Latin American Populism. Between Horizontalism and Verticalism

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Abstract: Latin American populism is characterized by its heterogeneity. Considering its three major waves and other political discourses defined as populist, there is no doubt that it is a complex phenomenon in the region. This article aims to provide a political theory of populism and analytical tools to problematize discourse theory by characterizing Latin American populism considering the concepts of autonomy and hegemony. Thus, from a critical analysis of Ernesto Laclau's theory of populism, considering also plebeian republicanism, performative theory, and the post-hegemony approach, the article proposes an analytical axis between verticality and horizontality to characterize the three major waves and other examples of populist phenomena in the region. In this way, I recognize a radical democratic creative tension between, on the one side, local mobilizations and horizontal expansion of social demands, and, on the other side, populist discourses that emphasize verticality in the figure of the leader, as well as a variety of hybrid forms.
Keywords: Populism, Political logic, Latin America, Autonomy, Hegemony

ESP El Populismo latinoamericano. Entre el Horizontalismo y el Verticalismo

Resumen: El populismo latinoamericano se caracteriza por su heterogeneidad. Considerando sus tres grandes oleadas y otros discursos políticos definidos como populistas, no cabe duda de que se trata de un fenómeno complejo en la región. Este artículo tiene como objetivo ofrecer una teoría política del populismo y herramientas analíticas para problematizar la teoría del discurso al caracterizar el populismo latinoamericano desde los conceptos de autonomía y hegemonía. Así, a partir de un análisis crítico de la teoría del populismo de Ernesto Laclau, considerando también el republicanismo plebeyo, la teoría performativa y el enfoque posthegemónico, el artículo propone un eje analítico entre verticalismo y horizontalismo para caracterizar las tres grandes olas y otros ejemplos de fenómenos populistas en la región. De este modo, se reconoce una tensión creativa radical democrática entre, por un lado, las movilizaciones locales y la expansión horizontal de demandas sociales y, por otro, los discursos populistas que enfatizan la figura del líder, además de una variedad de formas híbridas.
Palabras clave: Populismo, lógica política, América Latina, autonomía, hegemonía.

Summary/Sumario: Genealogy of Ernesto Laclau's Political theory of Populism. Taking Autonomy Seriously: Complementing the Laclauian Scheme. Horizontalism and Verticalism in Latin American Populism. Conclusions. References.

Populism in Latin America has a long history. The three major waves (Mudde and Rovira, 2017; Burbano de Lara, 2019) or eras (Barr, 2017; Conniff, 2020) of populism in the region, as well as many other political leaders, parties, and movements defined as populist, put in evidence the heterogeneity of the phenomenon. The

first wave was between 1929 and 1960, with charismatic leaders in Argentina, Chile and Brazil, such as Juan Domingo Perón, Carlos Ibañez del Campo and Getulio Vargas. The second was carried out by leaders called neopopulists (because of the contingent articulation between neoliberalism and populism), such as Carlos Menem in Argentina or Alberto Fujimori in Peru during the 1990s. Finally, the third wave of populism in Latin America was led by leftist political processes such as the governments of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, and Evo Morales in Bolivia during the first decade of the 21st century.

Most of the studies on Latin American populism have followed theoretical perspectives centered on defining populism as a vertical political strategy (e.g. Weyland, 2001; Roberts, 2006; Barr, 2017) or a kind of semi-authoritarian regime (e.g. Germani, 1978; Urbinati, 2014). Recently, some studies have taken an ideational approach to populism in the region (e.g. Hawkins, 2010; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013; Rovira Kaltwasser, 2014), focusing on the Manichaean rhetoric of some political leaders and parties. Additionally, the institutionalist approach has focused on the democratic incorporation and the role of populist governments in the inclusionary turns in Latin America (Roberts, 2021), as well as other approaches centered on their relationship with the erosion of democratic institutions (Ruth, 2018).

For their part, the political-discursive perspective, informed by Ernesto Laclau's theoretical contributions, has been widely employed to analyze Latin American populism through various case studies and comparative analysis, including those of Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, and Venezuela, among others (e.g. Groppo, 2009; Stavrakakis *et al.*, 2016; Zicmann de Barros et al., 2023; Mazzolini, 2022; Biglieri, 2010; Acosta Olaya and Magrini, 2017). This approach has also been applied to the study of European left-wing populism (e.g. Mouffe, 2018; Katsambekis and Kioupkiolis, 2019; García, 2020) as well as right-wing populism (e.g. De Cleen and Stavrakakis, 2017; De Cleen, et al, 2021). However, the analytical focus on the interplay between vertical and horizontal dimensions of populism remains underexplored, particularly as a means of accounting for the heterogeneity of Latin America's three major populist waves, as well as other more "isolated" manifestations of populist discourse.

