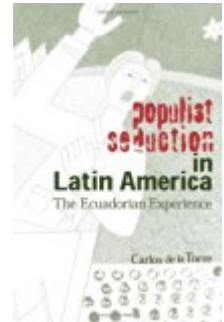


Carlos de la Torre. *Populist Seduction in Latin America: The Ecuadorian Experience.* Ohio University Research in International Studies. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000. xix + 185 pp. \$22.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-89680-210-0.



Reviewed by Roger P. Davis

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In 1982 Michael Conniff's essential compilation of research on Latin American populism charted its growth and development from the early phases of modernization in Latin America, to the "classical" populism of the 1930s and 40s, through the decline of populism in the 60s and 70s. The collection ended with Paul Drake's requiem:

Whatever the future holds, both the right and the left have condemned populism in Latin America. Indeed, their complaints against populists have changed little in fifty years. From the 1920s to the 1970s, conservatives have repeatedly lashed populists as demagogic agitators who spur excessive mass expectations, fuel inflation, frighten domestic and foreign capital, and engender political instability. Meanwhile, leftists have excoriated populists as charlatans who dupe the masses into supporting palliative reforms that subtly preserve the existing hierarchy of power and privilege. All the critics are correct that populism has failed.[1]

Six years later, in 1988, as a graduate student searching for a dissertation topic, Carlos de la

Torre attended a political rally in Ecuador and was surprised to find the dead very much alive. Attending mass meetings of the Guayaquil populist Abdala Bucaram, de la Torre recognized that reports of populism's demise were greatly exaggerated, and he became determined, "to understand the complexities of populist seductions and explore the tensions between liberal democracies and populism" (p. ix). He has succeeded admirably at his task.

For the past decade Carlos de la Torre, Associate Professor of Sociology at Drew University, has researched the meaning of Latin American populism, the creation of populist leaders, and the relationship of populism to democracy. This volume under review is a distillation of earlier articles and manuscripts, and more recent analysis and conclusions. The result is an excellent theoretical analysis of the definition and dynamics of Latin American populism.

The classical analysis of populism, as suggested above, defined it in negative terms and as a historical anachronism. The modernization of economies created dependent masses forced from

the security of agrarian estates into urban environments where mass anomie, or alienation left them susceptible to the demagogic leader. Seeking power, without principle, the populist caudillo manipulated the mass to gain the state and then recklessly undermined the economy of the nation, rewarding his followers and himself until the next necessary coup. De la Torre applies subaltern, and post-modern discourse analysis to outline the shortcoming of the classical view. Rejecting the proposition of lost masses duped by a charismatic "great man" directing the fate of the movement, de la Torre writes of the "social creation" of the populist leader, caught within an ongoing democratic current.

Social, political, economic and cultural factors coalesce to create the public space for the charismatic leader to occupy. However, these factors are not generated by an anomie of economic modernization or import substitution industrialization (ISI), nor are they a product of an emergent class consciousness. For de la Torre, the dynamic factor is the nature of Latin American democracy. Adhering to the theory that Latin American democracies are "delegative democracies," he notes that it is nearly universal that democratic elites use democratic practices as tools that exclude the common people from decision making and from the resources of the state. In Latin America the democratic norm does not tie the citizen to the state. Rather, a system of democratic clientalism bind the masses to political figures who are inclined to interpret an electoral victory as a conquest of the state, from which opponents are purged and rewards are distributed. As this flawed practice of democracy remains the Latin American norm, so the crucial catalyst for populism continues to the present.

The author draws his conclusions from the analysis of two instances of Ecuadorian populism—the rise to power of Jose Maria Velasco Ibarra in 1944, and of Abdala Bucaram in 1996. In a masterful discussion of the history of the rise to

power of Jose Maria Velasco Ibarra during "The Glorious Revolution" of 1944, de la Torre inventories the varied circumstances that combined to produce the need for the populist leader. Military setbacks, inflation, economic dislocation, and rivalries between the army and the elite police forces all contributed to the essential moment. The compelling factor, however, was the broad perception that all political parties were corrupt and the democratic system itself was consequently untrustworthy.

