a new science of rhetoric capable of analysing the synecdochical, metaphorical, and metonymical components (Laclau, 2005) in the discursive construction of 'the American people'.

Introduction

There has been a marked resurgence in the usage of the concept of populism both in the literature of the social sciences and in the media. Whereas the term was originally used to refer to the classical late 19th century cases of The People's Party in America and the Russian *Narodnichestvo*, and the mid 20th century Latin American cases of Perón's rule in Argentina and Brazil's Vargas, populism has also received substantial attention in recent Latin American scholarship with the rise of political figures such as Menem, Fujimori, Collor, Bucaram, Chávez, and Evo Morales among others. So, too, it has been employed to characterize an element of certain reactionary political currents in Western Europe and other political regimes around the world.

Yet even in the media coverage of the United States' 2008 presidential election, the label 'populist' was applied to candidates from both the Democratic and Republican parties, such as Edwards and Huckabee, and one could even

argue that the American populist heritage was a salient theme in the vice presidential campaigns of Biden and Palin. And with the current economic crisis and proposed bailout, the media has recently turned its attention to what it has termed as the reemergence of an economic populism,[1] depicted as a surge of hatred targeted at 'Wall Street fat-cats' and CEOs that has its historical roots in the anti-big business discourses articulated in the Progressive era, the present incarnation of which can be found both in popular sentiment and in certain rhetorical appeals utilized by Barack Obama. One might also consider the recent emergence of the conservative anti-government discourse of the Tea Party, which was highly successful in mobilizing support for Republican candidates in the US 2010 mid-term elections.

Given the current resurgence of the term, 'populism', to describe aspects of political phenomena in cases both abroad and in the United States, this paper poses the following questions. What is populism? Why is the usage of the concept proliferating in both the media and academic literature, but always in an ambiguous manner that seems to resist sociological or analytical classification? Does populism still function as a prominent component of current American politics? And is this new American populism similar only to its historical counterpart in the 1890s or is it possible to link the seemingly divergent cases of populism now occurring in the United States and Latin America. Finally, is it possible to locate starkly populist elements in the political discourse articulated by Barack Obama, and does his political discourse involve a strategic positioning that mirrors instances of populism in Latin America?

Dislocation and terrain

In order to analyse the populist elements in Obama's presidential campaign, this paper focuses on aspects of Obama's rhetoric utlilizing Laclau's discursive model of populism. This model bears a host of theoretical and empirical advantages with regard to this project. First of all, insofar as the type of populism found in Obama's campaign is both rhetorically charged and principally based on rhetoric, a model that treats populism as discourse and pivots around elements such as signifiers and chains of articulated demands is specifically oriented to the object of my analysis.

Another advantage of Laclau's model is its ability to allow for the conception of populism as a *universal* discursive formation. There are many instances of political phenomena designated as 'populist' all around the world and in different time periods. After a review of the literature concerning the US, Latin American, and Western European cases, it will become evident that many theorists construct limited definitions of populism that exclude or discount cases of populism occurring in other regions. The attempt to isolate cases of populism based on region and subsequently tie these cases to historical, economic, and political conditions specific to these regions reveals theoretical problems, empirical inconsistencies, and forecloses the possibility of a comparative-

historical approach to populism. In order to suggest a comparison between aspects of Obama's populism and those of Latin American cases, it is useful to employ Laclau's ontological model of populist discourse, which provides the abstract discursive components of hegemonic identity formations applicable across cases.

In his discursive model of populism, Laclau articulates a conception of society drawn from the Lacanian conception of the Other or symbolic order. Society is analogous to a fragile symbolic order which, Lacan (2006) argues, following the tenants of Saussurean structural linguistics, is always subject to the 'incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier' (419). For Laclau (1990), 'society is an impossibility' because it is based on a model of social cohesion and stable identity formation that is always subverted by antagonisms between different social groups as well as the instability of signification and reference within the symbolic order which is society (90). Populist discourse thus emerges as a way partially to stabilize the symbolic order and provide for the formation of political identities. In the articulation of an empty signifier, such as the 'people', a political identity is formed around a chain of democratic demands temporarily stabilized within a discourse.

This model of populist discourse allows for an analysis of Obama's campaign rhetoric as well as other instances of populist discourse occurring around the world. However, there is one problem with Laclau's conception of populist discourse from a sociological perspective, which is related to the way in which Laclau privileges the political over the social. Even though I will argue that theorists run into problems in their attempt to attribute the emergence of populism to specific and isolated historical, economic, and political conditions, this is not to say that instances of populism do not emerge from any sociological conditions whatsoever. In this sense, it is evident that the current 'rising tide' or increased frequency of instances of populist discourse is related to the current global economic crisis. Therefore, I would like to suggest a critique of Laclau, which is that his privileging of the political over the social creates problems for empirical and comparative-historical sociological analyses of populism and that a stride toward overcoming these problems can be made by placing more emphasis on Laclau's concept of 'dislocation' than Laclau does himself.

Consider the following passage from the preface of Jacob Torfing's *New Theories of Discourse*:

> Discourse theory, as developed by Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe and Slavoj Zizek, draws our attention to the implication of postmodernity for the way we conceive of the relation between the political and the social. Postmodernity urges us to take into account the open and incomplete character of any social totality and to insist on the primary role of politics in shaping and reshaping social relations (1999:vii).

