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Latin American Populism in the Age of Globalization: Views from History and Nature

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Introduction

Mexico's President Felipe Calderón began his first European tour with an affirmation to Spanish newspapers *La Vanguardia* and *ABC* that Mexico offers secure guarantees to potential investors against populism ["México es un seguro contra populismos"]. President Calderón took pains to distance his government from recent events in "Venezuela, Bolivia and other countries, where expropriations have occurred that some investors may consider an affront to their property and assets [patrimonio]." Calderón went on to assure his interlocutors that his administration seeks to expand its economic and cultural relations with the European Union through Mexico's historical ties to Spain. (*La Jornada, Mexico, 28 January 2007*)

Why should populism pose a problem for advancing business ties between Latin America, Europe and North America? What are the implications of populism in President Calderón's statements? He seems to allude to expropriation or nationalization of vital resources and industries as well as an emphasis on internal political and economic developments that may appear in opposition to the internationalization of investments and trade. National and international presses often portray populism in these terms,

underscoring the drama of political pronouncements and policy changes that pose uneasy alternatives between national sovereignty and globalization of the economy.

My presentation today chooses a different perspective on populism, seeking its cultural roots, history, and social bases. Let us agree for today's discussion on four common foundations of populism:

- Mass electoral politics and universal suffrage
- Appeal to social issues and economic well being
- Political rhetoric linked to the sovereignty of the nation-state
- National control of natural resources and social demands for distribution of the revenues they generate

The central question I want to explore concerns the conditions that give rise to populism, which requires a social pact of reciprocity and accountability in Latin American political developments.

The Roots and Content of Populism

What are the bases of support for political parties and coalitions that bring new actors and platforms to national prominence? Stated another way, behind the faces of populist electoral candidates and politicians, where are the voices of the people whose votes legitimate their power? Social movements over the last half-century bring to our attention recurring themes and strategies that call for analysis and careful consideration:

Bases: the social components of class-based movements; indigenous movements, culture, and the politics of identity

Methods: politics in the street with marches and manifestations of mass support

Issues: new formulations of the rights and obligations of citizenship

In what follows, I shall summarize some of the salient issues for each of these themes, which often overlap in specific historical and contemporary events.

Class-based movements follow three decades of market-driven neo-liberal policies, promoted and enforced by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund and often associated with debt-reduction plans. “Structural readjustment” in Latin America is linked in the minds of many of its citizens with policy changes that have reduced or eliminated subsidies for peasant farmers and poor urban consumers on basic foodstuffs, dismantled or privatized social services in countries like Mexico and Chile, removed wage supports, and thwarted or stalled the consolidation of state-supported social networks in Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, and Central America. NAFTA has played an important role in this recent history for Mexico, and CAFTA appears to repeat the pattern for Central America.

A recent example of these developments brings us to the tortilla, a basic food item and symbol of Mexico’s material culture and national identity. Soaring prices for maize have caused the price of tortillas to rise in recent weeks, leading to popular demands for a return either to subsidies for corn production or to price controls in the market. A recent march of several hundred thousand participants in Mexico City publicized widespread anger over rising prices for tortillas, gasoline, and other basic foodstuffs. The marked increase in the cost of tortillas for direct consumers, leading to hardship for middle- and lower class families, has been linked to sharp increases in the price of corn on the world market sparked by the demand for ethanol as well as to the role of intermediaries and higher fuel and electricity costs in Mexico. The Calderón administration has responded by expediting the importation of white corn (mainly from the U.S.) and proposing subsidies to stimulate

higher production in Mexico. At the present time, over one-fourth of the corn consumed in Mexico comes from imported grain, and higher prices on the world market translate into significant public expenditures for this basic subsistence crop [LADB *SourceMex* 24/I/07]. President Calderón indicated in his remarks published in the Spanish press that his administration seeks to expand foreign investment in Mexico *and* protect employment. If he is to accomplish both of these objectives, his cabinet secretaries and agencies must respond to pressing immediate problems for the production, distribution, and consumption of food -- the most basic of popular needs.

