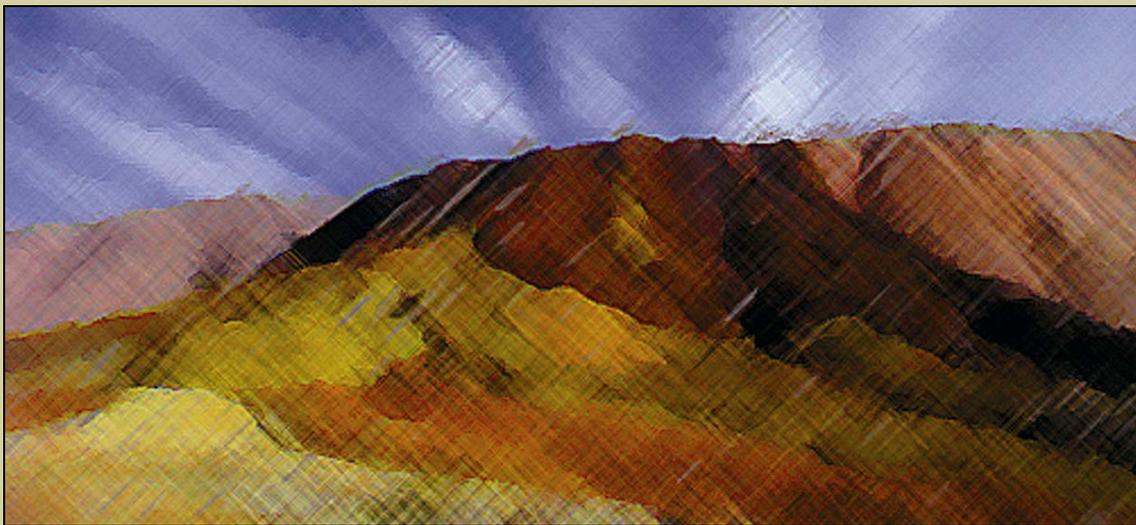


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**“THE THREE LEFTS OF LATIN
AMERICA”**

Ignacio Walker

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Ignacio Walker

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The Three Lefts Of Latin America

Ignacio Walker

I BEGAN TO WRITE these lines while listening to a speech by Hugo Chávez at a summit of the Andean Community of Nations in Lima, Peru, some time in 2005. As inspiration for this article, the speech helped crystallize my thinking. Populism in Latin America has a lot to do with discourse, rhetoric, and symbolism, and I came to understand many things about this kind of politics that are not to be found in the literature. I want now to describe the inherent tensions and contradictions of old and new populism in Latin America, especially as they relate to democracy. I will then consider the emergence in recent years of a new social democratic left characterized by an unambiguous commitment to democratic institutions. For there is not one (populist), not two (Marxist and populist), but at least three lefts in Latin America (populist, Marxist, and social democratic). Hugo Chávez may be the most visible and strident Latin American political figure, but he is not the most representative. In fact, he is the exception rather than the rule.

In significant ways, the history of Latin America in the last century can be described as a search for responses to the crisis of oligarchic rule that took place in the 1920s and 1930s. Populism appears as the most salient response within the context of the waves of democratization and authoritarianism that we have known in Latin America for so many decades. Somehow we are still in the process of *“desoligarquización”* that started at the beginning of the twentieth century. This is perhaps what explains the emergence of “neopopulism” in recent years, especially in the cases of Chávez in Venezuela, Evo Morales in Bolivia, and Rafael Correa in Ecuador. But these cases

should not obscure the complex and diverse reality of Latin America, including the emergence of a new social democratic left, different from both Marxism and populism.

Populism emerged in the middle of an authoritarian wave, if we are to follow Samuel Huntington’s account of the three waves of democratization: the long wave, from the 1820s to 1920s, the short wave from the 1940s to the 1960s, and the current “third wave,” starting in the mid-1970s in southern Europe and the late-1970s in Latin America. The 1930s and 1940s saw the emergence of populism in Latin America, characterized by negative attitudes toward liberal-democratic institutions and liberal capitalism—in Europe, Nazism, fascism, and Stalinism; in Latin America, corporatism and populism. This context of a widespread discrediting of liberal-democratic institutions makes for a fundamental difference from contemporary neopopulism, which appears in the midst of an unprecedented wave of democratization in Latin America and around the world.

