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RESEARCH ARTICLE

CONCEPTUALIZING KIRCHNERISMO

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ABSTRACT: What is the nature of kirchnerismo? The experience of the period encompassed by the presidencies of Nestor and Cristina Kirchner have generated greater controversy regarding its characterization. The article critically reviews the analysis that Ernesto Laclau and Guillermo O'Donnell made of kirchnerismo through their respective conceptual models of populism and delegative democracy

KEYWORDS: populism, delegative democracy, Ernesto Laclau, Guillermo O'Donnell, Peronism

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1. Introduction

The three administrations of the Kirchner's that spanned over twelve consecutive years (2003-2015) generated an important divide in certain Argentine social camps, like journalism and academia, like no other period before of the three decades of democratic life. In consequence, there seem to be no middle ground when evaluating the political legacy of *kirchnerismo*: its supporters consider that the latter's accomplishments are only comparable to those promoted by classical *Peronism* in the 1940s. *Kirchnerismo*, they argue, successfully uplifted the country from its worst crisis to set into motion a virtuous model of growth and social inclusion. Its detractors, instead, consider the

period as a populist regression characterized by economic mismanagement, high levels of corruption and presidential authoritarianism (Gervasoni and Peruzzotti 2015).

The discrepancies over the political legacy of *kirchnerismo* are replicated at the conceptual level. Two of the most prominent Argentine intellectuals, Ernesto Laclau and Guillermo O'Donnell, elaborated opposing diagnosis about the kirchnerista experience. While the former views *kirchnerismo* as a healthy wind that blew away some questionable features of Argentine politics, the latter simply saw in it the continuity of harmful yet ingrained political styles and behaviors. For O'Donnell, the period of *kirchnerismo* represents yet another cycle of delegative democracy that confirms the inability of Argentine society to break free of the damaging dynamics of such problematic form of polyarchy. For Laclau, instead, *kirchnerismo* represents an effort to leave behind the limited parameters of the liberal institutional framework that structured Argentine politics since the transition from authoritarian rule, to promote a more radical form of populist democracy. The differences could not be more striking: one sees kirchnerismo as a democratic deepening experience while the other considers as an illustrations of a defective version of polyarchy.

What are the arguments that O'Donnell and Laclau develop in support of their respective diagnoses? The first two sections will review each of the conceptual diagnoses respectively elaborated by Laclau and O'Donnell. It will do so by revising the public positions that each adopted throughout the period in journalistic articles and interviews, given that none of them produced specific academic work on the subject. Yet, while they might not have openly engaged in an academic analysis of the period, their distinctive theoretical perspectives on democracy provided in each case the lens through which they looked at the kirchnerista years: in consequence, the Kirchner's governments were respectively contrasted against the delegative democracy and populism models.

The third section critically evaluates Laclau's and O'Donnell's corresponding diagnosis, arguing that neither of the models seems to adequately capture *kirchnerismo* as a political phenomenon. *Kirchnerismo* seems to lie in a middle ground between those two theories. It does not fully comply with Laclau's criteria for populism for it failed to polarize Argentine society the way Chavismo (and previously Peronism) had done; a fact that Laclau himself recognizes in his depiction of the Kirchner's governments as a case of half-baked populism (*un populismo a medias*). However, it diverts from important features of the delegative model as well. Questions about rights and horizontal checks on the Executive were far from absent during the three presidential tenures. Furthermore, the dynamics of the period do not completely resemble those of the delegative democracy cycle described by O'Donnell.

2. Ernesto Laclau: kirchnerismo as a case of half-baked populism

Of the two authors analyzed, Ernesto Laclau is the one that played a more prominent public role during the period. Until his unexpected death in 2014, Laclau was a highly visible intellectual presence in the region: he was a fervent supporter of the political processes opened by Chavez's Venezuela, Morales' Bolivia, Correa's Ecuador, and the Kirchner's in Argentina.

The lens through which Laclau viewed the experience of kirchnerismo, as well as the other previously mentioned political experiments taking place in the region was his concept of populism as presented *On Populist Reason*. In that book, Laclau develops a critique of the model of representative polyarchy and proposes populism as a strategy to democratic deepening.

On Populist Reason is a book of clear Schmittian undertones where Laclau postulates populism as the path to rescuing 'the political' from the neutralizing dynamics of representative government (Laclau 2007). Laclau conceives populism as a specific –yet paramount-- method of political identification:

"Populism is the royal road to understanding something about the ontological constitution of the political as such..." (Laclau 2007: 67).