In this paper I follow the political-discursive approaches (Laclau, 2005, 2014b; De Cleen, 2019), who define populism as a discursive political logic that combines two central elements, the appeal to the people as a political subject and articulation of unsatisfied demands and anti-elitist components (Stavrakakis, 2017). In other words, populisms are those political discourses that conceptualize society as divided between the people and the elite, where the former is presented as the ultimate source of political legitimacy (Canovan, 2008).

Thus, unlike other political discourses, populism does not have a specific content or program but is a contingent discursive articulation, which is why there are left and right-wing populisms depending on the context in which they emerge. In sum, populism responds to a formalist logic in which some central elements, the antagonism between the people and the elite, make it possible to articulate a series of demands and meanings of other discourses.

This article makes a significant contribution to the study of populism by advancing a theoretical framework that centers on the tension between horizontality (autonomy) and verticality (hegemony), in discursive and organizational terms, offering a novel lens to analyze the heterogeneity of Latin American populism. Drawing on Ernesto Laclau's political-discursive approach, the article goes beyond traditional applications of his theory by integrating complementary perspectives such as plebeian republicanism, performative theory, and post-hegemonic approaches. This framework not only responds to the critiques of Laclau's work, such as the perceived underestimation of grassroots autonomy, but also expands the analytical scope to include hybrid forms of populism that combine vertical and horizontal logics. As illustrative examples, the article reinterprets the three major waves of populism in Latin America and includes new cases like *Octubrismo* in Chile, providing a comprehensive typology that accounts for varying degrees of verticalism and horizontalism. In doing so, it offers an innovative perspective on the democratic potentials and constraints of populist movements, parties, and leaders bridging historical and contemporary debates while setting the stage for comparative research on populism in other regions.

Additionally, this work holds significance for radical democratic theory and its interplay with populism. It highlights the democratic potentials and constraints of populist discourse. This is achieved by examining not only the vertical dimension, which pertains to the role of the charismatic leader in mobilizing social demands —a common feature in the Latin American context— but also the horizontal dimension, which encompasses bonds of solidarity within popular and social movements independency of the leaders' will. We argue that the radical democratic aspect of populism hinges on the dynamic interplay between vertical and horizontal dimensions. This balance between hegemonic and post-hegemonic logics manifests in various contingent expressions of populist discourse across Latin American history.

The manuscript is divided into five parts. First, I propose a genealogy of Ernesto Laclau's theory of populism consisting of four moments identified based on the main internal conceptual oppositions, and their evolution considering specific developments in Latin American populism. Second, considering the contributions of plebian republicanism, performative theory, and post-hegemony perspective, the article supplements Laclau's perspective considering the tension between the concepts of autonomy and hegemony. Third, I present illustrative cases from each of the three major populist waves in the region and more "isolated" cases to observe the interplay between the vertical and horizontal logics Finally, the article concludes that the interplay between horizontalism and verticalism, is central to grasping the heterogeneity of Latin American populism, and this approach can be expanded to the study of the populist radical right that recently emerged in the region.

Genealogy of Ernesto Laclau's Political theory of Populism

To propose a genealogy of Ernesto Laclau's theory of populism, it is necessary to identify different moments in his theory in connection with the development of Latin American populist waves. His theory has been generally understood as a homogeneous theoretical body that culminates with *On Populist Reason* (2005). However, these readings are biased due to the lack of English translations of other texts where Laclau theorizes populism, especially in the Latin American context. This section identifies four moments within the author's work, complementing the generally cited contributions with other less-studied texts. My analysis coincides with the perspective of Arthur Borriello and Anton Jäger (2020) on verticalism and horizontalism as the central antinomy of Ernesto Laclau's theory. Notwithstanding, the perspective of this article aims to engage with his theory from a Latin American perspective critically.

The first phase of Laclau's theory of populism, developed in *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory* (1978), responds to authors like Gino Germani (1978) who saw populism as a deviation from Latin America's modernization. Influenced by Gramsci and Althusser, Laclau conceptualized populism as a discursive political logic centered on the construction of "the people" through hegemonic articulation of diverse class and non-class elements in opposition to dominant discourses. He identifies three core features. First, populism does not refer to specific content but to a way of articulating popular-democratic practices; second, "the people" is central but an undefined category; and third, the antagonism between "the people" and the "bloc in power" is expressed through a unifying, oppositional discourse (Laclau, 1978, p. 201). Using Peronism as a key example, Laclau shows how populism organizes heterogeneous demands under a common project that challenges the prevailing ideology. While rooted in class struggle, this antagonism is not reducible to class identity but is instead overdetermined by a range of social experiences—reflecting the enduring influence of Althusser in Laclau's early work.

