FROM JUAN PERÓN TO HUGO CHÁVEZ AND BACK: POPULISM RECONSIDERED*

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In an interview conducted by political scientist Anthony Peter Spanakos, a Venezuelan teacher in Barquisimeto, the capital city of the State of Lara, tried to explain the new political process under Hugo Chávez’s rule:

The proceso has affected the common citizen. Never before was there so much protagonism in the political process. Here the people were mute. They voted and returned to their house [...] Now, you are not only an observer of politics, you are participating in politics [...] Now [the people] think ‘I am a protagonist in my own process’ (Spanakos 2008: 528).

Almost 60 years earlier, in late 1951, Juan Perón called upon his fellow Argentines to send him their suggestions for the upcoming Second Five-Year Plan, that is, for the social and economic policies that his government should adopt for his second presidential term. The President’s call was issued under the slogan ‘Perón Wants to Know What the People Want.’ And indeed, as shown by Eduardo Elena, tens of thousands of letters and petitions were sent in from all over the country (Elena 2005). One of these letters—all of which were deposited in the Archivo General de la Nación, Buenos Aires—was sent by a woman named Zulema, from the city of Santiago del Estero, and it is most relevant to any discussion of citizenship and political participation under populist governments in Latin America.

Zulema told President Perón how skeptical she had been in 1946 about the promises for social and economic reforms in Argentina. She showed several Peronist pamphlets to her boss, a ‘señor español,’ as she characterized him, who replied: ‘As a project this is beautiful, señorita, but it’s a utopia, do you know what a utopia is? Well, it’s this, something one dreams but doesn’t achieve.’

After six years of Peronist rule, Zulema was less skeptical, and in her letter she put forward her opinions about national economic policy, labor relations, and public works projects: ‘Today, having learned my lesson,’ she

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* This is a thoroughly revised version of my essay ‘De la Casa Rosada al Palacio de Miraflores: populismos de ayer y de hoy,’ in Antonio Hermosa Andújar and Samuel Schmidt eds. Pensar Iberamérica (Buenos Aires 2009), pp. 75–94.
wrote to the President, ‘I put before your consideration another utopia, as that señor would say, because I know that you have the power to make [it] real’ (Elena 2005: 81).

These two examples illustrate the role and social dimension assigned to the state, as well as the new model of citizenship offered by both the so-called ‘classic populism’ of the second third of the twentieth century and by the current ‘left-wing populism’ or ‘radical populism’ of leaders such as Hugo Chávez and his Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela, and, to a lesser extent, Evo Morales in Bolivia and Rafael Correa in Ecuador (March 2007). These two phases of populism, with their emphasis on citizen rights and responsibilities, stand in sharp contrast to the weak and passive citizenship offered by liberal oligarchical politics, with the electoral fraud of the pre-populist era, or by the so-called ‘neo-populists’ of the neo-liberal 1990s.

In the 1990s, it was fashionable to speak of presidents Carlos Menem in Argentina, Alberto Fujimori in Peru, and Fernando Color in Brazil as representatives of ‘neo-populism’ (Weyland 1996, 2003; Philip 1998; Roberts 1995). These leaders tended to adopt economic policies that were favorable to the free market. They eliminated high levels of inflation through liberal-inspired stabilization programs that had a very high social price. This was in stark contrast to the ‘classic’ populists who embraced anti-imperialist rhetoric and waved the banners of nationalization and state interventionism. Menem and Fujimori oriented their policies toward privatization and an alliance with financial organisms, whereas classic populism was characterized by its redistributive policies and defiance of the international financial system. Nowadays, contemporary populist leaders, such as Chávez or Correa, evoke much more markedly the ‘classic populism’ identified mainly with Juan Domingo Perón’s leadership in Argentina and, to some extent, the myth of Getúlio Vargas as the ‘Father of the Poor’ in Brazil and the legacy of Lázaro Cárdenas in Mexico (On Vargas, see Fausto 2006; Hentschke 2006; Levine 1998. On Cárdenas, see Krauze 1999; Becker 1995; Niblo 2000).

Extensive research has been done on Latin American populism and still there is much controversy surrounding it (classic works include Germani 1978; Welfort 1978; Cardoso and Faletto 1979; Conniff 1982; and Knight 1998. More recent works include Freidenberg 2007; March 2007; De la Torre and Peruzzotti 2008; Spanakos 2008, Zanatta 2008; Di Piramo 2009). In this chapter I would like to sketch 10 key components necessary for a better understanding of present and past populist politicians and movements in Latin America and their challenge to the liberal meanings