Velasco Ibarra takes advantage of this already existing frame of discourse to articulate what is apparent. The caudillo polarizes the struggle for democratic practice between the oligarchy and the people, who must turn to a trustworthy individual who is above the fray, outside of the normal political arena, who can not only end corruption but, more importantly, create a democracy that can fully integrate the mobilized people into citizenship and its rights. The language is appealing and effective but the practice of Velasco Ibarra in office does not transcend politics as usual. Velasco Ibarra can not construct the "new order" that he never truly envisioned or sought. And so while the populist falls, the popular urge for democratic inclusion continues.

Following the military regimes of the 1970s, the technocratic, modernizing elite of Ecuador overhauled the Ecuadorian political system to "rationalize" the party system to specifically avoid cycles of populism and military coups. For de la Torre, the "sobering reality" of the success of the Guayaquil caudillo Abdala Bucaram demonstrated once again that the impulse for inclusive democracy will not allow itself to be designated as the "other" in Ecuadorian democratic discourse. Accompanying the problems of urbanization, smuggling, regional animosity between Guayaquil and Quito, the attempt at political rationalization only accelerated a broad conclusion that the concerns of the pueblo (common people) were outside the understanding of the gente. (refined peo-

ple). Once again the place for a populist leader came into being, and once again the discourse promised inclusion. And, once again, the individual was not up to the task. Bucaram was ushered out of power after barely six months in office.

For de la Torre, populist leaders like Velasco Ibarra and Bucaram fail because they do not honor, they do not understand, the impulse for democratic inclusion which is the reason for their being. Neither the "Classical Populist", trumpeting propositions for redistributing the wealth nor the "Neopopulist," implementing neoliberal economics and world trade, ultimately confront the challenge of Latin American democracy. Turning to the authoritarian exercise of power, their fall is as inevitable as the next populist episode.

De la Torre characterizes Populism, old and new, by four traits: Manichaeian discourse, the socially constructed leader, the temporary coalition of fragmented elites and the popular sectors, and, most importantly, "an ambiguous relationship with democracy" (p. 141). For, despite its heritage of authoritarian practice, Populism continues because the impulse for democratic inclusion is an authentic characteristic of the common people of Latin America

Neither historian nor political scientist, Carlos de la Torre does not attempt to bring the research analysis of those disciplines to this work. The detailed historical studies of post classical events which may support the theoretical preference for democratic inclusion are left to others. More significantly, the acceptance of the democratic impulse is without sufficient discussion. For being such an essential element it could use a chapter of its own. Engaging the perspectives on the culture of Latin American democracy by the likes of Glen Dealy, [2] Frederick Pike, [3] and Bradford Burns [4] would be a welcome addition.

Nevertheless, *Populist Seduction in Latin America* is an excellent theoretical study of populism in Latin America and a significant contribution to Ecuadorian studies. It is significant to note

that as de la Torre was finishing his work, Michael Conniff edited a new compendium of scholarship on Latin American populism. Two observations from this work bear upon the volume under review. Speaking for himself and his collaborators, Conniff explains that, "we have steered clear of the argument that populists were simply irresponsible big spenders who used public monies to win mass support. Rather, we see populism basically as a political phenomenon." [5] He also acknowledges that as of the end of the twentieth century, "it may be premature to declare that populism is either moribund or on the rebound." [6] It seems that de la Torre may be on to something.

Notes

[1]. Paul W. Drake, "Conclusion: Requiem for Populism?" in Michael Conniff, ed., *Latin American Populism in Comparative Perspective* (Albuquerque, 1982).

[2]. *The Latin Americans* (Boulder, 1992); "The Tradition of Monastic Democracy in Latin America," in *Journal of the History of Ideas* 35:4 (1974).

[3]. *The United States and the Andean Republics* (Cambridge, 1977).

[4]. *Latin America: A Concise Interpretive History* (New Jersey, 1994).

[5]. *Populism in Latin America* (Tuscaloosa, 1999), p. 2.

[6]. Ibid. p. 13.

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