Populism, Pueblos, and Plutocracy: Notes on Radical Democracy from Latin America

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Shortly after the reelection of President Obama, the Filipino undocumented immigrant, journalist, and founder of Define American (an immigrant-awareness campaign), Jose Antonio Vargas, wrote:

The Nov. 6 election signaled a demographic tipping point: a record number of Latino and Asian voters, the country’s fastest-growing voting blocs, formed a coalition with black and white Democratic voters to re-elect the country’s first African-American President. A new American majority—a multiethnic majority—has not only arrived but is in fact reordering the political landscape.¹

A multiethnic majority is something the United States has not seen before. Whereas most civil rights and social movements assumed that they stood for minorities, how will the call for social justice change once it is understood to be a demand from a coalition of seemingly disparate voices (and allies) now constituting the majority? How will this demographic shift affect our collective attitude and commitment toward the democratic process and the practice of politics in the United States? What divisive mechanisms will be concocted so as to dissipate the power of this fledgling group?²

In order to answer these questions, this project explores the nature of democracy in the twenty-first century in the wake of shifting racial and ethnic demographics and popular social movements situated against oppressive political arrangements. Skeptics will suggest that a multiethnic majority will not necessarily vote unanimously, fail to achieve consensus, and perhaps even lack the ability to constitute change (especially in the wake of the repeal of parts of the 1965 Voting Rights Act).³ Probably the most poignant reason to be skeptical reminds us that women have constituted a demographic majority in several countries throughout the globe for years, yet do not dominate elections as a women’s movement.⁴ These concerns are right to view the birth of this new majority with caution. Below, I mention one other reason for concern stemming from the history of nonwhite majorities in Latin America.

Amidst these worries, within the recent political works of Ernesto Laclau and Enrique Dussel, two Argentines by birth, one can find ample support for the possibility and importance of a multiethnic majority. These thinkers inspire new life in democratic theory in ways that are attuned to the reality of social movements and the workings of popular political coalitions throughout the globe. Laclau offers the theoretical mechanisms for “equivocating” or translating competing justice claims into strategic alliances seeking to overcome shared antagonisms. Rather than dissipate, these strategic popular movements provide an adequate form through which popular sovereignty becomes possible. While Laclau admits that it is no easy task to maintain populism, his work offers a starting point for the birth of political practices situated in the hands of those who are frequently quieted by oligarchical and plutocratic systems. Dussel provides an alternative global history of political philosophy that departs from Hellenistic and subsequently Western narratives, thus providing the opportunity for diverse political futures that make sense of recent popular movements and eliminating the sentiment that the Latin American or Arab Spring “came out of nowhere.”⁵ Dussel also highlights the material orientation underpinning all political thought and brings to light the inherent victimization of political institutions, which includes the eventual victims of democracy. Both thinkers fuse democratic practice with popular social movements in ways that give some reason to continue thinking about the possibilities of a multiethnic majority.

“The Revolt of the Nonwhite Masses”

Historically, nonwhite majorities connected to the idea of popular democracy have not fared well, especially in places like Latin America.⁶ Time and time again, various social movements consisting of demographic majorities have attempted to wrest political power out of the hands of oligarchs and plutocrats to no avail. For a variety of reasons, white minorities have balked at the idea of “majority rule,” especially when they control substantial amounts of economic, cultural, and political capital.⁷ Through the pressure exerted by social movements and the embrace of politics by people typically alienated from the political scene, popular sovereignty and democratic rule has found a home in Latin America in the past decade. Nevertheless, it remains commonplace that politicians who emphasize the plight of the overwhelming poor, which happens to mostly correspond with indigenous, black,
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and mixed-heritage populations, are typically labeled “populist,” *indigenista,* or some other kind of politician (and whatever it is, it is not the good kind—the point being that most mistake “populism” as supplying a socialist platform).

Amidst these concerns, the idea of a multiethnic majority points toward the future of democratic thought. Rather than representing the needs of oppressed or alienated groups piecemeal, the kind of majoritarian politics I have in mind calls for the formulation of coalitions, blocs, or translatable justice claims united in their marginality, victimization, or “alterity.” These alliances strive to represent the needs of various groups within the larger collective, a balance that will never be perfect and constitutes an ongoing challenge rather than the outright failure of popular movements.

From the onset of *On Populist Reason,* Laclau states that his concern is “the nature and logics of the formation of collective identities.” Rather than harboring some kind of ideological commitment, populist political practice unites heterogeneous elements in ways that constitute hegemonic change. Laclau describes a means through which different perspectives and concerns unite so as to combat a shared antagonism. In order to effectively promote change within the prevailing political order, this movement must crystallize into a single voice that is "inscribable as a claim within the system." Attempts to differentiate, equivocate, or vague referents, Laclau thinks that populism is "a way to the use of "empty signifiers"—i.e., abstractions or variables that make use of "chains of equivalence" in order to arrive at a level of generality that unites the people (e.g., ideas like "freedom," "economic justice" or even "the 99"). This is not to say that all social justice claims are generalizable, nor does it hold that a true referent for populism is possible. While acknowledging that the process of representing particularity through universality will be difficult and at times result in ambiguous, “blurred,” or vague referents, Laclau thinks that populism is “a way of constructing the political” that is characteristic of any communitarian space.

Populism, rather than having an ongoing monolithic concern at its core, attempts to mediate the particularity of differing justice claims amidst the need for sufficient universality.