Rising prices for corn, which drive up the consumer costs for basic food sources like tortillas, have led to public protest in the Central American countries of Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras as well. Scarcities in the national market are linked to expanding opportunities for the exportation of corn motivated by the demand for ethanol in the U.S. and other foreign markets [LADB *NotiCen* 24/I/07].

President Rafael Correa of Ecuador placed similar policy concerns at the forefront of his recent inaugural address January 15, 2007. President Correa pledged an “economic revolution” that would prioritize meeting the needs of the poor over servicing Ecuador’s international debt. Situating Ecuador’s international obligations in the context of his country’s economy, Correa stipulated that Ecuador’s annual debt service of US\$2 billion represents 7% of his country’s gross domestic product, an amount he considers too high to pay. His administration will negotiate with Wall Street firms that hold billions of dollars of Ecuadorian debt for new repayment terms and re-examine which parts of the debt are legitimate. President Correa rejected a free-trade pact with the U.S., because he

believed it would hurt the economy of small peasant producers in Ecuador. Alternatively, he called for greater integration of “our America,” by implication the countries and peoples of Latin America south of the Rio Grande. (LADB *NotiSur* 8/XII/06, 26/I/07)

In rhetoric, policy formation, and internal political pressures, these examples illustrate class-based movements that oblige elected leaders to address fundamental social and economic issues.

Indigenous movements, regionally based and organized around perceived ethnic identities, are challenging the constitutional structures of the nation-state. They call into question nineteenth-century traditions of electoral politics based on constitutional principles for a limited electorate of property-holding and literate males. In several key nations, among them Mexico and Bolivia, current populist movements challenge modern configurations of nationalism that espouse universal principles of citizenship. During the early 20th Century social revolutions and massive organized labor confederations forced economic and social elites to open the political process to numerous sectors of urban and rural workers, women, and indigenous communities that had been disenfranchised and effectively excluded from the public sphere. Indigenous activists and communities have turned to the power of the ballot, to mass demonstrations, and – in some instances – to armed revolt to press their demands on national governments and the international community. Indigenous demands for political recognition, territorial rights to basic resources of woodlands, floodplains, and water, and for cultural dignity, have responded to globalization in two related ways: they have protested the results of global trade that threaten their own economies at the same time that they have used the technologies of global communication to reach an international audience.

Recent political movements that claim the mantle of indigenous actors and traditions include Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, based in Chiapas, Mexico; the Shuar and other Amazonian tribal confederations; the Andean political movements of Quichua, Quechua and Aymara-speaking peoples; and numerous Mayan indigenous groups of Guatemala. We do not often think of a large Indian population in Chile, but recent scholarship has shown pointedly and poignantly that Mapuche communities were the target of governmental repression during the Pinochet dictatorship [Mallon, *Courage Tastes of Blood*, 2005]. Some of these political mobilizations have helped to elect national leaders, such as Evo Morales in Bolivia and Rafael Correa in Ecuador. In other cases, notably the Zapatistas of Chiapas and the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca (APPO), most recently in the news, indigenous movements are raising claims of territorial and political autonomy that challenge the integrity of the nation-state as a sovereign unit. The significance of indigenous movements adds a new dimension to mass electoral politics and to nationalist claims for the control of natural resources. Most forcefully, indigenous movements revisit constitutional issues of citizenship, a theme I shall develop further below.

