

BOOK REVIEW ESSAYS

Cutting the Populist Knot

George Ciccariello-Maher

Decolonizing Humanities Project, College of William and Mary, US
gjcm@protonmail.com

This essay reviews the following works:

La marchita, el escudo y el bombo: Una historia cultural de los emblemas del peronismo, de Perón a Cristina Kirchner. By Ezequiel Adamovsky and Esteban Buch. Buenos Aires: Planeta, 2016. Pp. 367. ARS\$555 paperback. ISBN: 9789504954750.

The Resurgence of Populism in Latin America. By Robert R. Barr. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2017. Pp. xii + 251. \$75 hardcover. ISBN: 9781626376670.

The Promise and Perils of Populism: Global Perspectives. Edited by Carlos de la Torre. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2015. Pp. viii + 474. \$45.00 paperback. ISBN: 9780813153308.

Latin America's Leaders. By Rut Diamint and Laura Tedesco. London: Zed, 2015. Pp. xi + 188. \$25.00 paperback. ISBN: 9781783601028.

Evita, Inevitably: Performing Argentina's Icons before and after Eva Perón. By Jean Graham-Jones. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014. Pp. ix + 271. \$37.95 paperback. ISBN: 9780472052332.

Creating Charismatic Bonds in Argentina: Letters to Juan and Eva Perón. By Donna J. Guy. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2016. Pp. vii + 173. \$29.95 paperback. ISBN: 9780826338389.

Populism and Performance in the Bolivarian Revolution of Venezuela. By Angela Marino. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2018. Pp. xi + 212. \$34.95 paperback. ISBN: 9780810136731.

Populism: A Very Short Introduction. By Cas Mudde and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. Pp. 136. \$11.95 paperback. ISBN: 9780190234874.

Dancing Jacobins: A Venezuelan Genealogy of Latin American Populism. By Rafael Sánchez. New York: Fordham University Press, 2016. Pp. ix + 393. \$35 paperback. ISBN: 9780823263660.

When Democracy Trumps Populism: European and Latin American Lessons for the United States. Edited by Kurt Weyland and Raúl L. Madrid. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. Pp. 238. \$27.99 paperback. ISBN: 9781108728829.

On October 28, 2018, Jair Bolsonaro was elected president of Brazil. A formerly fringe politician, Bolsonaro leapt unexpectedly into the political mainstream espousing what most consider extreme views. Overtly racist, homophobic, and misogynistic, Bolsonaro's support for the Brazilian dictatorship's torture program, unrestrained police power to kill, and tenuous fidelity to democratic institutions evoke the specter of a globally resurgent fascism. Most media accounts, however, have instead opted to label him a populist. Why? For some, the term "fascism" is too fraught, too contested, and too pejorative to be of any analytic use, but these are all equally true—if not more so—when it comes to populism. To call Bolsonaro a populist,

moreover, is to be complicit in his own strategy by sanitizing his image and welcoming him into a broader political orbit that for some includes not only Donald Trump and the Tea Party, but also the late Hugo Chávez, Spain's Podemos, and the Occupy Movement as well. And yet, there remains something in this strategy that demands explanation. So we reach for populism, a notoriously fraught concept that offers scant clarity, little consensus on its meaning, and no real justification for its continued relevance aside from its relevance. The best argument for not abandoning so confused and confusing a concept is that it continues to be used, but as we use it we become trapped in an apparently inescapable circle. Which way out?

The ten books considered here—only a sample of the thousands of pages dedicated to populism in recent years—offer no easy answers, only hints, threads, local histories, and struggles, successes, and failures that point us toward possible approaches to the populist knot. I will consider these texts—a useful cross section of the literature—in three groups. The first addresses the populist question head-on through prevailing social-scientific methods; the second digs deeply into Argentine Peronism with nuanced ethnographic and semiotic analyses that skirt the populist question while illuminating its contours; and the third frames contemporary Venezuela as a litmus test for theories of populism, avoiding the definitional straitjacketing that plagues many theorizations of populism.

Populism Defined

We begin with two ambitious texts that tackle the populist tangle directly—Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser's *Populism* and Robert R. Barr's *Resurgence of Populism in Latin America*—but which, symptomatic of the difficulties of the task, prove that even thoughtful work can fall prey to the many snares strewn about the populist question. Formally speaking, both books approach populism through a classical concept structure, in which all elements must be simultaneously present, but this is where the similarities end. Mudde and Rovira's text is representative of the arguably predominant ideational approach that views populism as “a discourse, an ideology, or a worldview” (5), attempting to grasp not only how populist rhetorics are deployed by leaders, but also when, why, and how populism is embraced, reproduced, and negotiated by individuals and movements (what Mudde and Rovira call the demand side).¹

Barr, by contrast, leans toward a “political” approach that emphasizes the strategies and structures used by leaders, defining populism as “a means of building and/or maintaining political power based on the mass mobilization of supporters through the use of antiestablishment appeals and plebiscitarian linkages” (44). Barr deploys this concept both selectively—underscoring those cases that do *not* fit—and within the specific geographical and historical context of Latin America's “third era.” If the “first era” refers to the so-called classical populism of the 1930s–1950s, and the “second era” to those bait-and-switch populists of the 1990s who rode popular mandates to power only to pursue neoliberal policies, the “third era” is marked above all by a leftist resurgence against these neoliberal policies. Populism is not, Barr argues, defined by personalism, clientelism, or mere outsider status, but by the unmediated manner in which antiestablishment leaders connect to the masses. In this view, the Kirchners of Argentina and Colombia's Álvaro Uribe are insufficiently antiestablishment to count, whereas Ecuador's Álvaro Noboa—not often considered a populist—makes the cut due to the types of linkages he constructs. Evo Morales is a more dynamic case for Barr, coming to power through social movements before later developing the necessary plebiscitary linkages to qualify as a populist.