The second moment can be identified in the article published in a journal of the *United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean* (ECLAC/CEPAL), Populism *and Transformation of the Political Imaginary in Latin America* (Laclau, 1987). Building on "Hegemony and Socialist Strategy" (Laclau and Mouffe, 2014), Laclau incorporates the registers of the symbolic, the real, and the imaginary of Lacanian theory (see Stavrakakis, 2010). Laclau (1987, p. 27) proposes a definition of populism in which certain dominant social discourses (the symbolic) are dislocated in moments of crisis (the real) and reorganized by new discourses that "suture the hiatus resulting from the clash between the real and the symbolic" (the imaginary).

Thus, populism in Latin America would not have been a consequence of the emergence of new social sectors but rather the result of a "process of dislocation and fragmentation of social interests and identities, resulting largely from the peripheral insertion of Latin America in the world market" (Ibid., p. 28). In other words, populism would have fulfilled the role of suturing the dislocations, constituting itself as a political imaginary in the region. In his words,

> We call populist that form of rearticulation of dislocated identities that inscribes them in a discourse that divides the totality of the social into two antagonistic political fields. In other words, populism ve- rifies three distinctive operations: 1) the construction of a chain of equivalences between unsatisfied demands and threatened identities, which constitutes the "people", "those below", in a new synthetic and complex identity: 2) the construction of this new popular identity from a totalizing frontier that opposes it to "power", "domination", "corrupt oligarchies", etc. - the names vary according to the cases; 3) the politicization of all social antagonism, since the constitution of the people/power duality takes place in the political field. The tendential invasion by this of all collective identity tends, therefore, to erase the distinction between public and private spaces, between the state and civil society. (This is the dimension of mobilization with which populism has traditionally been associated.) (Laclau, 1987, p. 29).

This new definition does away with the Marxist approach and recognizes the construction of a people or "those from below" from the articulation of dislocated demands and identities, the construction of an antagonistic border between the people and "power bloc", and the politicization of this new antagonism within the political sphere, expressed between different political forces.

Secondly, for my analysis, the 1990s represent a complex decade in the work of Ernesto Laclau because none of his main work was centered on the political theory of populism. Maybe it was because in Argentina, with *Menemismo* and the second wave in Latin American populism, the strategy came to be articulated with neoliberal discourses and policies, producing tension in the national-popular tradition in the region and undermining populism as a radical democratic political logic.

During these years, Laclau (1990, p. 33-35) developed a theorization of the social and the political antinomy in the essay *New Reflections About the Revolution in our Times*. On the one side, the social logics correspond with the sedimentation and naturalization of practices, identities, and institutions. On the other side, the political logics correspond with the moments of reactivation of social relations, usually during and after a period of crisis, as well as the emergence of new antagonisms that question sedimented social practices. Thus, the distinction between the social and the political is central to the theorization of populism as part of a political logic that reactivates the sedimented social identities.

The third moment of Laclau's theory, developed in his most influential work *On Populist Reason* (2005), conceptualizes populism as a discursive political logic shaped by two main processes: the articulation of heterogeneous and unsatisfied social demands, and the crystallization of these demands around a unifying signifier, usually the name of the leader, that represents the whole community. This formulation introduces two interrelated logics, the logic of difference, where demands are addressed individually within institutional

frameworks, and the logic of equivalence, where these demands are linked into a chain due to the system's inability to address them separately. Populism emerges when this chain is formed and organized around an "empty signifier" that can be "aims, figures, or symbols" (Laclau, 2005, p. 117) producing a new popular identity that exceeds the sum of individual unsatisfied demands. In this way, a part of society (the least favored, those from below or plebs) comes to represent the whole political community (*populus*).

In a text published in Spanish in 2006 in the Latin American social science journal *Nueva Sociedad* (New Society), Laclau (2019) analyzed the so-called pink tide or progressive turn in the region. He proposes a clear distinction between institutional and populist logic. In this vein, "populism is a matter of degree, of the extent to which equivalential logic prevails over differential logic" (p. 383). Thus, during the pink tide, the progressive governments in Latin America, in the cases of the center-left governments in Chile and Uruguay, showed the prevalence of an institutional logic where social demands are articulated separately; in contrast, in the case of Venezuela the equivalent articulation of demands around the figure of Hugo Chavez was central. There are also more intermediate cases, such as *Kirchnerismo* in Argentina and the governments of Luis Ignacio Lula Da Silva in Brazil.