At the core of the emergence of traditional or classical populism was the crisis of oligarchic rule and the emergence of the “social question” as the newly mobilized popular and middle sectors sought “their place in the sun”—social and political inclusion. This populism had six characteristic features.

The first corresponds to its popular and national elements: “popular” means anti-oligarchic and “national” means anti-imperialist. Populism set itself against the rule of the landed aristocracy, and it rejected foreign control of natural resources and national economies. The crucial dichotomy was between the people and the oligarchy. The people (*“pueblo,”* *“povo”*) were considered as a moral rather than a social category. It was the masses, the urban workers, the people from below—the *“descamisados”* or the *“cabecitas negras”* in Argentinean Peronism—that became the de-

fining feature of this movement (for populism was always a movement rather than a party organization).

Hence the tension between populism and Marxism. It was never the struggle between the “proletariat” and the “bourgeoisie,” as they appeared in the context of capitalist development, that drove populist politics. In fact, populist leaders like Juan Perón and Getúlio Vargas aimed to avoid any intensification of the class struggle. In many ways, it was the fear of communism, following the Bolshevik Revolution, that led populists to advocate anti-oligarchic and anti-imperialist reforms. This tendency was strengthened even further by the mentality of the officer corps, from which many of Latin America’s populist leaders emerged.

THE SECOND feature of classical populism is that it usually took the form of a political alliance between the popular and middle sectors of society. When we study the populist phenomenon of the 1940s, we usually describe it as a multiclass alliance, even an alliance of business, labor, and the state—as in Brazil under Vargas or Juscelino Kubitschek. This alliance held out the potential for both democratization and modernization but, as we shall see, only in an incomplete, ambiguous way: always in tension with representative democracy and its institutions, especially in their liberal expression.

The third feature of populism was the crucial role of the state, conceived in almost a mythical way as the means of salvation of the dispossessed. It may still be debated whether the state undertook this role because there was no private sector (or “national bourgeoisie”) that could perform it or whether a private sector or a bourgeoisie never developed because the state occupied such a predominant position in the economy. The fact remains that the state played a very active role in economic development. The emergence, especially from the late 1940s, of the “developmentalist state,” or the “entrepreneurial state,” and of state-led import-substitution industrialization had a lot to do with populist statism. The state came to be seen as the means of progress and well-being for the emerging popular and middle sectors of the populist coalition.

The fourth feature of populism was the focus on industrialization, which came to be seen as a strategy of development. Of course this was not present in the first stages of populist politics, whose leaders followed their intuitions rather than a carefully worked-out blueprint. Starting, however, with the ideas of Raúl Prebisch and the Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA) in the late 1940s, industrialization was adopted not only as a policy but as a doctrine that was very much at the core of the “populist coalition.” Industrialization was thought to be the necessary means through which the “labor surplus” resulting from massive migrations from the countryside could be absorbed, providing the masses with new opportunities for well-being and progress.

The fifth feature of populism, and one that reappears in contemporary populist politics, is the identification between a charismatic leader and the people. In fact, the term “populism” commonly refers to the direct appeal to the people by a charismatic leader, whether military or civilian, under an authoritarian or a democratic regime in the context of weak political institutions. This strong personalization of power is a defining feature of populism in Latin America from the 1930s to the present. Populism presupposes a low level of institutionalization—in fact, there seems to be a trade-off between populist personalization and strong institutions. This trade-off is at the core of the tension between populism and democracy, which is also a tension between personal and institutional forms of power.

The sixth feature of populism is this intrinsic ambiguity of its relation to representative democracy. In the logic of populism, what really matters is the incorporation of the masses of the people. So there clearly is an element of “democratization” in populism, both old and new, but it is democratization understood more in social than in political terms, and it is not accomplished through the institutions of representative democracy, which are regarded with suspicion. As Enzo Faletto has written, “[P]opulism emerged as a response to the crisis of oligarchic rule but at the same time, it constituted a divorce with the liberal understanding of democracy.”