Mudde and Rovira, by contrast, espouse a more expansive view, defining populism not as a mobilization-based political strategy but as a “thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite,’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” (6). This thinness explains both populism's mutability and its transitory nature: populism “seldom exists in pure form” (7), and it can (and does observably) shift by attaching to other ideologies that fill out its absent content. “It is the *combination* of populism and its host ideology that creates the specific interpretation of ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’” (Mudde and Rovira, 40–41). For Mudde and Rovira, then, populism's conceptual others are both elitism and pluralism; the first prioritizes hierarchy over and against the people, and the latter is incompatible with what they view as the people's pure and undivided sovereignty. While attentive to contextual nuance, Mudde and Rovira thus seek to provide a minimal universal concept of populism that

¹ For a broader statement of the ideational approach, see also Kirk A. Hawkins and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, “The Ideational Approach to Populism,” *Latin American Research Review* 52, no. 4 (2017): 513–528.

holds across time and space, and as a result a series of complexities cascades forth from their apparently parsimonious definition.

First, their core concepts—the people, the elite, and the general will—are each far more complex than at first sight (chapter 1). This is notoriously true of “the people,” which oscillates between denoting the whole (everyone) and the parts (the common or poor people). Furthermore, elites are often defined in incommensurable ways: in economic terms by the Left, in racial and national terms by the Right. Moreover, while regional differences are not absolute they are indeed pronounced, particularly between (tendentially progressive) Latin American and (tendentially conservative) European populisms (chapter 2). Rejecting a political definition of populism also means that—unlike Barr—Mudde and Rovira’s scope exceeds leaders, to see populisms emerging from within social movements and political parties as well (chapter 3). And even where leaders are central, it is not necessarily as charismatic strongmen; populists can be entrepreneurs, women, political insiders, outsiders, and all those between (chapter 4).

The advantages of this approach are clear: Mudde and Rovira speak coherently and with nuance about a broad range of global phenomena and grapple nimbly with contextual differences, process, and transition. For example, their insistence that populism is “essentially democratic, but at odds with *liberal* democracy” admirably avoids knee-jerk responses according to which democracy can *only* be liberal (81). In the end, however, this is a deferral rather than a sustained critique of liberal democracy: populism’s “dark side” grows from its “monist core” (18)—that is, the presumed unity of the general will—thereby constituting “an illiberal democratic response to undemocratic liberalism” that “often asks the right questions but provides the wrong answers” (116–118). But this explanatory breadth comes with a catch-22. While populism remains a formally classical concept in Mudde and Rovira’s account, the introduction of qualifications into every element of that definition—and the multiplication of subtypes this brings—makes theirs a classical concept in which almost anything fits. At best, it feels as if we are suddenly in the realm not of classical concepts at all but of radial concepts, with all the conceptual stretching these bring.² At worst, we are at the breaking point of the concept of populism itself, with Mudde and Rovira’s “thin-centered ideology” posing the inevitable question: is such a thin category of any use at all?

Barr wonders whether the ideational approach is in fact too minimal, leaving a gap or “disconnect between the concept and the analysis” (4), but the difficulties plaguing these and other texts on populism have less to do with crafting a perfect definition than with the unrecognized content many smuggle into those concepts through two interrelated errors. The first is the error of talking too much. After offering a straightforward and parsimonious definition, the author continues to make grand statements—often drawn from the pejorative arsenal—about the populist menace, without recognizing how these freight and even deform their own definition. Thus while Barr’s definition is limited to the overlap of antiestablishment appeals with plebiscitary linkages, and while he agrees with Mudde and Rovira on the apparent “paradox” that populism “can simultaneously erode and expand democracy,” he concludes starkly that “populism is simply a strategy to build and maintain political power—no more, no less,” and one fundamentally geared toward “enhancing the power of an individual” (181, 44).

Second is the question of coding: even the best definition is doomed if we misinterpret our cases and slot historical realities into the wrong columns. But this error is epidemic when it comes to populism, and not coincidentally, in those cases that provoke the most anxiety. Thus while Barr is at pains to distinguish populist-plebiscitarian linkages from participatory ones (“I can do it *for* you” versus “we can do it ourselves”), he dismisses the extensive history of social movement organizing within Chavismo by blithely insisting that participation in Venezuela has been “enclosed by plebiscitarianism” (175–177). In a nearly identical gesture, Mudde and Rovira delineate the importance of social movement mobilization before erasing Venezuelan movements entirely by coding Chávez as a “charismatic strongman” (63) who is “not just the core of the political movement but also of its political identity” (43). Furthermore, to call Bolivia’s Morales “the prototypical case of ethnopopulism” while downplaying the role of ethnicity in racist European populisms (72) is dubious at best, as is their claim that populism is incompatible with class struggle; this would come as a surprise to Morales’s many socialist supporters, not to mention those accustomed to see Chávez on live television espousing Lenin, Gramsci, and Luxemburg.

² Mudde and Rovira have previously argued against the usefulness of radial concepts for discussing populism: “Populism and (Liberal) Democracy: A Framework for Analysis,” in *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?*, ed. Mudde and Rovira (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). Paris Aslanidis has argued that, in the process, they deploy a radial concept of ideology (in their “thin-centered” approach), and my argument is that they tacitly do the same within their conceptualization of populism. Paris Aslanidis, “Is Populism an Ideology? A Refutation and a New Perspective,” *Political Studies* 64, no. 1 (2016): 88–104.