Similar to Laclau, Dussel describes the creation of an "analogical hegemon," a strategic bloc of marginalized people who realize their continued misrepresentation and victimization amidst the newfound ability to constitute political change. In *Twenty Theses on Politics* he writes, "As "unfinished," democracy attempts to secure the legitimacy of political institutions in a way that is inherently unique and ongoing. Rather than identify any kind of universality in the process of legitimation—which is a point that perhaps runs counter to Laclau's emphasis on the need for a level of generality that can unite a plurality of views under a single banner of the "people"—Dussel advocates for a kind of universality associated with the content of politics (i.e., the need for political institutions to ensure the material well-being and survival of the people it serves).

According to Dussel, as the product of finite human beings, all political institutions will cause victims; even the best or most just political institutions will be unfair or harm someone, somewhere (both within their boundaries and outside). Political institutions are but a moment in the attempt to formalize or capture *potentia,* the will-to-live of the political community. In order to do this, institutions rely upon a "snapshot" of the dynamic needs of community and are bound to fail in some degree since the life of the community will always exceed attempts at totalizing its existence. Potentia is always too rich for *potestas* or institutionalized power. Political philosophy assumes a universal content when it takes material well-being as its central concern and the need to ensure the survival of people (which includes animals and the environment). This material focus directs the institution’s attention towards those denied the ability to continue living (i.e., victims). While the form of addressing the plight of the suffering will vary (on account of democracies being "inimitable"), the inability to live—which is the ultimate foundation for political institutions—will bring the people together in a way that unites their concerns along a universal material ground. Arising from the position of marginalization, alienation, and victimization, the people harbor a "reason or rationality from beyond" or "the reason of Other situated beyond the self," what Dussel calls analectical political thought ("analectics" is derived from Greek particles ano/a or "beyond" and *logos* or "reason"). Given that victimization is inevitable, analectical politics is thus an ongoing process and drives the institution toward a more just situation. Dussel expresses this idea at the end of the *Twenty Theses* when he writes, "It is true that the bourgeois Revolution spoke of liberty, but what is necessary now is to subsume that liberty and speak instead of liberation (as in North American pragmatism, one does not speak of truth but veri-fication). So now we do not refer to liberty but instead to liberation as a process, as the negation of a point of departure, and as a tension pressing towards a point of arrival."
the ultimate fetishization of politics, a point that Dussel clearly worries about.\(^4\) Laclau and Dussel remind us that under popular rule, the institution is made up of this “new” community. While popular government will be no easy task, their work indicates the challenge of popular sovereignty in an age of the multiethnic majority and not the result of this practice.

NOTES


6. Probably the most notorious critique of democracy in Latin America can be found in José Enrique Rodó, Ariel, trans. Margaret Sayers Peden (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988), and Simón Bolívar, “Address to the Angostura Congress, February 15, 1819, the Day of Its Installation,” Nineteenth Century Nation-Building and the Latin American Intellectual Tradition, eds. Janet Burke and Ted Humphrey (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2007). While Bolívar does not mention democracy per se, his rejection of popular suffrage and desire to implement a hereditary senate are clear indications of his disapproval of popular sovereignty, amidst his acknowledgement of the heterogeneity of Latin American populations.


9. Ibid., x.

10. Ibid., x-xi.


12. Ibid., 69.

13. Ibid., 137.


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ANNOUNCEMENTS

Announcement on the Society for Teaching Comparative Philosophy

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It is my pleasure to be able to contribute to this newsletter with the announcement of a new academic society. The Society for Teaching Comparative Philosophy (STCP) is devoted to sharing, discussing, and developing pedagogical strategies for teaching the philosophies of diverse cultures at the undergraduate level. While there are several academic societies devoted to non-Western and/or Asian philosophies (for example, the Society for Asian and Comparative Philosophy, the Association of Chinese Philosophers in America, and the Comparative and Continental Philosophy Circle, among others), there has been no such academic society devoted strictly to issues of comparative and non-Western philosophical pedagogy. Teaching comparative and non-Western philosophical material to undergraduates presents unique challenges, which the STCP aims to help teachers meet. Courses in comparative or non-Western philosophy are often the first exposure students ever have to traditions outside of their own, and as such they are a direct enhancement of the diversity of thought available to students, as well as an illustration of academic plurality and inclusiveness.

The STCP held its inaugural event, the Society for Teaching Comparative Philosophy Symposium and Workshop, from February 28 to March 1, 2014, at the University of North Florida. The meeting itself consisted of a series of workshops and panel presentations aimed at bringing pedagogical theory and scholarship of teaching and learning to bear on the specific challenges of teaching comparative philosophy courses at the undergraduate level. Panel presenters considered such topics as how to structure Introduction to Philosophy courses so as to responsibly include non-Western material, how to respond to rampant Islamophobia in a philosophical manner, and how to help students see colonial heritages and avoid colonialist thinking in the contemporary world. The first workshop, led by Dr. Erin McCarthy (St. Lawrence University), addressed the use of contemplative pedagogies in the classroom, and the second workshop, led by Dr. Benjamin Luecky, drew connections between Philosophy for Children (p4c) and comparative philosophical pedagogies. The STCP welcomes supporters and members from across the profession. To keep apprised of upcoming events, view resources related to teaching comparative and non-Western philosophies, or contribute pedagogical materials you have developed, please visit our new website at http://stcp.weebly.com.

NOTE

1. Sarah Mattice, Ph.D. is assistant professor in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, and the Asia Council Leader, at the University of North Florida. She is also the current STCP president.