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LESSONS FOR EU FROM LATIN AMERICA: HOW TO FIGHT AGAINST POPULISM.

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INTRODUCTION

The third wave of democratization, which led Francis Fukuyama to advance the bold prediction of the “end of history”, after the fall of communism in USSR, in 1989; seems to have come to a stop. In many parts of the world, democracies are in crisis and a return of populism seems to lead to a reversal of the wave, even on the political horizon of many regions, like the EU, where it was thought that democratic consolidation would impede the return of political experiences, which were believed to belong to the past.

At the same time, most of Latin America seems unable of moving ahead along the road of democratic consolidation and new waves of populism have been spreading across the region, eroding the fragile institutional foundations of the new democracies which emerged following the fall of the highly repressive, military authoritarian regimes of the 60's -80's of last century.

On both side of the Atlantic, the central questions are: 1. Is Populism compatible with the values, Institutions and procedures of democracy? 2. What can be done to reverse the trend of political decay and citizens' disaffection with institutionalized politics?

From the point of view of the European Union, an additional question is in order: 3. Are the common, nationalistic orientations of populism and their transnational articulation, a threat to the continuity and survival of the process of integration?

I will try to provide some answers to these questions by considering:

the nature and specificity of populism as a political phenomenon;

the change in the political and socio-economic paradigm which took place in the last two decades or so, which created the political opportunity for a massive return of populism in EU;

An historical glance at the populist experiences in Latin America and their relationship to democracy, as a basis for drawing some useful lessons for the EU troubled democracies and for the very continuity of the process of EU integration;

I will conclude by suggesting a possible strategy to contain the threat of populism, both to democracy in EU and its process of integration.

WHAT IS POPULISM?

Before discussing the central issues of this short essay, it is useful to define the nature and specificity of populism, since this concept and its empirical referents appear in a variety of political forms, often associated with contrasting promises of policies, going from rightist to leftist solutions. Some analysts even went so far as to suggest the inutility of the concept, since it is used more for political purposes to disqualify opponents than as an analytical tool, useful to advance its understanding. I maintain, on the contrary, that despite its varieties in time, space and content, populism presents a core of traits that in their interaction produce a political specificity that differentiate it from other political arrangements.

There is no space here to review the many definitions presented in the literature. Therefore, I will concentrate on the few traits that point out a minimum set of properties that form the common denominator of the concept:

A political movement which makes a direct appeal to the people – the followers of the movement –to mobilize them against inefficient, corrupt and greedy political and economic elites, both internal and external to the country. For this reason, populism tends to be strongly nationalistic or ideologically driven by the Rousseau's postulate that popular assembly is always right and owns the truth. What is at stake in the struggle between the movement and its enemies is the achievement of power. Therefore, a fundamental characteristic of populist movements is the centralization of powers presented as the only way to defend the (pure) "people" against the (corrupted) oligarchic elites; this centralization is radical as it opposes to any constitutional constraints, covering also the eradication of any countervailing power or "check-and-balance" mechanism, refusing to grant authority to constitutionally-established institutions when their decisions conflict with the purported will of the people

It is led by a charismatic leader who embodies and expresses the interests, demands, frustrations and aspirations of the people (the majority). The leader tends to hold a totalizing conception of power which is profoundly illiberal and anti-pluralist. Peron used to say "adentro del movimiento todo, afuera nada". He/she brings unity and identity to the different orientations that characterize the various components of the movement.

Because of the above considerations, the political camp is divided into the militants, participants and supporters of the movement, regarded as friends and its opponents, considered as enemies. Obviously between these antagonistic power contenders, there can be no reciprocal legitimation of different opinions and interests.

Pluralistic institutions and in general the rule of law, typical of democracy, are perceived as obstacles and impediments to the action of the leader who wants to act as “legibus solutus”. For this reason, ruling is carried out through a direct relationship with the people, without institutional mediations, or by creating institutions ad hoc that serve the interests of the leader.