This social totality is viewed by Laclau as an essentially discursive totality or differential ensemble that always exists as a failed or impossible totality. Thus political struggles are privileged in which demands linked into equivalential chains make possible empty signifiers or hegemonic identities, such as the

'people', which, in a sense, partially fix the social/discursive totality in 'a stable system of signification' (Laclau, 2005:74).

In other words, political struggles are privileged insofar as they momentarily construct and stabilize the social totality. Furthermore, Howarth (2004) writes that Laclau's 'central claim that "society is an impossible object of analysis" seeks to exclude essentialist, objectivist and topographical conceptions of social relations (whether put forward by positivists, materialists, or realists), while developing a relational conception of society in which concepts such as antagonism and dislocation are constitutive' (266).

In the rest of this paper, I maintain that Laclau's adoption of a relational conception of society, as a discursive entity comprising language and social action, *is* reconcilable from a sociological perspective, as is his claim that social totalities are shaped by politics. I argue, however, that his claim that 'society is an impossible object of analysis' goes too far and that the social and political should be viewed as coextensive discursive planes in order to resolve contradictions already present in Laclau's theory of dislocation.

Howarth (2004) sums up Laclau's (1990) notion of dislocations put forward in *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*:

> Dislocations are thus defined as those 'events' or 'crises' that cannot be represented within an existing discursive order, as they function to disrupt and destabilize symbolic orders (NR 72–8). This enables Laclau to inject an 'extra-discursive' dynamism into his conception of society, and his later writings suggest that late- or post-modern societies are undergoing an 'accelerated tempo' of dislocatory experiences (Howarth, 2000a: 111). *This 'accelerated tempo' is caused by processes such as commodification, bureaucratization, and globalization . . .*' (261, my emphasis).

It seems that the dislocations that Laclau refers to are the effect of precisely those social phenomena and sociological processes which, as they belong to society, he paradoxically thinks are an impossible object of analysis. Howarth (2004) writes that these dislocations open up a space in which there is 'a greater role for political subjectivities' (261). Thus, I argue that it is the primarily *social* terrain of dislocations which fragments the discursive/symbolic order opening the space for political identities to reconstitute the discursive/social totality. In this sense, there is always a reciprocal interplay between the social and political. As I approach the end of this paper, this understanding of dislocations will be integral to the development of what I refer to as the 'accelerated tempo' of populist outbreaks.

Epistemological contours

First, though, in order to argue for Laclau's model of populism for understanding Obama's rhetoric against other models presented in the literature, it is necessary to elucidate the problems with traditional theoretical conceptions of populism and trace out the epistemological contours of how populism has come to be an

increasingly ambiguous and highly contested analytical construct in the literature of the social sciences.

The term 'populism' has been used to refer to a variety of different levels of political phenomena including regionally based political movements themselves, certain types of political leaders, specific types of political campaigning and administration, forms and styles of rhetoric employed by political actors, and politically fostered conceptions of identity oriented around a notion of the 'people' opposed to an oppressive elite. It follows that an analysis of the historical case studies generated within the social sciences, which seek to characterize certain movements or political leaders as populist, reveals a whole host of conceptual problems in the subsequent attempt to delineate the general theoretical components of populism as an ideal type or classificatory schema of sociopolitical phenomena.

The first problem one encounters and which is generally referred to by authors who analyse the wide array of political movements labeled populist is that those movements corresponding to different regions (i.e. Russia, United States, and Latin America among others) and different time periods (i.e. mid to late 19th century, mid 20th century, and the present) share little in common other than the fact that they have all been labelled as populist. Laclau (1977) writes about populism, 'it is that 'something in common' which is perceived as a component of movements whose social bases are totally divergent' (146).

This divergence in social bases is one of the main features that divides the classical cases of populism, including the Russian *Narodnichestvo* movement of the mid nineteenth century and The People's Party movement in America during the 1890s, insofar as the Narodniks were primarily composed of an urban intelligentsia who exalted and appealed to peasant farmers in an anti-capitalist and utopian ideology (Walicki, 1969; Worsley, 1969), while The People's Party began as a grassroots organization initiated by commercial farmers who harboured discontents with the crop lien system, monetary deflation, and the role of big business and the two-party political system in furthering their economic hardships (Goodwyn, 1978; Hofstadter, 1969).

Thus, just as one sees this demographic divide between urban and rural social bases in the classical Russian and American cases respectively, further discrepancies emerge with the later developments of Latin American populisms, which hinder and obscure comparisons with these classical cases. The first substantive difference apparent in the most prominently cited Latin American cases – regarding the political rule of Cárdenas in Mexico (1934–40), Perón in Argentina (1946–55) and Vargas's second term in Brazil (1951–54), and the more contemporary cases of Menem in Argentina, Fujimori in Peru, Bucaram in Ecuador, and Chávez in Venezuela – is that these movements are attempts at political mobilization and incorporation initiated by political candidates and leaders, not organic movements fostered by groups of farmers or intellectuals. It follows that a second crucial point of divergence from the United States and Russian cases is that the social bases appealed to by figures such as Perón and

Vargas, although primarily urban in their demographic composition, tend to transcend a solid base in any particular social class and thus constitute multiclass coalitions (Conniff, 1999:4).