What places populism in such a privileged position? For Laclau the answer lies in the antagonistic logic around which populist identities are constructed. Populism expresses a particular rationale of political identity formation, one that –given its friend-enemy rationale—has a particular elective affinity with "the political". In a way reminiscent of Schmitt's contraposition between representation and identification (Schmitt 2008), Laclau distinguishes between 'institutional' and 'populist' ways of constituting political identities. Populism expresses an alternative principle of will formation to the one that structures political dynamics under representative democracy; one that relies not on the institutional filtering and processing of claims but on an unmediated process of symbolic identification instead. Populism consists on the unification of heterogeneous claims under an ambiguous notion of "the people". The people, in Laclau's perspective, is an 'empty signifiers' whose value is not measured by its programmatic content but rather by its capacity at constructing an enemy.

Populism is a rationale of political identity formation that thrives in extraordinary times. Consequently, to be effective several preconditions are to be met. The first condition is a crisis situation, that is, a political-institutional context characterized by the inability of representative institutions to adequately address social demands. Populism is a politics of the extraordinary that arises there where there is a significant gap between important sectors of society and the political order:

“Without this initial breakdown of something in the social order... there is no possibility of antagonism, frontier, or, ultimately, people” (Laclau 2007: 85).

The second precondition is the successful political articulation of those unsatisfied social demands, an operation that requires, in Laclau’s jargon, the establishing ‘equivalential’ links between particular social demands. What binds such articulation together is their common opposition to an antagonistic pole, that is, the enemy (the political class, oligarchy, imperialism, etc.) provides the sole glues to keep such a heterogeneous universe of unreconstructed demands together. The third precondition is precisely the construction of the other side of the antagonistic pole: ‘the people’. The people, Laclau argues, are a part of the community, which views itself as the only legitimate totality (Laclau 2007: 81). The outcome of such process of self-understanding is the emergence of a zero-sum political scenario in which politics assumes an existential dimension. Politics becomes an all or nothing affair where two antagonistic camps deny legitimacy to each other.

It is against the former conceptual background that Laclau evaluates the experience of kirchnerismo. Kirchnerismo is the political emergent of extraordinary times: the arrival of Néstor Kirchner to the presidency in 2003 takes place against the dramatic background of the most profound crisis in contemporary crisis. The twin economic and political crisis that characterizes the events of 2001-2002 provides the ideal scenario for a populist intervention. The crisis opened an insurmountable gap between large sectors of society and the institutional order. The reasons that led to such situation of political alienation were twofold: first, a dramatic socioeconomic crisis that translated in record high levels of poverty and unemployment, second, a legitimacy crisis affecting all the spectrum of the political system.

The double nature of the crisis promoted the activation of a heterogeneous universe of social groups that fueled an impressive cycle of mobilization and protest against a political system that they viewed as unresponsive and corrupt. In brief, Nestor Kirchner arrives to the presidency in a situation that established textbook conditions for a populist outcome: a representative order that was viewed as illegitimate and unresponsive, and a social scenario characterized proliferation of unsatisfied demands.

Laclau considers that Néstor Kirchner moved quickly, promoting a series of high profile initiatives, in an effort to articulate many of the multiplicity of unmet claims that the crisis had activated. The rapid reorientation of economic, human rights, and foreign policies sought to establish a clear break with the policies of the Menem’s and Alianza’s years. The catalogue of policies that Laclau enumerates is large and diverse. The list includes the following: first, a set of economic policies that put an end to neoliberal economic policies (rejection of IMF policy recommendations, debt renegotiation, ex-

tension of social protections programs, end to the private pension system, expansive domestic policies, protectionism, etc.); second, a concomitant reorientation of foreign policy away from the Washington consensus, which translated in concerted actions with other regional partners to block efforts of the Bush administration to extend free trade agreements as well as the strengthening of alternative regional organizations like UNASUR; third, reopening of domestic human rights trials for crimes committed during the dictatorship. Such list will be subsequently expanded by additional measures adopted during the presidencies of Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner, such as the re-nationalization of the oil company *YPF* and of *Aerolineas Argentinas*, the *Asignación Universal por Hijo*, or the passing of gay rights legislation¹.

Yet, Laclau considers that such initiatives, while important, were by themselves insufficient to ensure the success of a populist strategy. While he enthusiastically endorses those decisions, at the same time, Laclau considers that they were not enough to promote a scenario of political polarization: “[Falta] Que la gente perciba que la sociedad está dividida en dos campos.” What is missing is the central operation of any populist intervention: the generation of a political antagonism of such intensity that promotes the partition of society into two irreconcilable and rigid camps, which seek to eliminate each other (Laclau 2009). This is what happened with classical Peronismo and what takes place in the Venezuela of Hugo Chavez. No such thing is going on in Argentina and that is why Laclau refers to kirchnerismo as a case of “populismo a medias” (a half-baked populism). Neither Nestor nor Cristina was able to generate a political divide like the ones between *Chavistas* and *Anti-Chavistas* in nowadays Venezuela or the schism brought by the irruption of Peron into Argentine politics.