Either by accident or design, *The Promise and Perils of Populism* edited by Carlos de la Torre, is able to skirt some of these perennial tangles. This is in part due to its form, which requires no single definition. Although Mudde's ideational approach clearly predominates, he correctly notes in the conclusion that "this book includes almost as many different definitions of populism as chapters" (433). With chapters ranging from the theoretical to the empirical, but most falling somewhere in between, *Promise and Perils* offers far-ranging analyses of the entire gamut of contemporary populisms, from the Far Right in Europe and the United States to Latin America's Pink Tide to conflicting populisms in the Asia-Pacific region. While de la Torre certainly smuggles in traditional prejudices via his introduction and offers an oddly sanitized account of Venezuela's 2002 coup in his own chapter, the volume as a whole reflects the thoughtful erudition of its contributors. And by placing front and center the transformative dynamism and unpredictability of populism's insurgent and insurrectional energy, *Promise and Perils* makes a serious contribution to our understanding of this protean phenomenon. This laudable richness does not manage, however, to assuage creeping doubts about the undefined object of analysis—about *why* exactly we continue to talk about populism. But if conceptual flexibility deepens our analysis, this is because we are edging closer to a different approach altogether, one that lies beyond the rigidity of some social science methods, and toward a spectral "people" looming behind and largely obscured by "populism" the concept.

Argentina: Texturing Peronism

If our first three texts suggest—however unintentionally—that we might best approach populism without defining it beforehand, the next three show how we can enrich our understanding of populism without ever using the word. This is not as counterintuitive as it may seem. By holding the concept of populism in suspension, we suspend as well the many prejudices that too often preemptively overload our analyses, allowing us to see and think more clearly. Three recent texts on Argentina's Peronism—the paradigmatic case of classical populism—show just how much is to be gained by this approach, which adds an inductive dimension, a thicker description, and an ethnographic texture to Peronism. In the process, these texts reveal not blind faith in great leaders but the undeniable, if systematically under-recognized agency of popular sectors in crafting the symbolic and charismatic relationships that so often define what we call populism.

Donna J. Guy's *Creating Charismatic Bonds in Argentina* provides a glimpse into the epistolary construction of Peronista identity by analyzing letters sent to Eva and Juan Perón by everyday citizens, thereby opening up a new archive that complicates populism by showing how charisma is constructed not only from above but from below as well. Most literature on populism has yet to internalize the lessons of Max Weber, for whom charisma is inherently two-sided: how leaders lead but also why people follow them. By emphasizing "how Peronism was experienced" by women, internal migrants, and populations outside major cities, Guy shows how charismatic bonds "have been formed as much by Argentines as by their leaders" (2–3). In response to government plans, everyday Argentines sent platitudes, poetry, and policy proposals—often a mixture of all three. Some offered their own expertise, while others, like two sisters from Tucumán Province, offered to volunteer their time to ensure the plan's success. While the top-down element is far from absent—Juan Perón often invited letters from the public only after he had already formed policy—the public did not await his invitation before sending a deluge of letters. Given how many thousands of Venezuelans stuffed handwritten notes into the hands of Chávez and his staff, the epistolary archive remains as potent as ever. And while "charisma could be established but rarely transferred" (142), the posthumous theft of Evita's body in 1955 and Juan's hands in 1983, corporeal sources of their respective charisma, testified to elite fears of charisma's continuity. Maduro is not Chávez, Dilma is not Lula, and Cristina Fernández finds it necessary to appeal directly to the legacy of Evita, proving that—if only as a necessary but not sufficient condition—"charisma still counts" (146).

If Eva Perón features centrally in *Creating Charismatic Bonds*, she takes center stage in *Evita, Inevitably*, in which Jean Graham-Jones similarly foregrounds gender and charisma through the performative construction of the Argentine "femicon." Seeking to break the "deadlock" (3) of Evita studies, Graham-Jones isolates her object of analysis—Evita the mythical construct—from Eva Perón the historical person, before fleshing out iconization as a process of not only embodying but also replacing historical figures. Less concerned with historical fact than with the staging, telling and retelling of stories, Graham-Jones skillfully weaves together the trajectory of "castigated female rebellion in the face of male-dominated authoritarianism" in Argentina (16). Evita's prehistory emerges through the "shaky" iconization of Camila O'Gorman, whose nineteenth-century execution for sexual rebellion remains a constant temptation for Argentine theater and film (58). No such ambiguity exists around Evita, however, and Graham-Jones dedicates three chapters to the many

stageings, “afterlives,” and eventual sanctifications of Evita, from the official and highbrow to popular drag troupes, revealing a “national ambivalence toward Eva Perón as a historical character, as mythologized figure, and as femiconized effigy” (130). This ambivalence is on full display today in two metal outline murals in Buenos Aires that are reminiscent of Che’s face in Havana’s Plaza de la Revolución. The massive images—one “militant” Evita facing northward, and another “kindly” Evita facing south (172–173)—were commissioned and closely overseen by none other than Cristina Fernández herself.