Additionally, Laclau (2019, p. 384-385) proposes another conceptual distinction between a horizontal moment of popular participation or protest and the moment when a charismatic leader vertically articulates this movement. This distinction was central in the last period of Laclau's work, recognizing that, in Latin America, it will only be possible to build viable States "if the vertical and horizontal moments of politics reach a certain kind of integration or balance" (Laclau, 2019, p. 384).

Lastly, the fourth moment can be identified in an article published the year of his death, in a text called *Logics of Political Construction and Popular Identities* (2014a), in an edited book about the dialogues between the left-wing of the global south and north, supported by the *Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales* (CLACSO). In this text, he incorporates some reflections from his book *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society* (2014b), mainly, on the one hand, the continuum between the logic of difference (metonymy) and the logic of equivalence (metaphor). On the other, a horizontal (autonomy) and vertical (hegemony) dimension to understand the political process. Referring to the social movements that emerged after the economic crisis of 2008, such as *Los Indignados* in Spain and Occupy Wall Street in the US, Laclau writes:

> These mobilizations tend to operate in a way that exceeds the channeling capacities of existing institutional frameworks. This is the horizontal dimension of "autonomy", and it corresponds exactly to what we have called "logics of equivalence" in our works. But our second thesis is that the horizontal dimension of autonomy would be incapable, if left to itself, of achieving long-term historical change, unless it is complemented by the vertical dimension of "hegemony," that is, by a radical transformation of the state. Autonomy, left to itself, leads, sooner or later, to the exhaustion and dispersion of protest movements. But hegemony, if not accompanied by mass action at the level of civil society, leads to bureaucratization and easy colonization by corporate power of the forces of the status quo. (2014a, p. 20).

Hence, autonomy and hegemony would refer to the way in which chains of equivalence are constructed and come to acquire greater coherence. In the first instance, a set of demands would be articulated as equivalent in the face of the inability of the political system to process them differently, but, in the second instance, these demands would acquire greater coherence and transformative potential through a vertical articulation.

In *Logics of Political Construction and Popular Identities,* Laclau incorporates the horizontal and vertical dimensions into his reflections on populism, especially Latin American populism, considering the place that charismatic leaders have within the discursive construction of the people. In his words,

> As we have seen, populism is constituted through the articulation of two principles: the horizontal expansion of democratic equivalences and their vertical articulation around a hegemonic signifier (which in most cases is the name of a leader). It is this second dimension that arouses the greatest mistrust: can this dependency on the leader not lead to transferring all decision-making capacity to him and, in this sense, to the establishment of an authoritarian regime? Let us say, first of all, that the leader, in order to be recognized as such and to play the agglutinating role of becoming a hegemonic signifier, must rely on an equivalential chain that precedes him and that he comes to complete and represent. Without a horizontal dimension, articulated to the vertical hegemonic dimension, there is no populism. (Laclau, 2014b, p. 258)

What is interesting about this argument of Laclau is that populism would always respond in the first instance to the existence of many unsatisfied demands articulated horizontally around feelings of solidarity. However, this horizontal articulation process is limited by its spontaneity and "lack of coherence". Therefore, a second logic would be necessary for specific hegemonic signifiers to represent or embody and give greater coherence to the set of demands articulated in the first instance. Hence, incorporating autonomy and hegemony as different conceptual categories allows a more precise definition of the formation process of popular identities and populist discourses.

In sum, it is possible to recognize an evolution in Ernesto Laclau's theory of populism from a neo-Marxist to a post-Marxist interpretation. The passage from one to the other implies taking priority away from the material conditions and the class determinism associated with them, prioritizing a discursive dimension in which a set of elements, demands, and identities are contingently articulated in discourses appealing to the people in opposition to the elites or dominant groups. The central tension identified in the author's theoretical body is between autonomy and hegemony.

Laclau's skepticism towards the transformative potential of populism's autonomy, and the spontaneous solidarity ties that enable it, reveals an underestimation of the self-driven processes of popular mobilization and their performative power. Often, these processes are a response to experiences of precariousness producing different forms of protest practices, deliberative dynamics, and territorial organization.

The need for the vertical dimension or connection with the political field proposed by Laclau calls into question the capacity for the autonomy of popular movements in the face of the unifying need around hegemonic signifiers. This tension has many times translated into a questioning of the Laclauian approach, accusing it of a Hobbesian monism that would tend to homogenize the people in the figure of the leader (Palacios, 2020, Vergara, 2020a; Stavrakakis, 2020). Therefore, this tension remains unresolved within Laclau's theoretical contributions.