In reiterate occasions, Laclau calls the Kirchner to “poner las cosas blanco sobre negro” (to draw a clear line differentiating black from white), that is, to promote a political polarization that could place kirchnerismo as a new hegemony (Laclau 2009). However, despite generating heated disputes and division in specific social camps (most notoriously within the academic and journalist ones), the partition of the electorate and society as a whole into two irreconcilable camps never occurred. A quick analysis of electoral dynamics of the period shows that far from two rigid electoral camps, there are significant electoral fluctuations thanks to a significant portion of the electorate remaining independent. For Laclau, the fact that the polarization that he so much yearned for, never came, represented the most troubling deficit of a political phenomenon that he otherwise enthusiastically endorsed. Precisely, he regretted that a political force that he viewed so positively was unable to become politically hegemonic.

¹ For a general overview of the policies of the period see Gervasoni and Peruzzotti (2015).

What were the factors that, according to Laclau, prevented kirchnerismo to successfully become fully populist? From his numerous public interventions, one can distinguish three main arguments oriented to justify some of the obstacles that the political construction of *kirchnerismo* as populism confronted. The first two respectively refer to discursive or strategic limitations of *kirchnerismo*; the last one instead addresses contextual factors.

The first factor relates to limitations in the discursive construction of kirchnerismo, which, in Laclau's understanding, was not strong enough to promote an authentic process of populist identification. The Kirchner's, he argues, were unable to politically construct a clear and identifiable enemy. The latter represents, in his evaluation of the experience, *kirchnerismo* most troubling political shortcoming.

That kirchnerismo failed at producing a proper process of political identification by no means indicates the absence of an antagonistic spirit: the fact is that during most of the period political dynamics adopted an open antagonistic logic. The problem consequently does not reside in the absence of an antagonistic vocation within kirchnerismo but on the fact that, while endorsing an antagonistic politics, their discursive strategy failed to produce a durable political divide in Argentine society. What are the reasons behind such failure? In a very interesting analysis of the period, Vicente Palermo offers a possible explanation (Palermo 2011). Under kirchnerismo, he argues, politics was characterized by a succession of battles between government and its circumstantial enemies chronologically followed each other, that is, by political battles many times of epic proportions against circumstantial enemies: Menemism, international corporations operating in Argentina, the IMF and other international financial institutions, agrarian producers, the media, the hold outs, the judiciary, etc. In brief, we are confronted with a scenario of multiple and rotating enemies. While each of the battles might have produce short-term political gains for the government, their accumulation was not sufficient enough to build a long-term axis of conflict structure around a more lasting political antagonism (Palermo 2011:101).

For Laclau, the latter might be an indication that kirchnerismo has not yet clearly defined "...the type of popular subjectivity that they want to promote." (Laclau). Kirchnerismo, Laclau argues, needs to politically address popular sectors in a stronger language. It is not enough to promote laudable measures such as the ones he previously enumerated. Such actions need to be complemented symbolically, to ensure the political identification of the addressees of such policies with kirchnerismo. The latter requires the elaboration of slogans and symbols oriented to establish a clear political di-

vide between kirchnerismo and its enemies, the way the slogan "Braden o Peron" did in the electoral context of 1945 that got Peron elected president (Laclau 2009).

A second set of factors mentioned by Laclau in several interviews refers to the challenges that kirchnerismo confronted at articulating a socio-political coalition. In a way, this discussion parallels the previous one indicating that for Laclau Kirchner's encountered difficulties at establishing the adequate symbolic and political conditions for a populist project to succeed. While he recognized the efforts that Nestor Kirchner did in articulating the different mobilized social groups to incorporate them into their project of *transversalidad* (term that was employed to refer to the initial efforts by president Kirchner at constructing a multi-party and social movement coalition), Laclau considers that such efforts confronted twin challenges: first, in establishing a broad and stable relationship with diverse universe of popular social organizations that had become particularly active in the post-crisis period; second, in disciplining the political machinery of the Peronist Party (Partido Justicialista – PJ) to align it under the leadership of the Kirchner's.