It is from a shared attentiveness to the bottom-up element of populism that Ezequiel Adamovsky and Esteban Buch provide truly perceptive readings of the tightly bound symbolic trinity named in their title, *La marchita, el escudo y el bombo*: the Peronista anthem, shield, and drum. Deferring the question of populism, the authors instead approach these cultural artifacts directly. By analyzing “the three most abiding emblems of the movement” in individually authored chapters, Adamovsky and Buch enrich our understanding of each and of “the ensemble of elements that constitute Peronism” more broadly (10, 12).³ Doing so means grasping the tensions between the three as well as the top-bottom dialectic complicating each: “the productivity and initiative of Peronism’s grass roots, their capacity to generate their own emblems, to reappropriate those proposed by the leadership, to stamp them with new meaning and use them to contest messages coming from above” (13). While the shield and anthem were official propaganda mechanisms, the booming bass drum emerged from the riotous intervention of the movement rank and file, and while the former point toward “the most authoritarian aspects of the movement,” the latter underlines more “plebeian” elements of mass spontaneity (12).

Adamovsky’s dissection of the Peronista shield sheds light on the radical polysemy of a broader movement that stretched from left to right, inviting comparisons to fascism and socialism alike. When Perón sought to rework the national coat of arms to suit his movement, he replaced two hands grasping one another horizontally with a markedly asymmetrical composition. To Adamovsky’s astute semiotic eye, this rejection of “abstract horizontality” (37) meant recognizing very real contradictions to be overcome, but also risked unleashing social conflict if popular demands were not met. In one “bicolor” variant, moreover, the hands are different colors, and while the reason remains unclear, this has not prevented antiracist organizations from seizing on it. Nearly half the book is dedicated to Buch’s exhaustive study of the Peronista anthem “Los muchachos peronistas.” Sonically martial, the anthem appeals directly to Perón as “a conquerer, not of territory but of souls” (83), but between the raucous singing of the crowd and the anthem’s later proscription as a “clandestine sign of resistance,” there is much more to the story (174–175). Buch unearths the subterranean influences that shaped its composition, discovering that it was a radical printmakers federation that inspired the anthem and contributed its most radical phrase: the insistence that Peronism fights “against capital.” “It was as a spontaneous product from below,” Buch tells us, that this apparent “ode to verticalism” emerged (112).

We can look away from images, refuse food and drink, plug our nose or cover our ears, but we cannot, Adamovsky insists, block out a sound loud enough to be felt. The Peronista *bombo* simply cannot be ignored: “it envelops, overflows, and penetrates without asking permission,” and this raucous nature allowed it to even occasionally “challenge Perón’s leadership” (360, 309). Like the anthem, the drum too became an “instrument of struggle” in periods of clandestinity, turning the martial function of the *marcha* on its head by playing it from within protective crowds at soccer matches (284). Adamovsky discovers the drum alongside Perón even before Peronism, but as is so often the case, those who most feared the drum cemented its role as the heartbeat of the popular “we.” For the drum meant the carnival *murga*, and the *murga* meant the irrationality of the black crowd: “the beat of the drum evoked the specter of that plebeian siege of social hierarchies ... it seemed to announce the presence of barbarism ... and above all it forced one to recall the African” (264). One contemporary writer even denounced Peronism’s “quilombification” of Argentina—a reference to communities of escaped slaves (270). This rebellious, class-based, and racialized content prevents the drum from being a fully empty signifier, especially vis-à-vis another sonic rebellion: the pot-banging *cacerolazos* that proliferated amid the 2001 economic crisis. These were, as one headline put it, “two irreconcilable sounds” (337), and if the *cacerolazo* moved further to the right when embraced by Venezuela’s anti-Chavista opposition, the sonic traces of the popular evoked by the drum were not easily erased. As one recent tweet put it, “the *bombo* is the *cacerolazo* of the blacks” (345).

That these three texts reveal so much about populism without even mentioning the word is a testament to the strength rather than the weakness of their shared approach. And the fact that all three underscore popular grassroots agency even within a movement as top-down as Peronism, shaping even its most official

³ Translations here and elsewhere are my own.

ideological symbols, should give us serious pause before imposing a populist caricature onto the more radical and movement-based populisms of recent decades: those present in Ecuador, Bolivia, and especially Venezuela.

Venezuela: Dancing Jacobins or Dancing Devils?

If you can't explain contemporary Venezuela, your theory of populism is worthless. This should be obvious, not because Venezuela epitomizes populism, but because Chavismo figures so prominently in elite anxieties about the populist menace even as it defies prevailing definitions. Venezuela's Bolivarian process has seen the dramatic expansion of political participation, sought to radically transform the political and economic landscape of the country, and existed long before Chávez just as it survives his death, but is often shoehorned into the populist caricature of a great leader manipulating the masses in order to undermine democracy.

In this context, Rut Diamint and Laura Tedesco's short book *Latin America's Leaders* is most useful as a cautionary tale. While not about populism per se, the text seeks to characterize different forms of leadership in a region where leadership is central, but the result is a confused book that asks too many questions and offers only meager and unconvincing answers. Their method is interview based, but the list of Venezuelan interviewees reads like a veritable who's who of the anti-Chavista opposition. Despite this catastrophic sampling error, the authors inexplicably press forward, exceptionalizing this central case by suggesting that Chávez's leadership was so "unique" as to be unclassifiable (8). But classify they do, categorizing the late Venezuelan president as a "power usurper" who not only "took over the role of the legislature" but also somehow usurped Venezuelan oil from transnational corporations (136–137).⁴ This is but one of many unsustainable characterizations that speak to the coding question: the authors classify Venezuela's party system as weak (it was in fact very strong until its unexpected collapse), dramatically understate those killed in the 1989 Caracazo, and regurgitate the most hackneyed caricatures of the Bolivarian process, even hyperbolically suggesting that Chávez "became the only voice in politics" (145). Needless to say, the grassroots social movements that fought for decades prior to Chávez and continue to fight today would certainly disagree.