In fact, populism usually took an authoritarian rather than a democratic form. This was the case, for example, with Perón in Argentina and Vargas in Brazil, perhaps the most emblematic manifestations of Latin American populism. This is not to say that there were no democratic elements in these examples. Perón, for example, was elected in a clean, free, and fair election in 1946 (although this was not the case in 1951), but he first came to power as a colonel in the 1943 military coup. Fascism was undoubtedly an influence in Peronism's initial development. In turn, we would have to draw a distinction between the Vargas of the "*Estado Novo*" (new state) in the 1930s, with its fascist, corporatist, and authoritarian features, and the Vargas who was elected president in 1950. The fact remains, however, that Vargas preferred strong government over constitutional government. He dominated Brazilian politics in a highly personalistic way: appearing as the "patron" of the urban working classes.

Although authoritarianism was a defining feature of Latin American populism in the 1940s, I want to insist on the complexities of the issue and mention some cases that were, in spite of their own ambiguities, closer to a democratic than an authoritarian understanding. This was probably the case with APRA (*Acción Popular Revolucionaria Americana*, or American Popular Revolutionary Alliance) in Peru under Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre and with "*Acción Democrática*" (Democratic Action) in Venezuela—notwithstanding its support of the 1945 military coup. Mostly, however, both old and new populism aim to build an alternative concept of democracy, different from its liberal understanding.

Perhaps the best expression of classical populism is to be found in a letter sent by Perón to his friend Carlos Ibáñez del Campo, who had recently (1952) been elected president of Chile:

My dear friend: Give the people, especially the workers, all that is possible. When it seems to you that already you are giving them too much, give them more. You will see the results. Everybody will try to frighten you with the specter of an economic collapse. But all of this is a lie. There is nothing more elastic than the economy, which everyone fears so

much because no one understands it. (Quoted in Albert Hirschman, "Against Economic Determinants," in David Collier, ed., *The New Authoritarianism in Latin America* [Princeton University Press, 1979], p. 65)

From this, it is easy to understand the legacy of populism in Argentina and elsewhere in Latin America, with its rather sui generis concept of the "elasticity" of the economy—which leads to inflation, hyperinflation, and macroeconomic instability. This, in turn, explains some of the difficulties in consolidating a stable, democratic regime in the region.

So, what happened to populism?

Three developments conspired against its further development, at least in the way it presented itself in the 1930s and the 1940s: (1) the new wave of democratization following the Second World War; (2) the problems of state-led import-substitution industrialization, which was very much at the core of the "populist coalition"; and (3) the new reality of the cold war and, more specifically, the tremendous impact of the Cuban Revolution, which led to a paradigm shift from populism to revolution, producing the very dramatic dichotomy between reform or revolution that Latin America faced in the 1960s and early 1970s.

This is not to say that populism disappeared altogether: Joao Goulart, in the early 1960s in Brazil; Juan Velasco Alvarado, in the late 1960s and early 1970s in Peru; and Salvador Allende, in the early 1970s in Chile, pursued populist economic policies within the context of the extreme polarization and ideological escalation characteristic of Latin America in those years. In the end, the new "bureaucratic-authoritarian" regimes and the economic market reforms—first authoritarian and then democratic—that started in the 1970s sealed the fate of the old populism and the "national and popular" state.

THE EMERGENCE of neopopulism may be described as a play in four acts.

Act I: The Populist Cycle In some of his writings in the 1980s and 1990s, Alejandro Foxley, Chile's minister of finance (1990–1994), referred to the appearance during the 1980s democratization process of the "populist cycle."

He pointed especially to the economic policies adopted during the debt crisis (1982) by the administrations of Alan García in Peru, Raul Alfonsín in Argentina, and José Sarney in Brazil, among others, which ultimately resulted in the “lost decade” of the 1980s. This “populist cycle” should be distinguished from populist regimes—it refers only to the policies followed by these administrations in the initial stages of the “third wave” of democratization.

The logic behind these policies was the need to activate the economy and raise salaries through a kind of fiscal shock—citing the old argument about the “idle capacity of the economy,” which was, perhaps, a variation on Perón’s line about “elasticity.” This led, in the first year, to much presidential popularity—think of Alan García in 1985–1986, as things seemed to be going just fine. In the second year, however, the bill comes due: inflation and hyperinflation appear—5,000 percent in Peru and 11,000 percent in Bolivia in the mid-1980s—leading to an economic crisis. In the third year, the economic crisis becomes a social crisis, with massive demonstrations in the streets and rapidly decreasing presidential popularity, while in the fourth year, the economic and social crisis becomes a political—and even a constitutional—one, as in Argentina, where President Alfonsín had to advance the transfer of power to his successor, Carlos Menem, six months ahead of the constitutional schedule.