But one must make a distinction here between the more traditional cases of *Peronism* and *Varguismo* and the newly emerging form of populism exemplified in the leadership of Menem, Fujimori, and Bucaram. This emergent form of populism is referred to as 'neopopulism' by authors such as Kenneth Roberts (1995) and Kurt Weyland (1999, 2003) and differs from traditional Latin American populism both in the adoption of a neoliberal economic stance, as opposed to the more traditionally advocated nationalist policies that relied on import substitution industrialization and restricted markets, and in the demographic makeup of the social bases appealed to: 'The base of support for neopopulism, for example, includes alliances between emergent elites with the very poor, excluding the industrial bourgeoisie and the organized working and middle classes, which were the advocates of classical populism' (de la Torre, 2000:113). Chávez's rise to power is also commonly associated with the emergence of neopopulism, and the label somewhat fits insofar as his appeal is made to the 'unorganized subaltern sectors of the population' (Roberts, 2003:55) and to 'the impoverished and politically inarticulate section of society, in the shanty towns of Caracas, and in the great forgotten regions of the interior of the country' (Gott, 2000:21). However, his economic stance represents a backlash against neoliberal reforms intitiated by one of his predecessors, Pérez. Roberts (2003) writes that Chávez 'posed a vigorous challenge to the regional trend toward neoliberal reform, countering Latin America's embrace of the political and economic models sanctioned by US hegemony' (71).

These unique features common to Latin American populism observable in the grand scale mobilization efforts initiated by political elites have led some scholars to construct refined definitions of populism that causally link its emergence solely to social, economic, and political conditions specific to these regions – such as processes of modernization, the marginal position Latin American countries occupy with respect to the global market and the resulting dependent capitalist development, and the clientelist legacies inherited from the colonial past. These theoretical frameworks delimit populism as an emergent phenomenon only possible in nation-states that can be historically linked to 'underdeveloped' economic and political structures and foreclose any possible comparison with forms of populism that, one could argue, are emerging in the United States.

Populism and Latin America

The classic approach to situating the emergence of Latin American populism within broader economic and political processes of transformation accompanying modernization was pioneered in the work of Gino Germani. Germani provides a functionalist account of the transition from traditional to industrial society in

which processes of modernization are coextensive with and directly tied to processes of social mobilization. It follows that the main process concomitant with social mobilization for Germani (1978) is the 'extension of legal, social, and political rights to all inhabitants, that is, their incorporation into the nation as citizens rather than subjects' (13). Thus, one can imagine a process of industrialization, urbanization, and economic concentration occurring in Latin American countries in which rural agrarian peoples are transformed into an urban mass – a process which is accompanied by changes in their aspirations for economic prosperity and political participation insofar as their sociopolitical positions and expectations change from being subjects dominated by a landed oligarchy to the desire for political incorporation into society as citizens.

This process, then, creates a susceptibility to populist forms of leadership insofar as the political structures and institutional means of integration, which serve the purpose of incorporating these masses into modern society, lag far behind the process of mobilization. Hence, the essential predicament, which leads to populism in this functionalist framework, is that of people entering modern society without modern means of integration. In this sense, Germani (1978) gives us a view of populism as a sort of intermediate form of political organization between authoritarianism and full democratic participation insofar as it 'includes contrasting components such as a claim for equality of political rights and universal participation for the common people, but fused with some sort of authoritarianism often under charismatic leadership' (88).

In a general sense, many of the analyses that seek to account for the emergence of populism in Latin America rely on the historical legacy of dependent capitalist development in order to explain the rise of populism as a type of aberrant political phenomenon. Paul Drake (1982), writing at a time after the initial wave of Latin American populism extending from the 1930s through the 1970s, but before the advent of neopopulism in the late 1980s, views populism in this way as a transient form of political organization that was made possible by the rise of the export economy and the resulting urban demographic explosion after which industrialization developed at a slower pace (236).

Other authors, such as James Malloy (1977), formulate a comparative-historical perspective, referred to as a 'modal pattern,' in which they see Latin American countries as passing through successive phases relative to transformations in the economic market. Roxborough (1984) succinctly sums up the three historical stages posited in this approach: once again, starting in the late 19th century, Latin American countries first produced 'primary products for the world market,' which was interrupted by World War I, the depression, and World War II (3). This initiated a second phase of import-substitution industrialization in which 'Latin American economies turned in on themselves and industrialized . . . meeting domestic demand for manufactured goods from internal production, rather than through export revenues' (Roxborough, 1984:3). A third phase follows with 'the massive penetration of Latin American economies by multinational manufacturing corporations,' which Roxborough (1984), following O'Donnell (1973), refers to as 'bureaucratic authoritarianism'

(3). Thus, it is the second phase of import substitution industrialization that is usually associated with the emergence of populism:

> The period of ISI was accompanied by a displacement of the old agrarian oligarchies from state power and by the mobilization of previously excluded classes and strata. A heterogeneous coalition of industrialists, the urban middle class, urban workers and migrants to the cities led this assault on the oligarchical state. Frequently with the aid of sections of the military, this coalition led to the installation of populist or Bonapartist regimes and to a new level of state autonomy from direct class pressures. Industrial expansion, growth in employment, and widespread rises in living standards were the material bases for the widespread support enjoyed by these populist governments (Roxborough, 1984:7).