Fortunately, there are alternatives to the Procrustean tendencies of most literature on populism, in which reality is amputated to fit theory and thinly veiled prejudices fly under the cover of method. Rafael Sánchez's *Dancing Jacobins* and Angela Marino's *Populism and Performance in the Bolivarian Revolution of Venezuela* offer an alternative approach replete with theoretical rigor, ethnographic nuance, and attention to the stubborn resilience of the masses that populism ostensibly fashions into a people. Sánchez's *Dancing Jacobins* is a beautiful but deeply flawed book—and I suspect there is a correlation between the two. He begins from Simón Bolívar's anecdotal fondness for dancing, and the dissonance provoked by the image of the Liberator, monumentalized at the center of every Venezuelan city and town, breaking into feverish movement, becomes a sort of ur-metaphor governing the broad repetition of Venezuelan history since the destruction of the colonial order. The greatest virtue of Sánchez's approach is to map what we might call populism in motion, not a fixed form but a dynamic product of the push and pull of social forces—in this case, governing elites versus the unruly crowd. Populism's plebiscitary appeal to that crowd is not an aberration for Sánchez; this "agitated dancing" is instead part of the broader two-step that he calls "monumental governmentality," a frantic historical oscillation driven by fear—at once paranoid and very real—of the periodic reemergence of the "highly heterogeneous, intensely mobile, delocalized" Venezuelan masses (4–5).

Historically, this means an "alternation" between two apparently opposed ideal types. In the first gesture, a small group of governing elites monumentalize their own representation of the people, "belatedly" gathering "the homogeneous, unified, and—most importantly—governable people of the nation" (4–5). This moment, which Sánchez terms the "Fragile Collection," is just that: fragile, an ultimately Sisyphean effort to reconcile the irreconcilable. The failure of this very smug, very serious, and very limited representative democracy unleashes the populist pendulum and the explosive return of a "radically populist from of plebiscitary rule" that he calls Bolívar Superstar, in which the "republican people cyclically becom[es] a republican crowd" and "casts representation aside" (11–13). Monumental governmentality is thus the dynamic binding together these two "complementary dimensions of the populist art of government" (4) that, by moving back and

⁴ The claim that Chávez usurped legislative power is a standard opposition canard based on the late president's use of enabling laws, and given Diamint and Tedesco's methodological failures, it is not surprising to find it repeated. Not only are these enabling laws granted by the legislature itself, they have also been common currency among Venezuelan presidents, with six enabling laws approved between 1961 and 1998.

forth between representative democracy and radical plebiscitarianism, mediates between universal and particular, the unified people and the heterogeneous masses, freedom and equality, order and chaos. But this means that Bolívar Superstar is ultimately a containment strategy, whose “manic performances”—as “winks” to specific groups—perform the populist function of articulation by reassuring individuals that it is *their* “particular fantasies, whims, interests, and desires” that truly matter (7).

The insights offered by Sánchez's framework are not insignificant. By understanding Venezuelan governmentality, and populism more broadly, as an oscillation, he introduces a necessary dynamism into our historical understanding. By grounding this oscillation in the material realities of a heterogeneous postcolonial social formation, he pushes us toward a material account of Venezuelan politics. By focusing on the relationship between elites and masses, he recognizes both the anxieties of the former and the centrality of the latter. And by understanding the “flamboyant behavior” of political leaders as part of governmentality rather than external to it, Sánchez gives us tools for breaking down the idea that Latin America is a land of backward peoples and charismatic caudillos. But more often than not, the word “cycle” bespeaks the presence of a fallacy, and Sánchez's text is no exception. This is because, while Sánchez rightly concedes the fundamental role that the specter of the masses plays in Venezuelan governance, the masses are never more than spectral.

Absent are the flesh-and-blood masses who intervened regularly and continue to intervene in the political life of the nation, their appearance blocked by Sánchez's refusal to see them as a people at all. Instead, echoing Hobbes, there are only two possibilities. Without the symbolic unification of the Liberator, Sánchez tells us “there is no Venezuelan unified people,” only “dispersed, heterogeneous crowds” (28). While hinting at the possibility of “a people not delivered to such dizzying motion, yet persisting in a state of chronic restlessness, always relatively beyond the grasp of the state,” Sánchez instead cuts this insight off at the knees by foreclosing on the agency of the masses (13). If he were to look more closely, he might just discern in the history and present reality of grassroots struggles just the sort of dynamic, heterogeneous, and transformative people that he is looking for.⁵ But instead, armed with twin caricatures of the crowd and people alike, dialectical movement appears blocked, leaving only a “pendulous oscillation ... the ongoing flux and reflux of the Venezuelan crowds” (14).

Sánchez's treatment of the popular phrase “solemn face, sassy ass” as epitomizing the oscillation of monumental governmentality is symptomatic of this erasure. By translating *rochelero* as “sassy,” Sánchez obscures the specificity of the term's irreverent content, which is grounded in the communal *rochelas* of escaped slaves. Just as the Peronista drum evoked the “quilombification” of Argentina, the fear—and agency—of Venezuela's black masses is always just beneath the surface. Similarly conspicuous is Sánchez's surprisingly reductive treatment of Chávez himself, “the quintessential dancing Jacobin” (327) who he claims took monumental governmentality to “unprecedented heights” (8). After all, Chávez too was prone to dance, and to sing as well. This was not just any song, however, but the springy *joropo* of his native llanos, and when he danced—as in the pouring rain at his final campaign rally on October 4, 2012—this was not the erratic flamboyance of other Venezuelan leaders, much less a cynical manipulation of the masses. This was the dying Chávez of the “Golpe de Timón” speech, fighting symbolically to cement his legacy, not to contain the threatening masses but to unleash their most revolutionary aims.