A CHANGE IN SOCIO-POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC PARADIGM

During the “glorious thirty years” of inclusive development after the war, it was thought that populism could occur only in third world countries as a phase in their political and economic modernization. But events following the first economic crisis in 1973-5 proved that this notion was wrong. Especially after the fall of the iron curtain in 1989, not only the prediction of “the end of history” proved to be a mistaken forecast, but the very triumph of capitalism, without the threat of communism, opened a contradictory period: on one hand, we witnessed the collapse of the old paradigm, with the weakening of the State and the predominance of market exchanges, which were accompanied, first, by the reduced impact of traditional parties in their representative role of integrating and promoting society’s interests and in their effectiveness to respond to citizens’ new demands, second, the intermediary structures of interests representation lost their centrality in the political process. On the other hand, these changes were concomitants with profound transformations in the social structures of these democracies, with decaying middle classes and disarticulating processes in the working class. Under the impact of the new emerging paradigm, based on liberal ideology and the progressive advancement of globalization, financial interests and multinational corporations were the most prepared ideologically and technologically to take advantage of the benefits that global markets and the free movements of capital, goods, services and people offered them, avoiding State intervention and regulation.

At the same time, foreign military intervention in the Middle East and Northern Africa, accompanied by a resurgence of Islamic extremism and terrorism and power struggles among the Arab countries, brought about civil wars, political turmoil and the disappearance of State control over the territories of many of these countries, with the consequences of promoting massive migratory movements, especially towards EU countries.

All these factors converged together to create an explosive cocktail which became even more disruptive of established order when the financial and economic crisis of the sub-primes exploded in 2008.

THE EXPLOSION OF POPULISM IN EU

The change in paradigm and the pressing new demands for security, employment, control of immigration and protection of large sector of the population in the various countries of the EU, were not met by the respective establishments and the EU institutions, opening the political opportunities for the proliferation and even explosion of a variety of populist movements that promised salvation from the evils affecting a disaffected, and frustrated population, in search for solutions that traditional parties and institutions were unable to provide.

After the war, during the “the glorious thirty years” of reconstruction and development, there were only two sporadic populist experiences, first in Italy with the short lived “Fronte dell’Uomo Qualunque, and second in France; with the appearance of “poujadisme”, a movement created by Pierre Poujade, which emerged in the fifties with typical populist claims, like, defense of the small producers, hostility against the dominant establishment and a reevaluation of the traditional community. This movement founded a party, the Union de Fraternelle Française (UFF), which gained national attention when in 1956 brought into parliament 56 deputies. But, by 1958 it was practically disappeared.

Neither experts, the media, or public opinion, seemed to pay any attention to these sporadic episodes, since it was widely believed in EU that populism was a political experience of the past.

It was only in 1984, that an alarming bell sounded through France and EU in general, when a young militant of the UFF, Jean Marie Le Pen, after having founded the Front National in 1972, managed to receive 11% of the national vote and be represented in the European Parliament by 10 deputies, professing a well-defined populist platform, along with a strong euro-skepticism. Since then, an impressive advance of populist forces spread throughout EU, reaching a climax after the crisis that hit the region in 2008. If we look at electoral results in the period until 1916, a great variety of populist movements, from mostly rightist orientation, but also with some from the left, received in many countries about 20% of the vote. Today, with populist leaders and parties in power in the countries of the east, that belonged to the iron curtain, and the growing centrality of populist forces in such diverse countries such as Italy, Austria, Spain, UK – Brexit in 2016 docet – populism has become the single most threatening challenge to democracy in EU and a very serious obstacle for the process of EU integration.

A GLANCE AT POPULIST EXPERIENCES IN LATIN AMERICA

In the case of Latin America, experts, like Guillermo O' Donnell and Gino Germani, conceptually and empirically identify populism as the historical experience of most of the countries of the region that took place in the late forties and fifties after the demise of oligarchic states and governments and before the advent of new authoritarianism in 1960's and 70's. David Collier, follows this view, by defining populism, with peronismo and varguismo as prototypes, in his widely cited book on **The New Authoritarianism in Latin America**, as a "type of political system (or state), characterized by a number of traits, including the following: a) it is based on a multi-class coalition of urban industrial interests, including the industrial elite and the urban popular sector, b) it is politically incorporating the urban (and some time, the rural) popular sectors and c) it promotes the initial phase of import-substituting industrialization oriented at the production of consumer goods." It should be added that, contrary to the laissez faire policies of the oligarchic era, populism is strongly nationalistic and attributes a central importance to state and bureaucracy building, for both social policies and its intervention in all sphere of life, including the economy.

To this definition, we should add the significant role played by charismatic leadership. In fact, the leader has a sort of messianic powers capable of healing the evil of society. It should also be remembered that Haya de la Torre, a charismatic leader and brilliant intellectual, was a precursor of populism in Latin America, when in Peru', in the 20's and 30's, he developed arguments in favor of a change of the pattern of development, centered on a nationalistic stand, a strong opposition to the oligarchy and imperialism and a building of the state, supported by a multi-class alliance of the sectors previously excluded by the oligarchic model based on the export of primary goods. His book **El Anti-Imperialismo y el APRA** can be considered as a basic text of populism in LA.