THE “POPULIST CYCLE” corresponds to what Patricio Meller has referred to as a set of clearly populist *macroeconomic* policies aimed at achieving a rapid revival of the economy along with extensive redistribution. These policies are characterized by an initial stage that appears to produce highly successful results; however, in the second stage, the strong expansion of demand generates growing disequilibrium, while the third stage ends with governmental attempts to apply a counterinflationary adjustment policy, within a tough, orthodox stabilization program. Meller points out that “the whole cycle imposes a terrible cost on the very groups it was intended to favor”—and in the concrete context of the democratization process of the 1980s, it

paved the way, paradoxically, for the neoliberal economic reforms of the 1990s.

Perhaps Rudiger Dornbusch and Sebastián Edwards’s *The Macroeconomics of Populism in Latin America* is the best theoretical and comparative work on the subject. Reviewing experiences of countries like Argentina, Chile, Brazil, Nicaragua, Mexico, and Peru, the authors analyze efforts to deal with income inequality through the use of overly expansive macroeconomic policies, leading almost inevitably to major crises. “The use of macroeconomic policy to achieve distributive goals has historically led to failure, sorrow, and frustration.” In the end, these policies have failed to benefit the poorest segments of society; real wages ended up being lower than they were at the beginning of the populist experiments.

Act II: Neoliberal Neopopulism The earliest versions of neopopulism came not from the left but from the right. Fernando Collor de Mello in Brazil, Menem in Argentina, and Alberto Fujimori in Peru introduced not only neoliberal economic reforms characteristic of the so-called “Washington Consensus” in the 1990s, but also a kind of personalistic, plebiscitary, and delegative democracy. Government by presidential decree, direct appeal to the masses of the people, the great popularity of the populist leaders, at least in the initial stages (leading to the reelection of both Menem and Fujimori), and a radical program of neoliberal economic reforms were some of the characteristics of these administrations.

Kurt Weyland contends that, although most writers considered neoliberalism and populism to be antithetical, in fact, in the 1990s there was a “synergy” between the two, because neoliberal reforms needed a kind of “free hand” to bring some predictability to the day-to-day lives of the people. This was a response to the inflation and hyperinflation so characteristic of democratization in the 1980s, with devastating effects for the economy and particularly for the popular sectors—which explains, in turn, the initial popularity of both Menem and Fujimori. A highly personalistic and plebiscitary component was attached to this neoliberal turn, along with low levels of institutionalization, which appears again as a defining char-

acteristic of populism in Latin America. Following an initial, bold phase of market reforms, there emerged the need for “institutional rules” for investors and other economic actors. This, in turn, resulted in the gradual erosion of the neoliberal/neopopulist model. The initial synergy that characterized the relationship was definitely gone.

Whether populist or nonpopulist, the recent story of neoliberal reform in Latin America ended very badly. In Argentina, it resulted in the deep economic crisis of 2001; in the Peruvian case, Fujimori went into exile and was recently extradited from Chile to Peru to face corruption charges. Broadly speaking, from the “Caracazo” in Venezuela in 1989—a popular reaction to the “austerity package” and the radical neoliberal policies adopted by Carlos Andrés Pérez—to the events of October 2003 in Bolivia, in which Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada was overthrown, with hundreds of people killed in the streets of Caracas and La Paz, neoliberalism was a disaster. However, populism survived and reemerged as an alternative to neoliberal economic reforms, especially in Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador—and perhaps in Argentina (although this is more debatable).

Act III: Leftist Neopopulism Two related processes in the late 1990s and early 2000s may help explain the survival of populism, now in a leftist version: first, the decomposition of traditional political institutions and elites in such countries as Venezuela, Bolivia, and Peru, leading to the collapse of the party system (six governments in Bolivia in six years, seven governments in Ecuador in ten years, the final crisis of 1998 in Venezuela) and second, the emergence of what we might call the “Cry of the People”—the new social demands of different sectors of society (the urban unemployed, young people, indigenous movements, and so on). The element of continuity here is provided by the highly personalistic democracies that have emerged during the “third wave” of democratization. Whether from the right or the left, this personalistic form of democracy remains one of the major obstacles to consolidating stable democratic institutions.