This more frenzied and complex mass dance reflects the tension at the very heart of the Bolivarian Revolution, a process that has never been purely Jacobin, but instead was driven by a dialectic between leadership and the ferocious diversity of the Venezuelan *sansculottes*. Ultimately, Sánchez is not only describing but also *inhabiting* elite anxieties of the masses and therefore is a sympathizer but never a supporter of the crowd and the “dangerous form of anarchic *sans-culotte* democracy” it promises (148). A partisan of Thermidor against the Jacobins, Sánchez only admits the masses into politics as a foil for their own containment.⁶ The dangers of monumentalization are real, of course, but these emerged more clearly *after* Chávez's death, and he saw them coming. Chávez himself once denounced the sanctification of Bolívar as a strategy to depoliticize the Liberator, and the same has been true of Chávez, with even opposition

⁵ Enrique Dussel theorizes the people as more radically dynamic and open-ended in his *Twenty Theses on Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008 [2006]), and I have discussed its relevance to contemporary Venezuela in *Decolonizing Dialectics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

⁶ For an account of the masses as the “unassimilable excess” (Sánchez, 27) of Venezuelan governance that refuses to foreclose on the agency and alternatives offered by grassroots struggles, see Ociel Alí López, *¡Dale más gasolina! Chavismo, sifrinismo y burocracia* (Caracas: Fundación Andrés Bello, 2015).

figures embracing his memory in an attempt to disarm it.⁷ But to neutralize Chávez is to misrepresent him, to turn a figure of combative transformation into a symbol of reconciliation; to make an ally of the masses into a tool for their containment; and crucially, to do so by shifting “the people” itself from the combative poor to all Venezuelans.

In *Populism and Performance in the Bolivarian Revolution of Venezuela*, Marino turns our attention away from the towering heights of power, with the dancing devils of popular festivals providing an antidote from below to Sánchez’s enthrallment with the dancing Jacobins above. Between devils and populism, the distance is not so great and the relationship far from incidental: for many analysts, Manichaeism—the division of the world into good and evil—lay at the heart of populist strategies.⁸ But by refocusing our attention to the grass roots, Marino shows that no such opposition is truly absolute, complicating the devil and populism alike (3). In so doing, she makes a significant contribution to the now-burgeoning literature on grassroots participation in Venezuela’s Bolivarian Revolution,⁹ while also engaging theories of performance (like that of Graham-Jones, for example) to insist that “performance can *be* populist, and at the same time, performance is a product *of* populism” (3–4). To do so, *Populism and Performance* moves in two inverse directions, showing first the populism of performance (in grassroots festivals) before then turning to the performance of populism (within and against the state).

Like the Argentine *murga* with its African undertones, Venezuelan fiestas provoke anxiety among white elites while providing spaces to resist top-down political designs. While the Corpus Christi devil dances in Ocumare de la Costa were originally “enacted through a top-down mandate by the church” (43), Marino tracks how participation transforms these popular fiestas into something qualitatively different: “forums of political engagement” in which membership in the “communal order” is negotiated in ways that exceed the dictates of leaders (31). Through such grassroots negotiations, even the devil is welcomed back into a transformed community, disintegrating the good-versus-evil dyad and providing “a very different, decentralized model for how people work through and beyond Manichaeic logics” (32). In her second chapter, Marino turns to what she calls “place-building” (103) in the semi-urban barrios, rejecting the caricature of the crowd as pure disorder in favor of “an insurgent utopianism of the popular class,” and thereby providing precisely what Sánchez lacks: a critical *we* inside the barrio itself for which the “fiesta—grotesque, dangerous, and also utopian—transforms the collective expression of the barrio public into an act of political agency” (101).

When Chávez denounced George W. Bush as “the devil” in a 2006 speech to the United Nations, he scandalized many and delighted many more, but this was not his first run-in with the demonic. In her third chapter, Marino traces Chávez’s mobilization of the Venezuelan folk ballad “Florentino and the Devil”—in which a cunning campesino from Chávez’s own llano region takes on the devil in a battle of wits—to fight a 2004 opposition recall campaign. For many among the opposition, this was Manichaeism of the worst sort, but Marino asks: “Did Chávez’s performance generate an exclusionary political style, or was it a mirror held up to the exclusionary logics of the political establishment? Could it have been both?” (123). Indeed, it is almost always both, and she shows how popular appropriations of the myth of Florentino again “defused a good-versus-evil dualism” (127) in an ultimately inclusive demand for participatory democracy and decolonization. Marino’s fourth chapter echoes Adamovsky’s analysis of the Peronista shield by dissecting Chávez’s revision of the Venezuelan coat of arms, and specifically the turning of Bolívar’s horse. Many predictably saw this as the mere whim of a strongman, but again Marino digs deeper, insisting that even “in what might appear to be a highly constituted symbol of the state—such as a flag—there may in fact be evidence of a dynamic embodied interaction” (31). Here Bolívar figures not as a one-dimensional symbol of containment but instead as “a symbol of layered futurity” that might bespeak “a kind of demystified state” (162).

Populism, Marino argues, “can take many forms, and ... be allied with a range of political movements and ideologies,” which “can obfuscate and neutralize political debate,” just as “it can also catalyze debate and reorganize power” (9). If this echoes much of the prevailing wisdom about populism as a category,

⁷ Íñigo Errejón, “We Are (Almost) All Chávez: Challenges in the Deployment of the Chavista Political Identity,” *Venezuela Analysis*, September 15, 2013, <https://venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/10024>.

