

Populism as an Expression of Political Communication to Understand What is Happening in Latin America [a Critical Review]

(English Version)

Populismo y comunicación política para entender qué sucede en América Latina [reseña crítica]

Populismo e comunicação política para entender o que está acontecendo na América Latina [revisão crítica]

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Critical Review of:

Mendieta Ramírez, A. and Estrada, J. L. (2021). *Comunicación Política y Populismo en América (Political Communication and Populism in Latin America)*. Tirant Humanidades, 195 pp.

Cross-sectional studies are important at any given time for the analysis of how media networks recreate its control mechanism via new narrative media. This media not only describes the current Latin American leaders, but also reports other examples of political discourse to attract the masses, such as those by: Mary Le Pen, in France; Víctor Orban, in Hungary; and Nayib Bukele, in El Salvador. These politicians act in favor of an ideological rhetoric based on the disputes between virtuous people and a corrupt elite. Although appealing to the emotion of the masses has been a long tradition by leaders or heads of state – whether democratic or totalitarian regimes – it is equally important or evident in current times, as is the case of some Latin

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American leaders. For instant, this practice remains in force as part of the political communication within certain democratic regimes in Latin America to gain sympathizers; and on the other hand, it fosters social polarization. This type of discourse created by Latin American presidents is analyzed in this book.

Mendieta and Estrada (2021) compile the historical context in the populist discourse analysis in all Latin American countries. They find the common thread around the polarization and dispute of the discourses in the media to ensure a resurgence of political representation through popular consultations when the population comments on any topic in social networks and the media. The disqualification of populist leaders regarding opposition parties and leaders is understood by the authors as a reflection. According to their interpretation, these discourses create a hegemonic narrative.

The authors infer that the problem lies in the way in which a narrative is created and expanded by the media from analysts or specialists to the majority of the population according to who is a populist and who is not. In other words, insofar as Latin American presidents adapt their speeches to the hegemonic model of the global social economy, they can be democratic and progressive leaders. However, those who proclaim their actions in favor of the poorest can be labeled as populist. This analysis is a relevant contribution of the book's authors.

At the end, the authors contribute significantly to the metric and analysis of Latin American populism, as they propose a methodology for this social phenomenon based on different variables that characterize the governments of the current Latin American leaders. They clarify that there is not only populism with a "left-wing ideology," but there is a need to talk about "right-wing populism." Donald Trump is an example. He promoted a populist nationalism, conservatism, and a distorted view of reality through *Fake News* and the indiscriminate use of social networks.

In addition, the book explains how to understand the main features of populist regimes, i.e., the way in which information and state apparatuses are used to promote ideas and concepts that legitimize the government. Furthermore, the authors reconsider the concept of "populism" as a "thin ideology," understood as a form of political control through the media.

The authors find that, precisely, the ideological mechanisms developed by populist leaders feed polarization, but also, as mentioned above, appeal to the people as the origin of the popular will and the sovereignty of the Nation. "The people rule..." is usually said by governments under this idealistic model; although they also construct a narrative of the establishment of democracy without mediation, where the people rule and generate popular mobilizations in favor of the rescue of natural resources, the nationalization of public goods, and

the development of a paternalistic vision of the State that shelters and benefits the popular masses. Perhaps the common denominator of populism in Latin America is the vindication of the rights of poor and marginalized people, as well as the neediest social class. Therefore, favorability is sought through public policy actions and governmental support in favor of the demand for laws and justice.

In the discussion of the concept “populism,” three variables that distinguish it are analyzed by the authors: a) “interests,” b) “identity,” and c) “values”; which constitute the way in which a change in democratic thinking is generated. According to Mendieta and Estrada (2021), the media operate in populism like a Facebook algorithm, that is, an artificial intelligence system that builds preferences and generates sympathies in users. All of this is contrary to the accountability and oversight of politicians promoted by liberalism. Therefore, an analysis of the ways in which populisms operate in Latin America is relevant and, of course, a commendable task that can be useful for politicians, but also for citizens.

Finally, this book raises the discussion about populism as a tool of political power and warns of the authoritarian characteristics that could derive from post-pandemic democratic regimes, which adopt a progressive – but also populist – vision in their discourse to gain followers and sympathizers.

It seems to me that a central aspect of the work is that beyond the fact that its authors reflect fears about the dangers of populist discourses, the objective of the study is to find the factors that define the construction of these discourses. In the last century the danger was communism, the Cold War. This was followed by the fight against terrorism, hunger, inequality, and poverty, among other issues to be addressed by the international community. Today, the latter continues to be the case, together with xenophobia, racism, and the migration of people from poor countries to the first world. In this sense, gimmicky (easy) speeches are made by candidates or leaders of governments magnified by social networks, which are difficult for citizens to discern during electoral campaigns. Additionally, I consider that these aforementioned factors should be further explored in future research to complete the ideas on the populism-political communication relationship. For all these reasons, this work is welcome and I hope it is read, discussed, and analyzed.



Reference

Mendieta Ramírez, A. and Estrada, J. L. (2021). *Comunicación Política y Populismo en América Latina*. Tirant Humanidades.