Social movements, both class-based and indigenous, have used similar methods to gain power, generating the noisy dynamic of populism through politics in the street. Marches, manifestations, and roadblocks at times seem theatrical and repetitive, but the rhetoric and the substance of popular demands have developed new political content in important ways: the political discourse of inclusion has shifted to autonomy, mobilized groups have demanded separate territorial and political spaces within the nation-state and political demands emphasize languages, customs, and cultural distinctiveness. Education remains a high priority, but it is not enough to build schools and pay teachers' salaries,

because local communities are demanding control over the content and language of education. In certain locales in Chiapas, for example, the Zapatistas have led autonomous communities in the formation of independent school systems, which serve and reflect the linguistic foundation of Tzotzil peasant commoners, their economy, and their cultural traditions. Similarly, the APPO civil movement of Oaxaca is centered in issues of education and led by dissident teachers' unions that protest the privatization of primary and secondary education and defend nascent bilingual schools for Zapotec and Mixtec-speaking communities.

The challenge we face is how to comprehend the different meanings of *citizenship* in this new political environment. Globalization has complicated national politics through the power of NGOs with external funding and international linkages, the transnational movements of immigrants, internal indigenous movements, and the political influence of emigrant populations. We are well aware of the economic and political weight that *paisanos*, emigrant communities of Mexicans living abroad, mainly in the U.S., exerted during the last two presidential elections in Mexico. Mexican federal elections now recognize the absentee ballot and, in 2006, the Instituto Federal Electoral invested impressively to recruit voters among Mexican citizens outside the country. Similarly, it is noteworthy that President Correa of Ecuador has called for a national referendum and a Constituent Assembly of elected delegates, in which three (of a total of 89) would represent Ecuadorians living abroad. Brazil has also begun to register voters among its citizens living outside the country. Equally worthy of note is that recent presidential inaugurations in Peru, Bolivia, and Ecuador have included separate indigenous ceremonies, recognizing the demographic and cultural importance of Indian peoples in these countries.

Citizenship in historical perspective

These same questions of local, regional, and cultural claims to distinctiveness and political recognition have a deep history in the formation of Latin American nation-states, with strong roots in colonial institutions and early 19th-century constitutional developments. Spain's empire in the Americas created a voluminous and impressive body of legislative and judicial rulings, codified as *derecho indiano*, which dealt specifically with the governance of the colonies and their mixed populations. Church and Crown worked as parallel institutions to rationalize the highly varied and changing composition of colonial societies, setting legal definitions for the "republics" of Indians and Spaniards. Yet, the boundaries between these juridical entities were porous and complicated among European Spaniards, Spanish-American colonists, African slaves and freed persons, Indians living in pueblos and those living among Spaniards, and many different types of racial and cultural mixtures. All of these sectors and groups were subjects of the monarch of Spain, but with decidedly unequal privileges and obligations.

Research in colonial archives helps us understand a number of important principles and practices of governance, relating to community institutions, claims to protection and redress, and the linkages between the religious and political dimensions of authority. The *cabildo*, or town council, was the basic feature of local government for both Spanish-American citizen-residents (*vecinos*) and Indian communities. A deeply rooted medieval institution, the cabildo was transplanted to the New World, where it took on new attributes and functions, melding Iberian and indigenous cultural traditions concerning power, justice, and the organization of work. Cabildo officials were elected, although their nomination

often resembled an appointment and conformed to long-standing privileges of nobility. Among indigenous peoples, the designation of *cacique*, originating in the Caribbean and generalized throughout the Americas by Spanish authorities, signified kin-based hereditary or elective governing rights over local or provincial social and ethnic groups. Recent histories of Yucatecan Mayan communities, Nahuatl councils of central Mexico, the Andean lines of nobility, and the mission cabildos of frontier provinces in northern Mexico and South America, confirm the common principles of cacique-led chiefdoms and village councils within a rich variety of specific local applications.