⁸ Marino takes specific aim at the guidelines offered by Kirk Hawkins and Bojana Kocijan, “Codebook for Measuring Populist Discourse: Populist Discourse Project at Central European University,” unpublished manuscript (2013), <http://populism.byu.edu/Pages/Data>.

⁹ See Sujatha Fernandes, *Who Can Stop the Drums? Urban Social Movements in Chávez’s Venezuela* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Alejandro Velasco, *Barrio Rising: Urban Popular Politics and the Making of Modern Venezuela* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015); and Naomi Schiller, *Channeling the State: Community Media and Popular Politics in Venezuela* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

Marino's goal is not to "universalize a theory of populism" (4) but instead to recognize that the polyvalence of populism is precisely its possibility. When bound to grassroots movements, we are confronted with the "seemingly oxymoronic possibility of a critical populism"—in part because, for Marino, it is "a purely top-down populism" that is truly oxymoronic (9). The years since Chávez's death have seen economic, political, and even constitutional crisis in Venezuela, but even amid these difficulties, grassroots institutions of popular power continue to resist and insist that they represent the only true alternative to oil dependence and state corruption. But rather than confirming existing caricatures, this complex reality means that moving forward, we must be more, not less attentive to the dynamic, intra-populist tensions between the from-above and the from-below.

Is there such a thing as populism? Is it anything more than "a term of abuse," a weapon, an insult to be hurled at opponents, or a fear haunting the guilty conscience of elites?¹⁰ "The charge of populism," Jason Frank suggests, "tells us at least as much about those making the charge as it does about their opponents."¹¹ Is populism best grasped through a narrowly classical concept, as a variegated cluster of family relations, or through a radial concept comprising a series of diminished subtypes? Too narrow and we lose the very reality we seek to describe, inviting what Ernesto Laclau called an "avalanche of exceptions."¹² Too broad and the concept itself risks stretching and even disintegrating entirely. But we haven't escaped the tangle posed at the outset: that when it comes to populism, it is not our concepts but reality itself that does the stretching.

Should we even talk about populism at all? After all, given the flurry of 2016 think pieces comparing Trump to Chávez, it is entirely reasonable to wonder what a racist billionaire from the United States and a poor kid from the Venezuelan countryside could possibly have in common. While Laclau sees populism's ability to accommodate "movements of entirely opposite political signs" as a strength, we might just as easily see it as a profound weakness, and Laclau's solution—rendering populism and politics essentially synonymous—is hardly satisfying.¹³ And yet, the best solution might not be to retreat into a narrower concept but to press further still, exploding the category into *populisms* plural that might be entirely incommensurable with one another: populisms of the powerful and populisms of the weak, inclusionary and exclusionary, populisms of the rich and the poor, of the global North and the global South, those populisms grounded in authentic truths and those that are cynical farces, those that seek to set the world into motion in ever more democratic and egalitarian directions versus those that simply uphold existing inequalities and hierarchies.

In *When Democracy Trumps Populism: European and Latin American Lessons for the United States*, editors Kurt Weyland and Raúl Madrid offer an international and comparative vision that has the virtue of reversing the standard myth—albeit one that seems quaint today—in which populism is a thing of the global South, with its charismatic caudillos and naive masses. The question instead is: What can the world teach the United States about Trump? But here too we might wonder whether comparisons hold: the question of Trump's white supremacist nativism is largely absent, while Venezuela in caricature as a process "engineered from the top down" that is emblematic of populist "efforts to strangle liberal democracy" (15, 2). In order to avoid getting bogged down in conceptual debates, Weyland and Madrid offer not a working definition of populism but rather a "working list" of cases all contributors can agree upon (9). Engaging a perceived disconnect between comparativists acutely aware of the global populist menace and Americanists who tend to underscore the resilience of U.S. institutions (xvi), the editors breathe a collective sigh of relief—"We believe that liberal democracy in the United States will prove resilient" (2). By viewing populism as a threat to be contained and liberal democracy as a prize to be maintained at all costs, however, the volume skirts important questions about the quality of US democracy and the havoc it continues to wreak worldwide. And the fact that the volume doesn't contain a single mention, good or bad, of Bernie Sanders or other left-wing populist alternatives to Trump suggests that the authors are less interested in populism per se than with a specific threat to a specific form of limited democracy. By centering the resilience of liberal-democratic norms, we miss the fact that, as Corey Robin puts it, "democracy is a permanent project of norm erosion, forever shattering the norms of hierarchy and domination and the political forms that aid and abet them."¹⁴

¹⁰ Tony Wood, "Some Theses on 'Populism'," *e-flux* 76 (October 2016), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/76/67530/some-theses-on-populism/>.

¹¹ Jason Frank, "Populism Isn't the Problem," *Boston Review*, August 15, 2018, <http://bostonreview.net/politics/jason-frank-populism-not-the-problem>.

¹² Ernesto Laclau, "Populism: What's in a Name?," in *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, ed. Francisco Panizza (London: Verso, 2005), 44.

¹³ Laclau, "Populism: What's in a Name?" 45.

¹⁴ Corey Robin, "Democracy Is Norm Erosion," *Jacobin*, January 2018, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/01/democracy-trump-authoritarianism-levitsky-zillblatt-norms>.