The new social demands and the sense of frustration among popular sectors that followed

the neoliberal reforms were expressed in a very eloquent way by graffiti on a wall in Lima, Peru, a couple of years ago: “*No más realidades, queremos promesas*” (“No more realities, we want promises”).

THIS DESIRE for “promises” helps to explain the emergence of Chávez in Venezuela, Morales in Bolivia, and Correa in Ecuador. I would also include the case of Argentina under the Néstor Kirchner administration, in a context that requires a different analysis, but with some common features: a strong personalization of power along with the institutional weakness that has been at the core of the pervasive instability of Argentina in recent decades.

Thus, the origins of leftist neopopulism have to be seen as an outcome of the failure of neoliberal economic reforms and the culmination of a long process of decomposition of political institutions and traditional elites, especially in certain countries (though not in all, nor even in the majority of countries, as we shall see). However, it must also be said that this leftist neopopulism confirms the inherent tension between populism and democracy in Latin America—within the broader process of “*desoligarquización*” that underlies both the old and new versions of populist politics.

Behind the call to a “direct,” “participatory,” and supposedly superior, form of democracy characteristic of neopopulism, there is the reality of personalistic democracy—or an “extreme case of delegative democracy,” as Michael Coppedge has labeled the Chávez regime. This form of democracy ends up bypassing (if not directly challenging) the institutions of representative government—especially parties and parliaments—while attempting to bring under control institutions such as the Constitutional Court that defend fundamental liberties.

Undeniably neopopulist leaders (presidents) have a formal, democratic legitimacy, and that makes a difference if we compare neopopulism with the rather authoritarian leanings of the old version. However, ultimately, it is the personal characteristics of a charismatic leader and his or her identification with the masses that prevail over any form of institutional constraint. As René Mayorga has stat-

ed, “unlike historical populism, neopopulism is involved in the democratic game. It accepts the rules of political competition, but at the same time resorts to the higher quality and legitimacy of the leader, who presents himself as redeemer and embodiment of the people and the nation.” See, for example, a recent statement by one of the politicians closest to Hugo Chávez, José Vicente Rangel, who has been the vice president of the republic, minister of defense, and minister of foreign affairs, trying to describe what Chávez represents in terms of Venezuelan democracy: “If there is any power represented by Chávez, it is the power of the people, which means that Chávez is above institutions because he is the embodiment of the people.” Thus it is legitimate—and accurate—to refer to the “Chávez regime” in Venezuela, due to the strong personalization of power.

I take “representative democracy”—or the “democracy of institutions”—as the backbone of the whole Inter-American democratic system, from the 1948 charter that created the Organization of American States (OAS) to the Inter-American Democratic Charter signed in Lima on September 11, 2001. It must be kept in mind that from the very outset the OAS charter considered “representative democracy” to be “an indispensable condition for the stability, peace, and development of the region,” and one of the “essential purposes” of the OAS in terms of the promotion and consolidation of its institutions. Resolution 1080 (1991) called for the “effective exercise” of representative democracy to “be made operative” in a variety of situations, whereas Article 3 of the Inter-American Democratic Charter went even further in terms of defining the “essential elements” of representative democracy.

Thirty-four American states have made explicit commitments with regard to the defense and promotion of representative democracy. Hence neopopulism, whether from the right or the left, appears in an environment characterized by the new legitimacy of political democracy. This is also an ambitious and demanding environment, growing out of a certain international understanding that is not only more market friendly, when compared to the state-led, inward-looking import-substitution industrialization of the “national and popular” state, but

also more pro-democracy—in spite of the many shortcomings of the new democracies that have been established in Latin America in the last decades. This is perhaps the true meaning of the December 2007 referendum in Venezuela. The defeat of Chávez’s attempt to be reelected indefinitely seems to demonstrate that a democratic culture still exists in Venezuela and receives, perhaps, international reinforcement.