Spanish-American elites, for their part, centered their claims to property, labor, and commercial licenses in their political representation on the councils of colonial towns and cities. Detailed studies of cabildo records in Puebla, Mexico, and Cali, Colombia, for example, reveal the tangled webs of notarial procedures, lifetime elections combined with rotating service on the councils, and intricate familial networks. Colonial *vecinos* anchored their sense of place in the locality, and their notions of political representation originated in the cabildo. It is significant that Hernán Cortés's first act upon landing on the southeastern shores of Mexico was to establish the Villa and Cabildo of Vera Cruz, thus legitimating his unauthorized expedition of conquest that, three years later, would culminate in the fall of Tenochtitlan. Over the following three centuries, as the viceroyalties of New Spain and Peru became consolidated, royal bureaucracies confronted a counter-weight of local interests and claims to the king's patronage in the colonial cabildos.

These principles and customary practices provided continuity over the long and contentious transition from colonial rule to national sovereignty during the first half of the

nineteenth century in Latin America. Amidst the enormous contradictions of colonialism -- most notably the widespread practices of human bondage and forced labor, unequal taxation according to social rank and ethnic designation -- the notions of fealty to God and King and the expectation of reciprocity between rulers and ruled established the foundation for a kind of political constitution that melded local custom with codified law.

The monarchical crisis occasioned in Spain with the Napoleonic invasion of 1807 and the forced exile of King Fernando VII, ushered in the extraordinary session of the Cortes, the Spanish parliament, in the coastal city of Cádiz, for the first time with deputies from the American colonies. The attempts to establish a constitutional monarchy, first in 1812 and again in 1820, tempered the European Enlightenment and transmitted its content to the Spanish-American world. Even as British invasions and the near-bankruptcy of the Spanish Bourbon dynasty sparked rebellions in the Spanish colonies, beginning in outlying provinces like Venezuela and Argentina, and spreading to the centers of viceregal power, Spanish-American claims to self-governance and, later, to full independence, took root in extraordinary town councils brought together for this purpose.

During the wars for independence and in the years immediately following armed combat, several provincial assemblies composed constitutions in an effort to define the nation-state they aspired to create. Notable examples include the Mexican Constitution of Chilpancingo of 1814 and the Tucumán Assembly of 1816. Although these progressive documents did not endure, they set important precedents for abolishing slavery, freeing Indians from tribute, and dismantling the hierarchy of racial and ethnic categories that had institutionalized social inequalities. To be sure, these experiments in nation-building were

rife with internal contradictions, rival factions, and regional disputes, but they shaped common debates on the different applications of the citizen and the national subject that developed over the nineteenth century in Latin America. Paramount in these debates were the following questions: Are Indians fully citizens with political rights? How can communities with their councils be reconciled with provincial legislatures and municipal government? What form will elections take, who may vote and be elected to office? What are the boundaries and linkages between local communities and the state?

My own research on two mission provinces of northwestern Mexico and eastern Bolivia has shown the remarkable durability of the Indian cabildo at the same time that Hispanic elites consolidated their power around provincial, or state, legislatures. In Northwest Mexico, several indigenous groups – especially the Yaquis, Pimas, and Opatas – blended the religious ceremonies of village saints days with the annual recognition of elected cabildo officers. In repeated altercations with Mexican governors and elites over land, water, and the integrity of local government, these indigenous groups – through their governors and captains – defended the village councils that had first taken root in the colonial missions [Radding, *Landscapes of Power and Identity*, 2005].

In the lowland province of Chiquitos, in eastern Bolivia, where different tribal groups constituted a majority of the population until the mid-twentieth century, the indigenous cabildos had a visible role in the performance of electoral politics during the early Bolivian republic. Ten mission towns of Chiquitos constituted *cantons* (cantons) and these held local elections in order to select electors who would, in turn, choose the deputies to the national congress. In this system of indirect elections, Indian caciques were recorded

as voting and holding office in the cantons, or pueblos. Although their names did not reappear at the district or national levels, their traditional role in the cabildo gave legitimacy to the electoral process. Furthermore, in the pueblos, Indian officers continued to govern in limited ways for the organization of labor, the distribution of produce, religious ceremonies, and the representation of their communities to higher authorities. These traditions, although muted and changed over time, have taken on new life and efficacy over the last half century, as Chiquitano communities reclaim land and political recognition – at times following and at times leading institutional changes at the national level [Radding, *Landscapes*, 2005].