Lastly, I agree with Seongcheol Kim (2022) on the vertical or hegemonic dimension of populism as a representational logic. The vertical dimension focuses on political representation as a logic of incarnation where an empty signifier (figure, symbol, or aims) can represent the totality of elements of the chain of equivalence or discourse in which it is a part (Laclau, 1997, 2005). In a nutshell, populism as hegemonic logic is overdetermined by, on the one side, a vertical dimension, understood as a logic of representation as incarnation, and, on the other side, a horizontal dimension, or a logic of autonomy. Consequently, in line with Kim (2022), I acknowledge that the vertical and horizontal dimensions of discursive logics, in terms of demand articulation, and organizational logics, focused on the role of charismatic leaders versus the autonomy of populist social movements, are intertwined.

Taking Autonomy Seriously: Complementing the Laclauian Scheme

The tension between autonomy and hegemony allows us to understand that populism would not only be associated with popular mobilization but also with the existence of hegemonic signifiers, which can be leaders or parties, that give "coherence" to that mobilization. In this way, building on Laclau's late distinction between horizontal autonomy and vertical hegemony, this article proposes a conceptual axis to analyze Latin American populisms. Rather than viewing populism as either vertical or horizontal, this perspective allows us to explore how different movements interplay or embody both logics simultaneously.

To analyze this tension, I follow the contributions of plebeian republicanism, performative theory, and the post-hegemonic approach, which have focused their analyses mainly on the moment of autonomy. The reflections regarding the plebeian condition of the people as a category and the understanding as the plural and heterogeneous encounter of bodies in the public space supplement the contributions of Ernesto Laclau. Thus, it is possible to question the priority that Laclau has tended to give to hegemonic signifiers, such as the figures of charismatic leaders, in the capacity to give unity and coherence to the people.

Firstly, it is relevant to conceptualize the notion of the people as plebeian political subjectivity. In the work of Laclau (2005), inspired by Jacques Rancière (1996), the people are recognized as a plebeian subject referred to as "those from below", "those without part", "the voiceless"; however, he had some difficulties in defining it properly. Following Camila Vergara (2020a, p. 16), populism is the mechanism through which the plebeian people become a political subject that electorally demands radical reforms. However, contrary to what Laclau (2005) proposed, where the plebeian people (*plebs*) seek to represent the entire political community (*Populus*), Vergara's approach, from a republican vision, insists that the plebeian people do not seek to represent the entire community, but instead seek to be recognized as a legitimate part (Vergara, 2020a, p. 11).

In this article, following the political-discursive perspective, I understand that populism focuses on how the people are discursively constructed in opposition to an elite, establishing a discursive frontier between above/below, where those above would be a minority group that threatens the interests of the majority, of those below, who lack power because of the actions of those above (De Cleen and Stavrakakis, 2017, p. 304).

Additionally, I consider the contribution of Judith Butler's (2019) performative theory of the people as a plural action of appearance in the public space of an assembly of bodies. In this way, politics appear between the bodies and would result from an unequally distributed precariousness. The appearance of the bodies reorganizes the space of appearance to challenge and question the existing forms of political legitimation and the demand for equality. However, the encounter of bodies does not necessarily have to be physical but can also be virtual through social networks or other platforms.

Therefore, Butler's argument fits uncomfortably in Laclau's premises since the people would respond not only to an equivalent articulation of demands but also to the encounter of plural bodies, which, only once they present themselves as "the people", can make demands. In her words,

> The invocation to "us" in the speech then alludes to a people whose needs, desires and demands are not yet fully known, and whose union is linked to a future that is yet to be lived. In reality, these practices of self-determination are not exactly the same as the acts of representation, and yet both are operating in the exercise of freedom of assembly, in which the appeal to "We the people" is in a certain way placed in the acts or in the words" (Butler, 2019, p. 171).

The quote shows the duality between the presentation of the self-determining people and the acts of representation of the people. In consequence, Butler's thesis is that the appearance of the people and its unity would not be subject to the existence of hegemonic signifiers that allow the articulation of unsatisfied demands; it would be the result of a plural and heterogeneous encounter of bodies that precede any possibility of social demands. Therefore, the people would not be the result only of a retroactive nomination

by a populist leader or party as Laclau (2005) arguments, but it would be the appearance of people that live experiences of precariousness and, due to them, breaks into the public space in a performative way through a plural and heterogeneous encounter of bodies.

Similarly, autonomy's relevance in some populist movements can be analyzed by considering what many of Laclau's followers called the post-hegemonic approach to the political. Following Benjamin Arditi (2007), not all political discourses focus on hegemonic political logics as their primary aim. There exist post-hegemonic logics in political movements such as, for example, May 1968 in France or the Argentinean mobilizations of 2001 after the economic crisis. Also, the Occupy Wall Street Movement in the United States in 2011 (Gerbaudo, 2017; van de Sande, 2020) or the Indignados in Spain (Gerbaudo, 2017) are examples in which there is not a vertical articulation or central coordination by a leader or party, but a horizontal "multitude" in terms of the political theorist Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000).