For Laclau, the project of *transversalidad* required simultaneously addressing the different demands that came from the world of social movements and from PJ structure under the leadership of the president. The success of such strategy relied on the ability to accomplish certain equilibrium among movements and parties so they could be fully subordinated to the grand strategy of kirchnerismo. In the eyes of Laclau, such equilibrium was not attained. On the one hand, kirchnerismo relied too much on conservative sectors of the PJ. The presence of questionable political figures in the structure of kirchnerismo was a major obstacle in the construction of a progressive agenda. On the other side, the government failed to integrate social movements that should have been an integral part of the kirchnerista coalition, such as Barrios de Pie or the Federación Agraria Argentina. Laclau will repeatedly call for the broadening of the social base of kirchnerismo. The latter demanded greater efforts on the part of Nestor and Cristina Kirchner at addressing the demands of popular sectors:

"El espacio kirchnerista debe ser ampliado... Porque sería muy malo que el kirchnerismo se redujera a la cocina interna del PJ y que una serie de sectores que estaban impulsando un proceso de cambio con la idea de la transversalidad en sus varias dimensiones empiecen a desgranarse y a abrirse. Entre otras cosas porque si se reduce el kirchnerismo a una línea interna del Partido Justicialista los barones del conurbano lo van a traicionar en la primera de cambio." (Laclau 2009)

As the above quotation highlight, Laclau sees in the existing structure of the PJ an important obstacle towards the building of a viable coalition. Paradoxically, Laclau considered that while the PJ could not be completely left out of such enterprise, in many

instances its conservatives sectors actively undermine governmental efforts at consolidating the kirchnerista coalition. This is due to a large extent to the political and ideological heterogeneity that has historically characterized the PJ:

"El peronismo es una matriz histórica dentro de la cual se dan fuerzas totalmente opuestas. Fíjense que tanto el menemismo como el kirchnerismo surgen del peronismo, lo que indica que el peronismo como matriz histórica tiene sectores muy diversos. Evidentemente, Kirchner no podía pretender crear un partido de corte ideológico totalmente nuevo, sino que tenía que contemporizar con distintas fuerzas tradicionales dentro del peronismo. Lo que ha sido la política de Cristina en este último año es el de continuar con esta contemporización, pero al mismo tiempo propender al desarrollo de todas estas formaciones nuevas que están llevando a que el kirchnerismo sea una nueva etapa dentro del peronismo y no solamente la continuidad del peronismo histórico" (Laclau 2011b).

The third factor that Laclau highlights is the socio-institutional context of contemporary Argentina. In his view, the country is characterized by the existence of a dense civil society and a complex political system that is not amenable to populism. Unlike contemporary Venezuela, Argentina retains, even after the weakening effects of the 2001 crisis, a highly differentiated and dense institutional and social structure from where different veto initiatives can eventually (and actually did) emerge to curtail the hegemonic aspirations of a populist leader. Many of the above mentioned battles that kirchnerismo promoted against different sectors resulted in the activation of formal or informal checks on government, perhaps the most dramatic—albeit the only one—being the conflict between government and agrarian organizations in 2008 over the unilateral decision by the Executive to increase taxes on agrarian exports. The Kirchner's then, faced a much more hostile scenario than Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, one that in several occasions put an end to their hegemonic pretensions.

4. Guillermo O'Donnell: Kirchnerismo as the expression of delegative democracy

Laclau evaluated *kirchnerismo* through the lenses of his theory of populism. Guillermo O'Donnell, instead, will analyze the period resorting to his influential model of delegative democracy (O'Donnell 1994). What are the main arguments of the delegative democracy model? According to O'Donnell, delegative democracies are a subtype of polyarchy that rests on the combination of well-functioning vertical electoral

mechanisms and the malfunctioning of horizontal checks on those elected authorities². As a result, under delegative polyarchies, the complex institutional network and political dynamics upon which the representative model of polyarchy is predicated (the separation of powers and governmental checks and balances) is replaced by a very simple and personalized decision-making structure whose cornerstone is the presidential figure. The president governs unconstrained by the usual checks and balances of representative government and is the dominant figure of the political landscape of delegative democracy. The only control that the delegative leader has to confront is the electoral verdict:

"La concepción central de la DD es que la elección da al presidente el derecho y la obligación, de tomar las decisiones que mejor le parecen para el país, sujeto sólo al resultado de las futuras elecciones presidenciales." (O'Donnell 2011a:21)