Another set of causal factors linked to the emergence and success of populist regimes in Latin America is derived from an emphasis on the clientelist political culture inherited from the colonial past and other problems associated with the development and effectiveness of democratic political institutions. Following Roxborough (1984), I will refer to this as the 'essentialist' model (3). With reservations about the explanatory value of this cultural model, Drake (1982) describes the historical roots of the 'patron-client' relationship and alludes to possible affinities with populist forms of leadership:

> A cultural approach to Latin American populism would emphasize the paternalistic bond between the leader and the masses. According to many analysts, this reciprocal but hierarchical relationship grows out of the rural, seigniorial, Roman Catholic, Ibero-American heritage of ingrained inequality with at least 500-year old roots (220).

Other authors, such as Claudio Véliz (1980), explain the problem of underdeveloped democratic institutions and the persistence of authoritarian forms of government in reference to the tradition of centralized colonial rule extending back to the Spanish and Portuguese monarchies. Carlos de la Torre (2000) also points to problems concerning democratic institutions, especially the extension of citizenship and the gap between civil society and the dominant power structures in countries like Ecuador, suggesting that these problems help to explain the appeal of populist leaders and the relative feasibility of populist forms of political organization (9,10).

Each of these paradigms for explaining the emergence of Latin American populism (i.e. the modernization paradigm, the 'modal pattern' paradigm, and the 'essentialist' paradigm) have encountered rigorous critiques in academic literature and reveal a whole host of theoretical shortcomings and inconsistencies when measured against the multitude of cases that are associated with or labelled as forms of populism in Latin America and elsewhere. For instance, Laclau (1977) provides a common critique of the modernization paradigm insofar as it 'implies highly questionable assumptions' that 'greater economic development' would result in 'less populism' and that societies affected by populism 'will necessarily advance towards more 'modern' and 'class' forms of channelling popular protest' (153,154).

These problematic functionalist assumptions endemic in the modernization paradigm, which asserted that increases in levels of modern integration would ultimately decrease instances of populism, led to the formation of the aforementioned 'modal pattern' paradigm. Once again, with this paradigm authors O'Donnell (1973) and Malloy (1977) attempted to provide a more 'structuralist argument that linked populism with import substitution industrialization' (de la Torre, 2000:5). However, Roxborough (1984) argues that the empirical data corresponding to the rise of the political regimes of Peron, Vargas and Cárdenas does not reveal a significant correlation with the advent of import substitution industrialization (16).

Similar inconsistencies arise in the attempt to create theoretical models that posit a unified historical account of the impact of inherited practices of corporatism, clientelism, and centralized colonial rule on the emergence of authoritarian regimes of either a militaristic or populist type and the underdevelopment of democratic institutions. Regarding these inconsistencies, Roxborough (1984), citing Cammack (1983), refers to a pertinent contradiction in the model of traditional continuity that Véliz (1980) attributes to the influence of colonial rule on authoritarian military regimes insofar as Véliz himself points to a 'liberal pause' in his own model between colonialism and military rule that 'covers virtually the entire period of national independence' in Latin America (Roxborough, 1984:5). And in order to refute any comparative-historical argument that would link the emergence of Latin American populism to a continuous tradition of underdeveloped democratic institutions, one has only to consider the history of stable democratic institutions in Argentina for seventy years prior to the military coup of 1930 (Germani, 1978:125).

From this analysis of the literature on Latin American populism it is apparent that there are serious limitations and inconsistencies that arise in the attempt to create a unified historical model of the economic and political conditions that led to the emergence of populism and in the attempt to delineate the essential characteristics that populism entails. The following examination of the literature on populism in the United States also reveals attempts to link up the emergence of populism with social, economic, and political conditions. And similar to the literature on Latin American populism, there are disagreements among scholars about the historical conditions, social bases, ideological content, and other essential characteristics of populism in the United States.

Populism in the United States

One of the more prominent historical accounts of populism in America is provided by Lawrence Goodwyn. Similar to most other analysts of American populism (Hicks, 1961; Hofstadter, 1969; Szasz, 1982; McMath, 1992; Kazin, 1995), Goodwyn historically situates the emergence of populism in the economic destitution experienced by farmers in the post-Civil War period as they found

themselves facing an increasing and insurmountable debt as a result of being bound to the crop lien system.

Goodwyn (1978) suggests that populism in America consisted of a movement culture that really began when the farmers of Lampasas County, Texas, reacting against the hardships of the crop lien system, banded together in 1877 to form the 'Knights of Reliance', a group which later became known as 'The Farmers Alliance' (25, 26). This movement culture was a complex and multilayered set of ideologies and practices that consisted of three sets of processes often intermingling: the farmers' emphasis on self-help, education and the formation of cooperatives; the farmers' view that they were part of a larger industrial class leading to boycotts and coordination of efforts with other movements such as the Knights of Labor; and the acceptance of the greenback doctrine calling for the introduction of fiat currency in conjunction with C. W. Macune's subtreasury system.