Likewise, Stavrakakis (2022, p. 417) agrees that populism cannot be reduced only to hegemonic politics that seek to incarnate the people as One because "no monism, holism, homogeneity or unity are ultimately attainable. It is only the registering of such irreducible impossibilities that introduces political pluralization". Therefore, instead of the vertical leader-centered strategy or the national-popular regimes, often used to define the concept in Latin America, there are "other" forms of populism "which can be as popular, antagonistic and as powerful a force of change as populism can be" (Kioupkiolis, 2019, p. 169).

What does it mean to take the moment of autonomy seriously? In short, all the theoretical perspectives explored in this section emphasize the autonomy logics or appearance and irruption of the (plebeian) people that respond to subjective experiences of precariousness, which can build on close ties of solidarity. Hence, the plebeian people have an autonomous functioning dynamic, independent of charismatic leaders, parties or movements that allow them to articulate their demands. Hence, the emergence of populist discourses does not respond only to charismatic leaders or social mobilization but also to the creative tension between both dimensions.

This discursive operation between two logics, between a nomination and an appearance of the people, is what defines the political logic of populism. On one hand, the autonomy of the popular subject operates in the registers of post-hegemonic logics of social and political movements. On the other hand, hegemonic political discourses seek to embody their demands on the figure of a charismatic leader or a well-defined political party. In the next section, I explore how the horizontal/vertical continuum works using illustrative cases of Latin American populism.

Horizontalism and Verticalism in Latin American Populism

Firstly, the first wave in the region, corresponds to the presidencies of Getulio Vargas in Brazil and Juan Domingo Peron in Argentina, as well, the second government of Carlos Ibañez del Campo in Chile and Lázaro Cárdenas in Mexico. Following Laclau (2014b, p. 262-264), this wave had three main characteristics. First, in economic terms, all these leaders promote a model based on import substitution industrialization. Second, there was the predominance of the vertical dimension by a representation as the incarnation of the people in the leaders, rather than horizontalism of the democratic demands, emphasizing a leader/mass relationship. In this dimension, the role of the leaders' connections with the labor unions and the formation of a corporatist state is particularly relevant. Third, all these political discourses could articulate very heterogeneous ideological elements from the radical left to the radical right, such as the influence and connections with corporatist and fascist political ideas (Finchelstein, 2018) and socialism, among others.

A more "isolated" and hybrid case from the first wave of Latin American populism is the Peruvian Aprista Party (APRA), founded by Raúl Haya de la Torre as an anti-imperialist movement. APRA embodied a complex interplay between verticalism and horizontalism: while it was strongly centered on the figure of the leader, it also developed a highly organized partisan structure that substituted civil society organizations by establishing its own local institutions, such as neighborhood and sports clubs, thereby fostering a sense of collective identity beyond class lines (Laclau, 1987; Roberts, 2006). This model reflected a unique form of vertical control combined with a mediated form of grassroots engagement. The party reached electoral success with Alan García's election in 1985, consolidating its populist configuration. However, the economic failure of García's government triggered a process of decline and transformation. In its later stage, APRA shifted toward neoliberalism, progressively abandoning its populist discourse, and evolving into a more pragmatic, traditional party. Despite this trajectory, during its formative years, APRA was able to incorporate and politically articulate the demands of excluded sectors of society.

Secondly, the second wave of Latin American populism, often referred to as neopopulism, emerged through the articulation between populist discourse and neoliberal policy frameworks in the presidencies of Carlos Menem (Argentina), Alberto Fujimori (Peru), and Carlos Collor de Mello (Brazil) (Weyland, 1996). This wave represents one of the most vertically oriented expressions of populism, characterized by a strong centralization of power and the weakening of horizontal structures such as social movements and civil society organizations. Neopopulist leaders actively curtailed citizen participation and reduced the autonomy of grassroots actors, substituting it with plebiscitarian, clientelist, and targeted policies aimed at consolidating executive authority and limiting political competition. For instance, *Menemismo* demonstrated how populist discourse could be reconfigured around traditional Peronist imaginaries while simultaneously dismantling the corporatist and protectionist structures of classic Peronism (Fair, 2016). This shift entailed a move from a vertical-corporatist alliance with labor unions to a vertical-clientelist logic that marginalized autonomous worker representation (Levitsky, 2003). Similarly, Fujimorismo presented an ambiguous relationship with

social movements, particularly women's and indigenous groups, adopting a clientelist strategy that co-opted followers into the state apparatus rather than preserving their organizational autonomy (Rousseau, 2006). In all these cases, vertical leadership supplanted horizontal dynamics, weakening the participatory base of populist politics and contributing to long-term disillusionment among civil society.