These two cases illustrate the ways in which local expressions of community and polity claim representation in the nation-state at the same time that they challenge the modern concept of *the nation*. Their meaning is articulated in the amendment of national constitutions over the last decade in Ecuador and Bolivia, to insist on “pluri-ethnic” and “multicultural” societies, principles that alter time-honored notions of universal and anonymous citizenship.

The Roots of Populism in Nature and the Environment

Populist demands are growing in many parts of Latin America for control and public accountability in the disposition and sale of natural resources. Are water, forests, minerals, and fuel commodities to be sold to foreign interests or collective patrimony to be used for the common good? Environmental concerns go beyond access to resources to include widely varying issues such as the disposal of industrial and urban wastes, the preservation of sacred sites, and access to game and fish. The demands for land reform that spurred agrarian movements in the early and mid-twentieth century have become more complex, involving a

range of natural and processed resources. Contentious issues include the supply of planting seed and the controversial use of genetically modified grains, labor and the use of pesticides, and the quantity and quality of water available to peasant farmers. Furthermore, the contenders are not clearly or predictably divided between social classes or between Indian and non-Indian populations. Despite internal divisions, forceful popular movements have coalesced around the privatization of urban water distribution systems and electricity, logging and management of rainforests and fisheries, and – as is well known in Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia – the processing and distribution of petroleum and natural gas.

Perhaps less well known are local and regional issues that develop over the scale of technologies applied to resource use. Of particular salience for the entire US.-Mexico border region are the irrigation canals and webs of *acequias* that supply small-scale farming and domestic use of water. These local technologies are threatened not only with global climatic changes and long-term droughts, but also by deep-well pumping and large-scale hydraulic works that transfer water to users across national boundaries or to distant population centers. Historical precedents are found in three major dams built in Sonora, Mexico, during the middle third of the 20th century, which transferred irrigation water from the piedmont and river valleys of the eastern portion of the state to the Yaqui River delta and the arid coast west of Hermosillo. Their reservoirs and the hydraulic technology developed through their construction increased commercial agriculture for national consumption and export, but at the cost of crop production upstream and in the Yaqui Indian pueblos.

At the present time plans are proceeding for the construction of a large hydroelectric dam at La Yesca, located between the states of Jalisco and Nayarit in western Mexico. The

Comisión Federal de Electricidad has opened bids for a project estimated at nearly \$U.S. 1 billion to create the highest dam in the world with a basin of 12 million cubic meters. Three large engineering consortia composed of Mexican companies in association with Russian, Chinese, and Italian partners, have submitted bids. Environmental advocates have protested its size, pointing out the dangers of deforestation, inadequate local water supply, and wildlife displacement (LADB *SourceMex* (26/I/07)). Similar protests spearheaded by a coalition of peasant farmers occurred last year over the projected construction of La Parota dam in Guerrero.

Social movements focused on environmental issues frequently find support among international non-governmental organizations, with access to the media and sources of funding. NGOs often serve as effective allies for local initiatives, but their role as intermediaries for sizeable funding sources can lead to an overweening influence in setting priorities. Global media attention to Brazil frequently calls for “saving the Amazonian rainforest,” when local environmentalists are concerned with air and water pollution in Brazilian cities. Nevertheless, nature plays a vital role in the perception of a baseline for livelihood and subsistence among local communities. It informs popular conceptualizations of nationalism on the ground. In the tension between globalization and locality, nature is central to the defense of place. National governments often seek a middle ground between conservation and economic development, as is illustrated by Brazil’s policy shift, recently announced, to regulate logging in the Amazon forest by granting licenses to private firms [NY *Times*]. Pragmatism as well as populist rhetoric seems to inform governmental policies in response to sustained pressures exerted by local communities. Yet, as we have seen in the

bids for dam construction in Mexico, foreign investments play a determining role in the implementation of energy and environmental policies.