Goodwyn's historical account of the formation of the Populist Party has encountered substantial critiques. Concerning the emphasis that Goodwyn places on the greenback ideology, Clanton (1991) comments, 'Not all historians of Populism would agree that greenback ideology was quite that fundamental, but it figured prominently in the thought of a significant segment of the leadership, in Texas and elsewhere' (18). McMath (1992) has suggested that Goodwyn's analysis of the origins of populism is too narrowly focused on a radical type of Alliance action exhibited in the formation of cooperatives, which occurred only to a large extent in Texas, and that Goodwyn's study overemphasizes a distinctive and local movement culture that dismisses the broader reception of populism by the nation (15).

Whereas Goodwyn suggests that the core of the populist movement revolved around the attempted formation of cooperatives and the dissemination of the greenback ideology, Szasz (1982) argues that it was the moment at which cooperatives proved unsuccessful and the Populists began to support other issues that populism began to broaden its appeal as a movement. Thus, as the issues that the Populists supported became diversified so did their social base of support. The Populist party 'provided the only real political alternative to the Republicans or Democrats . . . In addition to agrarians, the famous 1896 Populist convention at St. Louis bounded with Single Taxers, Bellamyite Nationalists, Socialists, Prohibitionists, Greenbackers, and Suffragettes' (Szasz 1982:194). And the fact that 'much of the Populist vote in the western mining states of Colorado and Montana relied on labor support' lends support to Szasz's (1982) claim that, not unlike Latin American forms of populism, populism in the United States could be described as 'multiclass, expansive, electoral, socially reformist, and led by charismatic figures' (195,191).

Authors such as Szasz and Kazin build from a historical account of the populist movement of the 1890s to show that this political heritage, in the form of a rhetoric of the 'people', has been adopted by a myriad of political figures in the subsequent decades of American history, extending all the way to the present. Although exhibiting some basic rhetorical affinities with the initial

movement, insofar as there is always an appeal to the common people, the history of populist discourse in America, much like in Latin America, reveals an articulation of diverse ideological contents that oscillates between Left and Right: 'thus, the Populist heritage has been ambiguous: it provided ammunition for both liberals and conservatives' (Szasz, 1982:203). Accordingly Szasz and Kazin have traced a populist discourse that runs through the rhetoric of such diverse political figures as Bryan, McCarthy, Wallace, Nixon, Reagan, and Bill Clinton. However, most analysts agree that there is still a common element in American populism, which Kazin (1995) defines as 'a language whose speakers conceive of ordinary people as a noble assemblage not bounded narrowly by class, view their elite opponents as self-serving and undemocratic, and seek to mobilize the former against the latter' (1).

Unpicking populism and other movements

In the final section of this paper, I argue that Laclau also analyses populism from a discursive perspective, although he has a very different conception of discourse, and that this is the only definition that remains tenable in a comparison of the Latin American cases, let alone a comparison between US and Latin American cases, insofar as the models of modernization, modal patterns, and political institutions reveal vast divergences and inconsistencies in the Latin American cases, and in both U.S. and Latin American cases, the ideological contents of populist discourse are always shifting.

Ahead of this, a brief examination of the academic literature on current populist trends in Western Europe will be useful in further debunking the already well refuted claim that the emergence of populism is tied to the processes inherent in economic and political modernization and in creating a space for the analysis of other contemporary cases of populism in 'developed' Western nations, such as the United States.

Considering the recent emergence of a new form of populism in Western Europe beginning in the 1980s, Paul Taggart (1995) has linked a series of nascent party developments to 'a rising tide of right-wing extremism' and coins the term 'New Populism' to distinguish these movements[2] from neo-fascist trends, despite a few ideological similarities (34). In delineating the distinguishing features of this form of populism, Taggart provides us with three essential characteristics that allow for comparisons to the other instances of populism previously discussed. First of all, Taggart (1995) notes that 'all these parties have combined elements of nationalism with neo-liberal economic policies' (35). Thus, in terms of economic stance, there is a parallel to the upsurge in neopopulist leadership in Latin America; however the nationalist anti-immigration and racist sentiments that characterize New Populism, and the fact of its occurrence in well-established and institutionalized democratic regimes, represent stark contrasts.

A second aspect of New Populism that is coextensive with more general definitions of populism and neopopulism is its anti-system ideological orientation. Taggart (1995) writes, 'New Populism is on the right, against the system, and yet defines itself as in the "mainstream" . . . It is of the people but not of the system. The growth of the New Populism is itself the repudiation of any idea that politics as usual is a politics that works . . . It enjoys breaking the rules because they are the rules of a system it sees as defunct' (36, 37). In this sense, New Populism represents what has been commonly referred to as the 'politics of anti-politics' 'as politicians and political parties become the "other" of the people' (Panizza, 2005:12). The 'politics of anti-politics' discourse is a common element in many instances of populism ranging from The People's Party in the United States to the description of Fujimori's 'antielitest and antiestablishment rhetoric' given by Roberts (1995). From Panizza's perspective, the people's disenchantment with institutionalized politics has led to the emergence of populist leaders as diverse as Berlusconi and Chávez. Both these factors of the people's disenchantment with institutionalized politics and the anti-system/ 'outside politics' orientation shed light on such phenomena as the brief electoral success of Ross Perot in the United States (Westlind, 1996).