Thirdly, the wave of the so-called Bolivarianism (de la Torre, 2017) or the populist governments of the "pink tide". About these presidencies, Laclau (2014b) argues that even when there was a vertical tendency in *Chavismo* in Venezuela, the Citizen Revolution in Ecuador, and the MAS in Bolivia, there was, in the first instance, greater respect for the horizontal dimension. In these cases, it is relevant the role of constitutional change processes and the political, economic, and social inclusion of several historically excluded sectors, such as indigenous, women, workers, among others (Roberts, 2021). However, these governments also had an ambiguous relationship with liberal democracy (Weyland et al., 2010) and the autonomy of social demands (Riofrancos, 2020), again proving the complex relationship between verticalism and horizontalism.

The paradigmatic case of the third wave of Latin American populism is *Chavismo* in Venezuela, which exemplifies a predominantly vertical configuration. As Stavrakakis *et al.* (2016) describe, *Chavismo* can be understood as a caesaro-plebeian populism, where diverse grassroots and social movements—many of which predated Chávez's rise—were ultimately articulated through his charismatic leadership, particularly after the 1989 Caracazo uprising. While these movements, including peasant and urban poor sectors, initially operated with varying degrees of autonomy, their demands were increasingly unified through Chávez's populist discourse, which emphasized the people, protagonistic democracy, anti-elitism, and anti-imperialism. Institutions such as the Circulos Bolivarianos and the Consejos Comunales further institutionalized this articulation (Stavrakakis *et al.*, 2016, p. 66-67). Over time, the vertical logic of hegemony became more dominant, especially after Chávez's death in 2013 and the consolidation of power under his less charismatic successor, Nicolás Maduro. This trajectory reflects how initially horizontal logics can be progressively subordinated to vertical ones.

Similarly, *Correísmo* and the decade-long Citizen Revolution in Ecuador offer another case of predominantly vertical populism, centered on the charismatic leadership of economist and former minister Rafael Correa, who also incorporated technocratic elements into his governance style. Correa played a key role in articulating diverse social movements and political identities, particularly in the wake of a deep representational crisis, leading to institutional reforms such as the 2008 Constitution and shifts in economic policy (de la Torre, 2013; Mazzolini, 2022). While this top-down model initially allowed for the integration of popular demands, the growing centralization of power and a confrontational discourse toward economic elites and the media generated tensions between populist mobilization and liberal-democratic norms, eventually contributing to the disaffection of former supporters (de la Torre, 2017; Mazzolini, 2022). Moreover, the relationship with horizontal actors such as indigenous movements—especially the Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador (CONAIE)—was marked by socio-environmental conflicts and a lack of sustained dialogue, reflecting the difficulties of reconciling vertical authority with autonomous demands from below (Riofrancos, 2020). *Correísmo* thus illustrates both the possibilities and the limits of vertical populist articulation when not adequately balanced with horizontal forms of participation.

The case of the presidency of Evo Morales, and the political party *Movimiento al Socialismo* (MAS) in Bolivia, shows a complex combination of verticalism and horizontalism in the construction of hegemony. Following Santiago Anria (2013), the Bolivian MAS represented a hybrid organization that articulated an autonomous, horizontal, and bottom-up organization of indigenous and rural sectors with a more vertical and representational top-down party in the urban areas. This hybrid dimension permits much more resilience to broad complex situations, such as the interruption of democracy and the MAS's governments between 2019-2020 that happened after the political crisis in Bolivia with Evo Morales's presidency after three periods. However, the creative tension of verticalism and horizontalism permitted a new MAS government led by Morales's former ministry of finance, Luis Arce. It is relevant to mention that currently, the MAS is experiencing many tensions between party leaders and ministers, as well as the presence of Morales as the current president of the party.

In Argentina, the rise of Néstor Kirchner as a new Peronist leader after the early 2000s crisis reflected a broader regional pattern of inclusive populism, characterized by the articulation of diverse social demands into a hegemonic political project (Biglieri, 2010). During this period, the Partido Justicialista rebuilt ties with civil society, particularly through grassroots movements such as the piqueteros (Casullo and Freidenberg, 2017), demonstrating a dynamic interaction between vertical leadership and horizontal mobilization. After Néstor's death, Cristina Fernández assumed leadership, reinforcing the party's symbolic lineage. Under her influence, new forms of political organization emerged, most notably the youth movement La Cámpora, led by their son Máximo Kirchner, which played a central role in sustaining mass mobilizations and shaping the party's discourse. Although Alberto Fernández was later nominated as the presidential candidate in 2019 with Cristina as his vice president, what initially appeared as a gesture of unity ultimately revealed growing tensions within the movement and Cristina Fernández's leadership. This evolution illustrates how *Kirchnerismo* oscillated between vertical concentration of power and horizontal grassroots engagement, and how unresolved tensions between these logics can generate internal crises.

