Outside of democracy, perhaps, no political concept has suffered greater abuse than populism. Frequently an epithet hurled at regimes or policies that analysts find disagreeable, the concept has been so thoroughly stretched that one wonders if it remains useful for the objective study of political science. Since the mid-1990s, political scientists have been generating a consensus that populism is fundamentally a political phenomenon. Nevertheless, until this point, these contributions were fragmented and solitary. This new edited volume represents a valuable addition to the literature by unifying these disparate voices into a coherent, singular work that applies the concept to a broad range of countries and historical periods.

Filled with most of the greatest luminaries on the topic, Latin American Populism outlines populism’s theoretical foundation before delving into the application of the concept to South American cases. The book further consolidates the consensus that populism is primarily a political strategy that can span different ideological and historical circumstances. According to the editors, the concept includes several important features. First, populism is a form of governance, discourse, and representation that fosters divisions between hegemonic and subaltern groups. In addition, leadership is charismatic and personalistic, with an affinity for establishing more direct linkages with constituents. Usually, these desires override the role of traditional institutions and existing rules. While
cases invariably demonstrate differences in mobilization strategies, institutional
tolerance, or economic policy, these common characteristics generally unite populists.

Given the historical nature of the phenomenon, *Latin American Populism* truly
excels at evaluating the evolution of populism over time. The diversity of cases
demonstrates the chameleonic nature of populism and gives the reader a far more
nuanced and detailed understanding of the complexity of each period and leader. As most
of the case studies illustrate, Latin America has witnessed three separate populist periods.
In the book, these periods are generally referred to as classical, neopopulist, and
contemporary radical.

Classical populists abounded in the period between 1930 and 1950, and are best
typified by leaders like Brazil’s Getúlio Vargas or Argentina’s Juan Perón. Classical
populists tended to promote economic policies that prioritized national development and
industry while fostering greater political inclusion of organized labor and women.
Neopopulists emerged in the 1990s during a period of heavy economic restructuring, with
presidents like Peru’s Alberto Fujimori or Argentina’s Carlos Menem as examples.
Unlike classical populists, neopopulists often hailed from the right wing and devoted
their energies to market liberalization and neoliberal reforms. While the political
components of populism persisted, neoliberal adherents demonstrated far less interest in
promoting greater political inclusion. The new brand of populism that has appeared
recently features leftist leaders who profess support for greater political inclusion and
economic redistribution. Prominent among these radical populists have been the late
Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and Ecuador’s Rafael Correa.
Although scholars are coalescing around the political attributes of populism, the volume includes one contributor who restricts populism to its classical variant. While accepting the populist label for Juan Perón, Hector Schamis adamantly argues that the right-wing Carlos Menem and the husband-wife duo of Néstor Kirchner and Cristina Fernández fail to fit the category. Linking populism with a particular structural and economic period, Schamis prefers the more nebulous term *postpopulism*.

In other chapters, several scholars struggle to apply the concept to their contemporary subjects. In particular, John Crabtree and Ana María Bejarano resist referring to Bolivia’s Evo Morales or Colombia’s Alvaro Uribe as populists. Although Morales is frequently lumped in with Correa or Chávez, Crabtree argues that Morales’s MAS party represents a quintessentially bottom-up strategy that nurtures accountability and delegation and resists more top-down populist strategies. Bejarano finds Uribe, in spite of professing to be an outsider, well within the traditional political dynamic in Colombia and too committed to technocratic, rationalized public policy. In both these cases, a crucial explanatory variable appears to be the relationship between the leader and his political party. As Kenneth Roberts notes, “rarely, if ever, is populist mobilization effectively channeled into or constrained by well-established parties” (39).

A fruitful new avenue on populism that is explored less in the current volume would establish the precise relationship between populist leaders and their political parties. Do any constraints exist, or have these parties become personalistic vehicles with little ability to constrain the ambitions of their leaders? Greater organizational analysis of political parties and their populist leaders will likely explain whether these parties persist and exert a long-term political impact after a change in leadership.
Containing seven distinct cases, *Latin American Populism* exclusively confines itself to South America. While claiming to represent Latin America, the exclusion of Central America, the Caribbean, and Mexico inhibits the creation of a fully regional conversation about populism. To what extent do Guatemala, the Dominican Republic, or Haiti exhibit signs of serial populism? Additionally, the cases of the Mexico’s López Obrador, Honduras’s Zelaya, or Nicaragua’s Ortega (particularly in his current iteration) represent an interesting vein of populism that is not fully explored in the current volume. Can institutionalized, programmatic parties be converted into individualistic populist vehicles? While the case of Colombia under Uribe offers some potential observations, an analysis of these other cases would offer important insights on the ability of political parties to constrain, or not, the populist impulses of their leaders.

A final criticism relates to the overall organization of the book. At the risk of stifling creativity, a more rigorous template would have enhanced the clarity and cohesiveness of the volume. The authors exhibit great leeway in considering the historical evolution of populism in their respective countries. Some authors are incredibly effective at creating a historical narrative that compares different periods of populism. Unfortunately, in other instances, authors confine themselves to contemporary events and do not really compare and contrast populist periods. Furthermore, some of the authors develop extensive historical narratives of their case studies that shirk a more rigorous application of the elements of populism to their subjects.

The volume does engage why populism re-emerges with such startling regularity. In almost every case (Ecuador and Peru represent potential exceptions), populism accompanies two types of crisis. One type revolves around issues of overall economic
performance or distribution; the other involves failing political institutions or weak representation. As crises fester and traditional leaders fail to resolve them, the conditions become propitious for populism. An interesting outlier in this regard is Colombia, where, Bejarano asserts, elements of populism emerged in response to escalating levels of violence perpetrated by paramilitaries, guerrilla groups, and drug cartels. Instead of traditional populist rhetorical strategies that pitted the “people” against an “elite,” Uribe developed a binary view of society that stressed a struggle between good moral Colombians and the violent, bad guerrillas and drug traffickers.

Most of the contributors in the volume appear concerned with the ultimate impact of populism on economic redistribution or performance and political democratization. How do populists perform in office? With regard to economic redistribution, Kurt Weyland is rightly pessimistic. While programs are frequently pro-poor, quickly enacted, and somewhat effective, the lack of institutionalization ultimately dooms most of them because they can be schizophrenic and are frequently scrapped after a change in power. In terms of the political ramifications of populism, the results are mixed. Many populist leaders successfully incorporate long-neglected sectors of society into the political system. Elections become more representative, and political elites are forced to respond more systematically to the concerns of voters. At the same time, a penchant for destroying existing institutions and centralizing political power promotes general instability.

Overall, de la Torre and Arnson’s new book represents a solid contribution to the study of Latin American politics and is useful reading for policymakers, researchers, and students of the region. While the impulse may have abated in certain countries, like Chile
or Brazil, populism remains a constant in many different nations, and this continual conceptual refinement encourages the enduring utility of the term. Moving toward a political understanding of populism, we will better understand this perpetually changing style of politics. We will be able to ask important research questions that explore the shifting relationships between leaders and institutions. We will also tackle the crucial dilemma for democratization that populism exposes: to what degree does greater political representation require altering extant political institutions? To what extent can democracy weather temporary institutional instability in the name of greater political inclusion or responsiveness? Classical populists imparted long-lasting historical legacies to their nations. We will have to wait to fully assess the current batch of populists, but their political legacies may ultimately overshadow the economic legacies of their neoliberal predecessors.

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