Act IV: Populist and Nonpopulist Responses to the Neoliberal Reforms of the 1990s—The Social Democratic Moment In this final part, I want to show that the Chávez regime is not representative of but rather exceptional within the complex and diverse reality of Latin American politics. This statement may seem counterintuitive, if we consider that front-page stories around the world tend to identify Latin America with the Chávez regime. Occasional references may also be made to Morales in Bolivia, but I would argue that although there are many common elements, there are also differences between these cases. In significant ways, Bolivia is not Venezuela, and Morales is not Chávez, just as Latin America is not Chávez, and Chávez is not Latin America. Suffice it to say that in Bolivia, in spite of the recent approval of the new Constitution—in a military school, no less, with the presence of the government’s political forces (MAS, *Movimiento al Socialismo* or Movement Toward Socialism) and the deliberate exclusion of the opposition (PODEMOS, *Poder Democrático y Social*, or Democratic and Social Power)—the opposition is still a majority in the Senate, and it controls five of the nine departments. It is too early to make a final judgment on the political process taking place in Ecuador. And Argentina, in spite of its high degree of personalization of power and weak institutions, can hardly be equated with the Chávez regime—in fact, it would be a great mistake to do so. Perhaps it is accurate to say that Argentina under Kirchner and Cristina Fernández is somewhere between a personalistic form of democracy and a “democracy of institutions.”

MY FINAL POINT is that there are not only populist but also nonpopulist responses to the neoliberal economic

reforms of the 1990s—and the latter prevail in the majority of Latin American countries. This argument isn't meant to transform this fourth act into a happy ending, but only to insist that Latin America is not well represented by the Chávez regime.

We must not lose sight of the fact that right-wing or center-right governments are also part of the political landscape in Latin America today. This is the case in El Salvador, which has elected four right-wing ARENA administrations in a row. It is also the case in Colombia, where President Alvaro Uribe was elected and reelected with more than 60 percent of the vote. Finally, in Mexico, President Felipe Calderón was elected on a center-right platform. Moreover, it must be kept in mind that both Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico and Ollanta Humala in Peru—typical examples of leftist neopopulism—were defeated. It is true that in Mexico it was a close, competitive election, but Calderón defeated López Obrador by 240,000 votes (0.5 percent of the total), much more than the margin that Romani Prodi and Angela Merkel received in Italy and Germany—or, for that matter, Oscar Arias in Costa Rica—and no one argues that they were not legitimate winners. It is true that Latin America would be quite different had López Obrador and Ollanta Humala won those presidential elections, but the fact remains that they lost, confirming that neopopulism is not the uncontested, widespread trend in the region that it is perceived from abroad to be.

There are Marxist, populist, and social-democratic lefts in Latin America. The Marxist and populist lefts have come together recently, leaving behind the disputes that existed historically, ideologically, and politically between them; this coming together can be seen in the alliance between Fidel Castro and Chávez. But alongside these lefts, and very significantly, there is a new social democratic left that cannot be ignored. This left may be less visible than the one represented by Chávez, but it is not less effective, especially when faced with the challenge of consolidating democratic institutions in Latin America.

I take the term “social democratic” to mean a reformist position—the legacy of Edward Bernstein, the “revisionist”—along the lines of

a strong commitment to social equity and an unambiguous endorsement of representative democracy. This social democratic left has become increasingly market friendly, with a favorable attitude toward globalization—aware not only of the threats that it represents but of the opportunities that it provides.

THERE IS A clear dividing line between the social democratic left and both the populist and Marxist lefts. The last of these is represented by Cuba's Fidel Castro, the Communist Party of Chile, sectors of the *Frente Farabundo Martí de Liberación Nacional* (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, or FMLN) in El Salvador, and the *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (Sandinista National Liberation Front, or FSLN), in Nicaragua, and parties and factions to the left of the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (Worker's Party, or PT), in Brazil, or even within the PT itself. Although it is true that this left is not what it used to be in the 1960s after the Cuban Revolution, or even in the 1970s and 1980s, around the time of the Nicaraguan revolution (1979)—it can hardly be ignored.

But already in the 1970s and 1980s, there was a process of “social democratization” underway in the Chilean Socialist left. The long years of the Pinochet dictatorship led to a new appreciation of political democracy, a discovery of the democratic roots of the European left, and a new appreciation of social democracy and its “reformist” values.