Finally, it is also important to consider a recent example of a populist social movement characterized primarily by horizontal dynamics is the 2019 Chilean popular revolt, known as *Octubrismo*. Sparked by a rise in public transport fares, the mobilization quickly articulated a wide range of unsatisfied social demands through discourses centered on the people and the signifier "dignity," in opposition to the political and economic elite embodied by former president Sebastián Piñera (Bellolio, 2022). Notably, the movement

lacked a charismatic leader or a unifying political party; instead, it relied on decentralized expressions such as slogans, symbols, and empty signifiers like "Chile despertó" to generate identification among participants (Aguilera Hunt, 2021). The prevailing logic was that of autonomy or post-hegemony, rather than representation through vertical structures. Attempts to organize this energy through local assemblies or *cabildos* (Vergara, 2020b) and later through institutional channels, such as the Constitutional Convention or political platforms like *La Lista del Pueblo*, failed to consolidate a stable vertical articulation (Hamamé *et al.*, 2025). Even the progressive government of Gabriel Boric was unable to fully capture or channel the heterogeneous demands of *Octubrismo*. As such, this case exemplifies a plebeian populism rooted in horizontal mobilization, where vertical articulation remained weak or fragmented despite repeated attempts to institutionalize it.

In sum, the political-discursive approach permits not only to identify the antagonism between the common people and the elites in different socio-political and temporal contexts and situating political discourses between the institutionalism (difference)/populism (equivalence) axis, but also to identify variations and hybridization between verticalism or a hegemonic logic of incarnation and horizontalism or the logic of autonomy in a discursive and organizational way. Thus, it is possible to grasp the variety and heterogenous populist discourses that emerged in the region, which goes further than the strategic approach centered on the vertical relationship between the leader and the masses. It also recognizes a horizontal dimension in populist phenomena and many hybrids in between.

Conclusions

To grasp the heterogeneity of Latin American political experience, this article builds on Ernesto Laclau's political-discursive approach by placing the focus on the tension between autonomy and hegemony. In this perspective, I identify an underestimation of the autonomy logic of populism in the work of Laclau and supplement his approach with the role given to autonomy by plebeian republicanism, performative theory, as well as posthegemony. Lastly, the article illustrates the tension between autonomy and hegemony using cases of Latin American populism, considering the interplay of autonomy and hegemony as a radical democratic creative tension.

In this vein, the tension between autonomy and hegemony can be identified, for example, in the naming of populist discourses referring to a leader (Peronismo, Chavismo, Menemismo, etc.), parties (e. g., Arpismo) or social movements (e. g., Octubrismo), as well as in the different degrees of centralized or non-centralized forms of organization on the variety of demands articulated. Thus, following this approach, the study of the creative tension between horizontalism and verticalism in populist discourses can be further developed through additional case studies or comparative research.

Therefore, the main contribution of this article lies in enriching the Laclauian approach to populism from a Latin American perspective, which is usually centered on the logic of difference and the logic of equivalence to characterize a phenomenon as populist or not. We focus instead on the different degrees of verticalism or horizontalism in how populist movements, parties, and leaders articulate their discourse and the unsatisfied demands of different social sectors. Thus, the creative tension between verticalism and horizontalism can help to characterize and compare the different waves of populism in Latin America. Additionally, this creative tension shows the possibilities and limitations of the democratic role of populism, which is especially relevant because of the emergence of the populist radical right in the region with many differences and similarities, especially with the second wave of Latin American populism, to the cases of populism in the region analyzed in this article.

In sum, the analytical framework proposed in this article not only enhances our understanding of Latin American populism but also holds significant potential for the study of emerging populist phenomena in diverse contexts. For instance, the rise of transnational populist movements, which articulate grievances across borders while challenging traditional state-centric frameworks, can be analyzed through the lens of the creative tension between horizontal and vertical logics of articulation. Similarly, the recent surge of right-wing populism in Latin America, such as the cases of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil or José Antonio Kast in Chile, demonstrates hybrid dynamics of autonomy and hegemony that merit closer scrutiny. These movements can also blend grassroots mobilizations with highly centralized leadership structures, challenging established assumptions about the democratic or authoritarian character of populism. By applying the horizontal-vertical axis, future research can explore the heterogeneity of these phenomena, offering a nuanced understanding of how populist discourses and practices evolve in response to changing political, social, and economic conditions.

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