Populism, even if preceded by the prefix "neo", reappeared in the 90's, particularly in the presidencies of Menem in Argentina and Fujimori in Perú. In both cases, power was concentrated in the executive, and both embraced a neo-liberal ideology, carrying out a strong package of privatization and liberalization policies. Authoritarian tendencies were manifest in both cases, accompanied by grave scandals of corruption. Particularly in the case of Fujimory, when parliament tried to investigate some of his actions, he closed it with the support of the Armed Forces, turning the political regime into an authoritarian one.

Finally, in the first decade of this century, a new brand of populism emerged in Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador and Nicaragua, advocating the need for LA to turn to socialism and to forge new LA integration schema, ALBA, to counterattack US imperialism and neo-liberal ideology and policies that impoverished the people. In all cases, the typical traits were:

1. Strong leadership, needed to keep together a fragmented people who suffered the consequences of corrupt political and economic elites, supported by a traditional party system

which expropriated the people of their rights of participation, leading to his impoverishment and social exclusion;

2. A systematic attack on liberal-representative institutions and changes in the constitutions to permit the reelections of presidents for life;

3. the limits on civil and political rights;

4, the repeated use of elections in search of plebiscitary acclamation, needed to defeat the enemies;

5 the use of state resources for personal gain and for obtaining popular consensus.

These populist experiences show that populism can re-emerge even after the installation of democratic regimes characterized by regular and fair elections for the presidency, and the beginning of democratization. This is so particularly when most demands of the people are not satisfied, and the prevailing policies of neo-liberalism tend to benefit only the rich sectors of society, leaving behind and excluded the great majority of the population. In these conditions the politics of movements reemerged, political parties entered a frank decadence and the old practices of populist politics reappeared in many countries. The old practices of patrimonialism, personalism and clientelism are back, even if the rhetoric of appealing to the people pretends to introduce the notion that the charismatic leader is forging a participatory democracy. The reality is quite different: The State is considered private property of the occupants of the seat of power, politics is characterized by the effort of accumulating power and limiting or eliminating the possibility of power contender to participate on equal grounds to the political game and society is deeply divided and fragmented in what Bernardo Zorj has called transgressive individualism.

Under these conditions, it is difficult to build a political community of citizens who feel a common belonging and are ready to observe the rule of law and establish a civic sociability.

In sum, my thesis is that the antagonistic relationship between exclusionary and oligarchic institutions and populist movements, now and then interrupted by military interventions, has been devastating for most of Latin America. The result has been a progressive institutional erosion, the ineffectiveness of the rule of law, the primacy of the personal power of the presidency, the fragmentation of society, along with the endemic problems of social inequality, exclusion, personal insecurity, violence, corruption and widespread poverty.

SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS

The populist experiences that marked the political history of Latin America should teach some important lessons to dealing with the resurgence of populism in EU. First, their repeated recurrence has badly damaged the institutional contexts of political order. Political fragmentation, polarization, reciprocal delegitimizing of power contenders, the absence of the rule of law, concentration of power on personal rule and unaccountable decision making, associated most of the time with corruption and violence, are just some of the legacies and present conditions of populist politics. Their incompatibility with democratic governance should be clearly understood. As Guillermo O'Donnell once said populism leads to the slow death of democracy. Democratic leaders, parties and ideologies, should be aware of this outcome and draw a sharp line of division between them and populist leaders, movements and ideologies. At the same time, they should adopt policies, which addressing the losers of globalization, could regain their trust in democratic institutions and leaders. In particular, they should launch programs of labor requalification, support for the unemployed, infrastructural investments, including schools and technical and academic institutions, in order to prepare the young to meet the challenges of technological innovation. Another area where democratic governments should intervene more decisively is in the protection and security of its citizens, which means developing programs of immigration policies and integration of immigrants, combining acceptance, containment and solidarity.

At the level of EU Institutions, democratic principles, values and procedures should be strictly monitored and their deviance should be stopped at the outset. EU authorities should also intervene in international organizations regulating global economic exchanges, to promote policies that protect labor, unify standards of employment, fiscal homogenization and other measures that would contribute to redistribute costs and benefits among countries and within.