A third aspect of New Populism that mirrors forms of Latin American populism and neopopulism is its centralized organizational structure and the reciprocal relationship between this organizational structure and reliance on charismatic leadership. Taggart (1995) writes,

> New Populist parties have two qualities that pertain to their organization: they are very centralized and they set great store in the leadership which is both personalized and charismatic . . . they can reconcile anti-systemic elements with organizational elements that ensure their institutional and electoral survival. They are also the organizational articulation of key elements of their ideology (40).

Thus, the fact that these parties rely on centralized charismatic leadership as opposed to typical institutionalized bureaucratic structures expresses precisely their anti-system ideology. Many analysts of Latin American populism have pointed to similar centralized organizational structures and personalistic styles of leadership (Conniff, 1999:16).

Thus, despite the right-wing, anti-immigrant and racist content of New Populist ideology, this emergent form of populism in Western Europe has many of the same characteristics attributable to populism in Latin America, especially neopopulism, insofar as it supports a neoliberal economic stance, articulates an anti-system, anti-political ideology, and rests on personalized and centralized organizational structures. And given the fact that New Populism proves a powerful force in countries with well-developed and institutionalized democratic structures, it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain the position that the economic and political conditions specific to Latin American countries are ripe for the emergence of populism in general and certain types of populist regimes in particular.

In the light of the aforementioned problems encountered in the attempt to relegate populism to a specific set of regional and historical processes, I argue that only Laclau's theory of populism as a unitary discursive formation retains explanatory value across cases insofar as the empirical evidence provided by the Latin American and Western European cases counters any essentialist link between the emergence of populism and modernization processes, import substitution industrialization, and a continuous trend of underdeveloped democratic institutions.

Laclau's conception of discourse

Laclau conceives of populism as a discursive phenomenon in which hegemonic political identities are constructed through 'empty signifiers,' which link together popular demands in a chain of equivalence or stable discourse. This stability of the chain of equivalence is achieved through the differentiation of an excluded element, which forms the basis of an antagonism. In order to render a detailed explanation of this process, it is important to understand Laclau's conception of discourse itself. Laclau (2005) writes, 'By discourse, as I have attempted to make clear several times, I do not mean something that is essentially restricted to the areas of speech and writing, but any complex of elements in which relations play the constitutive role' (68).

In an earlier work, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) refer to Wittgenstein's concept of language games in order to elaborate this theory of discourse that moves beyond a purely cognitive scope to include the forms of social action which correspond to a given discursive formation: 'The theory of speech acts has, for example, underlined their performative character. Language games, in Wittgenstein, include with an indissoluble totality both language and the actions interconnected with it . . . The linguistic and non-linguistic elements are not merely juxtaposed, but constitute a differential and structured system of positions – that is, a discourse' (108). It follows that the other integral aspect of this conception of discourse besides its extension beyond language is its relational character.

This relational character of discourse is derived from Saussure's conception of language as a system of signs[3] in which signifiers only acquire meaning in their relation, in terms of differences, to other signifiers within the linguistic system. Laclau (2005) then extends this conception of language as a system of differences to other 'signifying elements' and actions:

> And what is true of language conceived in its strict sense is also true of any signifying (ie objective) element: an action is what it is only through its differences from other possible actions and from other signifying elements – words or actions – which can be successive or simultaneous. Only two types of relation can possibly exist between these signifying elements: combination and substitution (68).

Laclau uses this conception of discourse as language and action encompassed in a 'differential ensemble' to privilege the discursive terrain as the primary level in which social and political relations are constituted; this then allows for the analysis of the operations of rhetorical tropes, which were previously the exclusive domain of language, to be applied to social relations and political discourse and identities. Laclau and Mouffe (1985) reveal this tropological orientation in writing, 'Synonymy, metonymy, metaphor are not forms of thought that add a second sense to a primary, constitutive literality of social relations; instead, they are a part of the primary terrain itself in which the social is constituted' (110).

Laclau's concepts of difference, antagonism, and equivalence are developed from this notion of discourse as a 'differential ensemble'. Once again, if the primary level of analysis is discourse as a 'purely differential ensemble, its totality has to be present in each act of signification. Consequently grasping the totality is the condition of signification as such. Secondly, however, to grasp that totality conceptually, we have to grasp its limits – that is to say, we have to differentiate it from something other than itself' (Laclau, 2005:69).

Laclau goes on to argue that the differentiated element would only constitute another internal difference within a system of differences and would thus prevent the grasping of the totality necessary for the act of signification. For this reason, the differentiated element, which constitutes the limit of the signifying totality, must be excluded and externalized. This expelled difference forms the basis of the antagonism upon which populist identities depend. Laclau, (2005) writes, 'the only possibility of having a true outside would be that the outside is not simply one more, neutral element but an *excluded* one, something that the totality expels from itself in order to constitute itself (to give a political example: it is through the demonization of a section of the population that a society reaches a sense of its own cohesion)' (70).