Human Rights and Populism

Fundamental human and civil rights constitute a major plank of the populist platforms in social movements of today's Latin America. Memories of the brutal dictatorships that suppressed basic freedoms in South and Central America over the last half-century – notably in Guatemala, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Uruguay, Chile, Argentina, Bolivia, and Brazil – remain strong and inform both the intellectual and the emotional content of populist movements at the present time. The following list of human rights is not exhaustive, but it is shared throughout the region.

Freedom from arbitrary detentions, torture, and executions.

Security and physical integrity of one's person and home.

Rights to food, housing, health care.

Access to education.

Freedom of movement.

Right to work and a living wage.

Freedom from violence at the hands of repressive governments or criminal elements in society is paramount. Colombia and Mexico are prominent among countries in the region where violence related to drug traffic and border issues has reached egregious heights and called into question the viability of the national government. The news media have made us painfully aware of the terrifying serial murders of young women in Ciudad Juárez, femicides in Guatemala, and gang violence that links Los Angeles and El Salvador. Equally disturbing

are the menacing words and actions of self-styled militias at the U.S. border with Mexico who command technologies of surveillance and death. At the same time, federal efforts to overturn local police departments and conduct a “war on terror” in Mexico raise concerns about due process and protection of human rights. We face these same issues in the U.S.

The next four rights refer to the *freedom for*: health, nutrition, shelter, education, work, freedom of movement, and a dignified wage. They echo the demands of social movements that challenge growing inequalities in the distribution of income, and the specific issues raised above concerning the price of corn, access to schools, and the quality of education.

What can we do?

How does an informed citizenry intervene in political processes in neighboring countries that call our attention and are linked to our own government? We can remind our own representatives that we respect the electoral outcomes of democratic states in Latin America. We can make our voices heard in defense of human rights at the border and, in other regions, as sympathetic and engaged observers. And, we can support the efforts by university-trained professionals – educators, scholars, and researchers – to contribute to civil society and nation-building in positive ways. The following brief summary of three current projects or areas of service that are especially relevant to the themes we have covered today.

Language revitalization. University of New Mexico Professor of Linguistics Melissa Axelrod, who has worked for over a decade with Apache and Nanbé-speaking communities to develop dictionaries and other teaching tools for these communities, is conducting research involving language and oral history among Ixil-speaking communities of

Guatemala, where violence against indigenous Maya villages was especially brutal during the past quarter-century. Her collaboration with villagers and Guatemalan professionals helps with the healing process of memory, following decades of civil war in which these people were victimized, and strengthens the use of this dialect of Maya. Oral histories provide a valuable tool for building ties among different generations and kin groups in communities, for establishing historical records, and substantiating claims raised to provincial and national governments.

Anthropologist Joanne Rappaport has devoted much of her career to working with indigenous groups in Colombia, weaving together oral testimonies and archival sources, in collaboration with the communities in which she works. In a similar effort, I have joined a collaborative team in Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia, working with Chiquitos Indian communities and Bolivian anthropologists and historians to help them gather testimonies and written information and to publish histories of these communities that arose from the migrations of Indian peon workers and their families out of large cattle estates in eastern Bolivia during the 20th century, following the Bolivian national revolution of 1952 and the slow process of land reform in the eastern lowlands.

A related area of research and service that fosters local knowledge concerns environmental management. This includes the judicious use of resources and ways of monitoring the quality of air, water, and soil. Road construction, the expansion of electric lines, placement of land fills, distinguishing between common wastes and hazardous wastes all require education, timely dissemination of information, and listening to local concerns. Indeed, environmental management is an essential component of populism that directs our

focus to its roots in history, culture, and nature. Listening to public debate takes the risk of openness to local decision-making at the same time that it builds bridges of accountability to national states and to international organizations.

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Illustrations: LANIC and related website linkages.