This renewal of the Chilean Socialist left expresses itself in the “*Concertación*,” the coming together of the Socialists and the Christian Democratic Party in the 1990s and 2000s. The governments of Socialist presidents Ricardo Lagos (2000–2006) and Michelle Bachelet (2006–) are examples of this broader process of “social democratization.”

But Chile is not the only case. There is also the case of presidents Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1994–2002) and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2002–2010) in Brazil, both of whom represent the same tendency. This is clearly so in the case of the *Partido Social Democrata Brasileiro* (Brazilian Social Democratic Party, or PSDB), but also in the case of the PT in very significant ways (hence some sectors from the

party's left have distanced themselves from the "neoliberal"—in fact, social democratic—policies of the PT and Lula). Brazil is a very remarkable case if we consider the specter of "populism" at the time of Lula's first election, in 2002 (due, among other things, to his background as a union leader and his social origins). The fact remains that, just as Chile achieved a remarkable stability in 1990–2007, Brazil achieved great success in 1994–2007, which can be partly explained by the "social democratization" of the left in both countries.

There are other cases of a social-democratization in Latin America; many more than appear in media headlines. This is clear in the case of President Tabaré Vázquez and the *Frente Amplio* (Broad Front) in Uruguay, but also of Lionel Fernández in the Dominican Republic (in fact, Fernández replaced Hipólito Mejía, a typical representative of populism); Martín Torrijos in Panama; Oscar Arias in Costa Rica; and even Alan García in Peru, the populist leader of the 1980s who rules very differently now. More recently in Guatemala—and contrary to preelection polls—Alvaro Colón, the representative of a moderate, social-democratic, center-left party, defeated a hardliner ("*mano dura*"), former General Otto Pérez, to win the presidency in a country where five thousand persons had been killed in political violence in the previous year. It is too early to say whether Cristina Fernández and "Kirchnerism," in this second administration, will move in the direction of social democracy, especially considering the background of Peronist political culture in Argentina. (We should also remember that most of the Caribbean countries are "labor" or social democratic.)

IN SUMMARY, Latin America has paid a high price for a political rhetoric (and, often, a political practice) that treated the "formal" or "bourgeois" character of democracy in a pejorative, derogatory way. The appeal of an alternative "direct" or "participatory" form of democracy, as expressed by the neopopulist left, seemed to capture some of the "malaise" that exists in broad sectors of society. Concretely, however, the reality behind this alternative is personalistic and plebiscitary—a politics that

bypasses the institutions of representative democracy. By contrast, social democratic parties work within and strengthen these institutions.

Although I have been critical of neopopulism, I don't want to lose sight of its roots. In fact, one could say that populism is not the real problem in Latin America; the real problem is the persistence of poverty and inequality and the decomposition of traditional political institutions and elites. Above all, what we have learned in our recent and not-so-recent history is that there are no short cuts on the path toward development and democracy, and populism is precisely, almost by definition, a short cut: the promise of immediate satisfaction of social demands. It may create the appearance of dealing effectively with poverty and inequality, but—as has been demonstrated, again and again—it has failed to do that, usually at the expense of democratic institutions and the poorest of the poor.

A less visible, less strident, and less heroic, but perhaps more successful way forward is opening in Latin America. The program of the new social democratic left seeks to move ahead simultaneously in the direction of political democracy, economic growth, and social equity. It represents a nonpopulist response to the neoliberal economic politics of the 1990s. This path may be less epic than the others that have been tried in the waves of authoritarianism and democracy that have characterized the political history of Latin America, and it may be a long and sometimes tortuous one, but at least it guarantees that it will be the people, democratic citizens, through deliberation, negotiation, compromise, and consensus-building, who will have the final say in the public realm. ●

IGNACIO WALKER was minister of foreign affairs of Chile (2004–2006), president of CIEPLAN (Institute for Latin American Studies, Santiago, Chile) in 2006–2007, and visiting senior research scholar and professor, Princeton University 2007–2008. This paper is adapted from "Democracy and Populism in Latin America," published as a Working Paper (347, April 2008) by the Kellogg Institute for International Studies at the University of Notre Dame. Full references are available from editors@dissentmagazine.org.