It follows that the differentiated element, as the excluded element from the totality, causes all other internal differences to be equivalent to each other 'in their common rejection of the excluded identity' (Laclau, 2005:70). Because of this 'tension' between difference and equivalence, the totality represents an 'impossible' and 'failed' totality (Laclau, 2005:70). The totality is impossible because it is precisely the act of expelling one difference – in order to form the limit of the totality and thus constitute it as totality – that transforms the differences within the differential ensemble into equivalences thereby subverting the differential ensemble or totality itself. For Laclau then, 'This totality is an object which is both impossible and necessary. Impossible, because the tension between equivalence and difference is ultimately insurmountable; necessary, because without some kind of closure, however precarious it might be, there would be no signification and no identity' (70).

Hegemony is thus achieved when one of the differences within the differential ensemble or totality comes to represent the totality as a whole, and in this act of representing the 'incommensurable totality,' the particular difference or 'hegemonic identity' takes on the role of 'empty signifier, its own particularity

embodying an unachievable fullness' (Laclau, 2005:70,71). David Howarth (2004) traces out the development of Laclau's conception of the empty signifier in *Emancipations* as 'a signifier without a signified', and notes:

> 'the hegemonic relationship' refers to the way in which a particular signifier ('people', 'nation', 'revolution') is emptied of its particular meaning and comes to represent the 'absent fullness' of a symbolic order. Thus, in social terms, the empty signifier comes to play the universal function of representing an entire community or social order' (261, 262).

In this hegemonic moment 'social demands' are linked together in an equivalential chain. Laclau thus refers to the demands of social groups as the elemental units upon which his theory of populism rests. In order to explain how these demands can be transformed into populist claims, Laclau makes a distinction between 'democratic demands' and 'popular demands.' If the demands that social groups articulate are satisfied, they obviously pose no problem, and if the demands are either satisfied or not, but remain isolated, they are simply democratic demands. However, 'if the situation remains unchanged for some time, there is an accumulation of unfulfilled demands and an increasing inability of the institutional system to absorb them in a *differential* way (each in isolation from the others), and an *equivalential* relationship is established between them' (Laclau, 2005:73).

These demands inscribed in an equivalential chain thus become popular demands and can lead to 'a widening chasm separating the institutional system from the people' (Laclau 2005:74). It follows that the 'two clear preconditions of populism' are '(1) the formation of an internal antagonistic frontier separating the 'people' from power; and (2) an equivalential articulation of demands making the emergence of the 'people' possible' (Laclau, 2005:74).

The Obama election

With this understanding of Laclau's definition of populism, the theoretical ground is set for an analysis of Obama's election and how it represents an instance of populism based on a reading of Laclau. As I approach an analysis of Obama's election as an instance of populism from a Laclauian perspective, it is important to note that there is nothing novel in utilizing Laclauian discourse theory to analyse aspects of American political discourse. This terrain has already been charted by many theorists: the comparison of Ross Perot and Sweden's New Democracy by Westlind (1996); the study of George Wallace by Lowndes (2005); the brief analysis of Bush's anti-terrorist discourse by Panizza (2005) [to name a few]. However, as I will simply and briefly demonstrate, the Obama case is just as amenable to such a discursive analysis.

A good starting point would be the dislocation: the 'event' or 'crisis' that 'disrupts the symbolic order'. Many political analysts have argued that the event that really led to Obama's ascendancy over McCain in the polls was the

devastating impact of the financial crisis felt in September 2008. The economic crisis 'fragmented the symbolic order' and opened up the space for new political identities; it revealed many flaws with the Republican administration in the minds of the American people. There were many democratic demands, which until well into Bush's second term of office, remained isolated democratic demands, such as ending the war in Iraq, fixing problems with the healthcare system, cracking down on CEOs and the irresponsible financial practices of lending firms, etc.

The institutional order, represented by the Republican administration, revealed its inability to absorb these democratic demands by isolating or satisfying them. These demands were thus linked into an equivalential chain and became popular demands. This equivalential chain of popular demands continued to persist, creating an antagonistic rift between 'the American people' and the power bloc. Barack Obama articulated a series of empty signifiers, found in such campaign slogans as 'Yes We Can,' 'Hope' and 'Change You Can Believe In,' which transformed the social totality and equivalential chain of demands into 'a stable system of signification' oriented around the hegemonic identity of 'the American people'.

One particular slogan of the Obama campaign, which reveals the capacity of political discourse to organize forms of social action with respect to grassroots campaigning and fundraising, is 'We Are the People We've Been Waiting For.' This slogan made it possible to signify a conception of 'the American people' that engendered the potential for collective political action. It was not Obama that 'we' were waiting for, but ourselves. 'We' had the power, through online donations, social networking sites, grassroots campaigning, t-shirts, and buttons, to participate actively in ushering in an administration that would satisfy our popular demands. Whether or not the campaign funds raised contributed directly to votes, the felt experience of popular participation did. Thus, these slogans were important not just as empty signifiers, but in the role they play as empty signifiers in this language-game. For after all, what I am describing here, following Laclau's usage of Wittgenstein, is a discourse which simultaneously involves both language and forms of social action and presupposes their inextricable connection.

