The Antonymic Role of the ‘Opposition’ in the Populist Discourse of Betancourt and Chávez

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[abstract]

This paper presents a comparative qualitative analysis of Venezuelan political discourse in the immediate postwar period and the present in order to argue that although the political and economic ideological contents of populist discourse have changed over time, there is an essential structure to populist discourse, which has remained constant. Through an examination of newspaper articles propagated during the rule of Acción Democrática (AD) presided over by Rómulo Betancourt (1945-48) as well as articles and websites covering the Chávez administration, this paper reveals the role of the ‘opposition’ as a trope, a representation, and an explanatory mechanism for the persistence of social conflict, thus comprising a key feature of populist discursive structure. In the discourses of AD and Chávez, this construction of the ‘opposition’ is posed in an antagonistic relationship against references to a ‘founding moment of the social,’ revealing the other key feature of populist discursive structure. Thus from the postwar period to the present, despite the ideological shift from Betancourt’s liberal democratic, pro-capital stance to Chávez’s social democratic, anti-capitalist stance, the populist formations of a reactionary/bureaucratic ‘opposition’ and the coup/Bolivarian ‘founding moment’ remain starkly intact. I conclude by extrapolating from the Venezuelan case in order to gesture toward understanding populism as a case of a universal discursive formation.