What prevents the category of populism from disintegrating entirely? And what does it tell us when our analyses improve the more we eschew hard definitions and universal theories in favor of contextual nuance? Perhaps the best approach is one that begins (as we have seen in several texts considered here) by holding the category of populism in suspension, focusing instead on the material conditions that undergird and give rise to different populisms, different concepts of the people, and different orientations toward democracy. Enrique Dussel proposes displacing populism in favor of the people, and with good reason: Latin American social movements often struggle in the name of the people only to find their own efforts erased by the “pejorative epithet” of populism.¹⁵ Focusing on the historically specific ways that “the people” is constructed in different contexts, it becomes clear that while Mudde and Rovira, for example, define populism in terms of a homogeneous and “pure people,” progressive populisms in the global South appeal to a very different people, one that is more transformative and inclusive, in part because they themselves struggle against various forms of exploitation and exclusion. And whereas Mudde and Rovira counterpose populism to class struggle, for Dussel, Laclau, and many other Latin American theorists, the people expands rather than negates the class struggle in contexts where the formal working class is not a majority.

When it comes to democracy, a similar distinction emerges, this time between those leftist critics who oppose liberal institutions because they are not democratic enough and those—often on the Right—for whom liberal, representative democracy is too democratic and even minimal checks and balances on the wealthy and powerful are unacceptable.¹⁶ As Frank argues, “focusing on populism as the primary source of democratic decline” crucially obscures “the economic and political developments that have most profoundly undermined democratic institutions and the meaning of democratic citizenship over the past forty years.”¹⁷ Criticizing liberal democracy from the left is less pie in the sky than food on the table: when institutions cannot deliver, stoking panic about populism rhetorically shores up a failing political order without addressing the reasons for that failure. Ironically, defenders of liberal democracy are often its own worst enemies, while its critics—by understanding that democracy, like the people, is a work in progress—are its best defense against antidemocratic threats from the Right. If we are concerned with threats to liberal democracy, then we have a decision to make: improve our democracies or continue to watch their contradictions bring them to the brink.

Viewing populism as grounded in dynamic and inclusive concepts of the people and democracy alike, Thea Riofrancos asks us to consider, “What if populism is not the problem but the solution?”¹⁸ This means confronting the inevitably partisan question of *cui bono*—populism for what and for whom? It means embracing “a left-wing populism that puts antiracism, immigrant rights, and refugee solidarity at the center of its politics,” that fights for an inclusive and radically democratic vision of the future.¹⁹ If the problem is the opportunistic deployment of xenophobia to govern an economic crisis, then let’s call this what it is, taking aim not at populism in toto, but at the false solutions offered by nativism, xenophobia, and racism. But this solution is in fact no solution at all, only a strategy *for now*, a deferral of fixed definitions, a suspension of the temptation to offer easy answers. Shattering populism into a hundred diminished subtypes does not mean we must cease to speak of it entirely, but it does mean being a bit humbler and accepting that there might not be a single, universal populism at all. And it means recognizing above all that the reasons that we *must* speak of populism and the reasons that we *cannot* do so coherently are one and the same: because in a destabilized world, people will inevitably speak of “the people” in ways we cannot ignore but which will not always make perfect sense. We need not abandon a term the world imposes upon us, but then again, if populism is a latter-day Gordian knot that refuses all attempts at disentanglement, then we might just be better off cutting it.

¹⁵ Enrique Dussel, “Cinco tesis sobre el ‘populismo,’” <http://www.enriquedussel.com/txt/Populismo.5%20tesis.pdf>.

¹⁶ See Laura Grattan, *Populism’s Power: Radical Grassroots Democracy in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); and Benjamin L. McKean, “Toward an Inclusive Populism? On the Role of Race and Difference in Laclau’s Politics,” *Political Theory* 44, no. 6 (2016): 797–820.

¹⁷ Frank, “Populism Isn’t the Problem.”

¹⁸ Thea Riofrancos, “Democracy without the People,” *n+1*, February 6, 2017, <https://nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/democracy-without-the-people/>.

¹⁹ Joe Lowndes, “Populist Persuasions,” *The Baffler*, October 31, 2018, <https://thebaffler.com/latest/populist-persuasions-lowndes>. Chantal Mouffe has recently offered an argument for a left-wing populism in *For a Left Populism* (New York: Verso, 2018). For some limits of this approach, see Thea Riofrancos, “Populism without the People,” *n+1*, November 23, 2018, <https://nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/populism-without-the-people/>. On the possibility (or impossibility) of a left-wing anti-immigrant politics, see the recent flap around Angela Nagle’s “The Left Case against Open Borders,” *American Affairs*, November 2018, <https://americanaffairsjournal.org/2018/11/the-left-case-against-open-borders/>.

Author Information

George Ciccariello-Maher is a visiting scholar in the Decolonizing Humanities Project and Department of Modern Languages and Literatures at the College of William and Mary, having taught previously at Drexel University, San Quentin State Prison, and the Venezuelan School of Planning in Caracas. He is the coeditor of the Duke University Press book series *Radical Américas*, and author of three books: *We Created Chávez: A People's History of the Venezuelan Revolution* (Duke University Press, 2013); *Building the Commune: Radical Democracy in Venezuela* (Verso, 2016); and *Decolonizing Dialectics* (Duke University Press, 2017).

How to cite this article: Ciccariello-Maher, George. 2020. Cutting the Populist Knot. *Latin American Research Review* 55(2), pp. 368–378. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25222/larr:961>

Submitted: 28 May 2019

Accepted: 28 May 2019

Published: 23 June 2020

Copyright: © 2020 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

LARR

Latin American Research Review is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by the Latin American Studies Association.

OPEN ACCESS 