Conclusion

I want to argue that this instance of populism conceived within Laclau's theoretical framework is comparable to instances of populism in Latin America, but first I will suggest a theory of the forces within academic discourses that hinder comparisons of instances of populism occurring in the US and Latin America. Using the theories of Wittgenstein (1958) and Foucault (1972), I argue that the academic discourses of US and Latin American populism constitute 'language-games' comprised of social norms that govern, regulate, and restrict

the usage of the term, 'populism', relegating its usage to their own respective 'fellowships of discourse'.[4]

There is also a set of discursive forces suggesting that such comparisons should be made, and Bakhtin gives us a model of the interrelationship of both sets of forces. Bakhtin (1981) argues that there are centripetal forces, mirroring sociopolitical and linguistic processes of centralization, which seek to merge diverse languages and their accompanying ideological perspectives on the world into a standardized unitary language. Unitary language is thus an abstraction reinforced by philosophical, linguistic, and poetic discourses, which denies the reality of heteroglossia – that there are multiple, diverse languages and points of view existing in the world. These diverse languages and points of view are given expression in the carnivalesque discourses inherited by the novel and represent centrifugal forces which seek to pull languages apart.

I would argue that there are similar sets of forces at work in the academic discourses of populism: forces which seek to pull cases apart and reveal the reality of multiple populisms and forces which seek a standard and unified conception of populism. And we have seen these forces at work in literature on both regions and in between them. My work thus represents both forces: on the one hand, I want to distance the case of Obama's populism from the type of American populism present in the 1890s, which was ultimately unsuccessful but, on the other hand, I would like to make comparisons between the populism present in the Obama election and that of Latin American cases.

There are many features of Latin American populism that make it difficult to compare with the populism present in the Obama campaign. Latin American populism is often associated with a top-down power structure, centralized leadership and organization, links to authoritarianism, and disrespect for the rule of law. Obama's populism has none of these characteristics and corresponds more closely to what Canovan (1980) has termed 'polititicans' populism': 'broad, nonideological coalition-building that draws on the unificatory appeal of "the people"' (13). But the fact of the matter is, 'against the assumptions of political modernizers, populist leaders are not anachronistic figures to be superseded by the political institutions and rational debate of modern democracy . . . populism is here to stay' (Panizza, 2005:19). And even though Obama's populism is considerably more benign and moderate than the populism of Chávez, I *imagine* that we will see more instances of populism in 'developed' Western nations in the future – perhaps taking on more dangerous forms. This bleak prediction is perhaps warranted, given the manner in which mainstream American politicians have begun to placate the problematic and reactionary demands of the Tea Party.

In one of the plenary sessions of the Sociological Review 100th Anniversary Conference, Randall Collins presented a paper entitled, 'Technological Displacement and Capitalist Crisis,' in which he argued that, due to the increasing severity of crises surrounding finance capitalism and the displacement of the middle class, we will soon see a movement toward more forms of socialism.

Thus far, however, it seems that we are witnessing more movements toward forms of populism than socialism. I argue that Collins is correct in positing a phenomenon that is similar to Laclau's 'accelerated tempo' of dislocations. As capitalism runs out of 'escape routes' in Collins' formulation, we will experience more dislocatory crises, which I believe will result in an exponential increase in populist outbreaks.

In comparing Obama's populism to populism in Latin America, we can see that despite the specific character of the dislocation – whether it follows a modal pattern, essentialist model, or economic recession – the aspects of antagonism, equivalence, and hegemonic identity formation remain constant. My argument is that from the perspective of a populist study, we should not analyse Obama at all; rather, there is something present in the language of his campaign, and how it so easily sutured the present dislocation and averted a confrontation with the unavoidable Lacanian Real that is worthy of interrogation.

Notes

1 See 'For Populism, A Return to Economic Roots,' John Harwood, *New York Times*, March 23, 2009, and articles by Michael Kazin and Fareed Zakaria in *Newsweek*, March 30, 2009.

2 Some of the movements Taggart refers to as parties that fit within his ideal type of 'New Populism' include: Haider and The Austrian Freedom Party, the Northern Leagues and Berlusconi's Forza Italy, the Ticino League and Automobilist Party in Switzerland, the Danish and Norwegian Progress Parties, Sweden's New Democracy, the Flemish Bloc of Belgium, Le Pen's French National Front, the Republicans in Germany, etc. To these we can now add Pim Fortuyn in the Netherlands – and beyond Europe, Preston Manning's Reform Party in Canada and Pauline Hanson's One National Party in Australia (Canovan, 2005). This classification also retrospectively fits political figures such as George Wallace in the United States.

3 For Saussure, the sign is composed of a signifier (sound-image) and signified (concept), which the signifier refers to.

4 See the appendix, 'The Discourse on Language,' in Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. 'A rather different function is filled by 'fellowships of discourse', whose function is to preserve or reproduce discourse, but in order that it should circulate within a closed community, according to *strict regulations*, without those in possession being dispossessed by this very distribution' (225, my emphasis).

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