The outcome of such particular form of political self-understanding is a form of democracy where the president presents herself as the "salvador de la patria" in charge of a "gesta patriótica" (O'Donnell 2011a:23). Such political style is not only celebrated but electorally convalidated by voters, at least in its early years. Like populism, delegative democracy is a politics that thrives in extraordinary situations. Like populism, delegative regimes are an outcome of crisis situations. It is precisely the widespread perception of an intolerable crisis what creates the "ceiling consensus" that is the main precondition for the emergence of a delegative leader. As it was also the case with bureaucratic-authoritarianism, a situation of crisis creates a demand for order upon which the delegative leader capitalizes. Yet, also as in bureaucratic-authoritarianism, such ceiling consensus tends to be short lived. It starts to erode as soon as there are signs that (political and/or economic) order is being restored. Repressed demands for transparency and good government suddenly made their way into the public sphere announcing the end of the first (upward) cycle that regulates the life of delegative democracies. The second and final one begins to unfold:

"...una vez que los peores momentos de las crisis han pasado, reemergen viejos problemas y los parches dados a los manifestados en la crisis demandan seguimiento. Esto requiere políticas estatales mucho más complejas que las inicialmente adoptadas.

² Guillermo O'Donnell classifies accountability mechanisms around their location along a horizontal/vertical axis. Horizontal mechanisms of accountability are located within the state: the term encompasses all of the agencies that composed the intra-state system of mutual checks and controls of representative government. Vertical mechanisms, instead, highlight the role of accountability agents that are external to the state, that is, those rooted in society, be it the electorate, organized civil society or the independent media (O'Donnell 1999).

No solo para decidir adecuadamente esas políticas sino también para su exitosa implementación, ellas requieren instancias de consulta e intermediación con diversas (y cambiantes según el tema en juego) instituciones políticas y sociales. Pero entonces, en parte porque el líder D se ha encargado de corroer o desconocer esas instituciones, y en parte también por un conocido problema psicológico --seguir aferrado a los modos de decisión que se juzga han funcionado antes, aunque han dejado de hacerlo más tarde-- esos líderes mantienen su estilo básicamente inconsulto de toma de decisiones." (O'Donnell 2011a:27-8).

Ironically, the same behaviors that in the upward cycle were celebrated are now considered unacceptable. Civic protests and media scandals began to sprout in the public sphere, accelerating the downward dynamics of a cycle whose last episode is a crisis that brings such delegative cycle to an end... while simultaneously establishing the preconditions for the inauguration of a new delegative cycle... Societies where democracy adopts a delegative form are thus trapped by a vicious and repetitive cycle where the same script is being played by rotating actors.

It is from such long term perspective that Guillermo O'Donnell addresses the experience of kirchnerismo. He views the period as yet another delegative cycle, similar to the ones that had previously dominated the political life of the democratic order inaugurated in 1983. Kirchnerismo, he argues, sets into motion a new delegative cycle (the previous one being that of Menemismo). If O'Donnell had referred to the Menem years as a paradigmatic expression of delegative democracy, now he considers that it is kirchnerismo "...the one that today's embodies the delegative conception..." ("el kirchnerismo corporiza hoy esta concepción delegativa..." O'Donnell 2009).

Indistinctively of the evaluation that one can make about the policy reorientation that took place under the Kirchner's (at this respect, O'Donnell shares some of Laclau's sympathies for some of the policies that, particularly, Nestor Kirchner enacted, particularly in the areas of human rights and economics), he questions the forms in which many of the decisions are made and implemented. Nestor Kirchner from adopted delegative behaviors early on, despite his campaign promises for political renewal of styles and behavior to promote greater governmental transparency. In the administrations that followed, CFK did nothing but deepened such delegative tendencies.

O'Donnell described the nature of kirchnerismo in the following terms:

...estamos frente a un elenco gobernante muy pequeño que está convencido de que tiene una misión casi sagrada a cumplir, y que por lo tanto le conviene resucitar fantasmas y polarizar en un execrable odio todo aquello que se le opone. Es una técnica que implica varias cosas: quien está convencido de que tiene esta misión no tiene aliados, solo tiene seguidores o súbditos que son piezas a usar según la necesidad; a

quien es el portador de esa causa, y para el cual vale todo, no le importa acarrear tras de sí gente despreciable... No me sorprende que esta lógica haya dado por destruida la transversalidad... (O'Donnell 2009).

According to O'Donnell, the Kirchner exerted a frontal attack on the system of horizontal controls. Throughout the period, the main agencies of control were annulated and the government intervened to control the judiciary as well. In addition, the independent media was subjected to all sort of governmental pressure. In fact, one of the most dramatic conflicts of the period was the offensive that the CFK administration initiated against *Clarín* media conglomerate (O'Donnell 2011b:27). In addition, (and in open opposition to the proclaimed commitment to a strong state) there were no significant efforts during the period to professionalize state bureaucracies:

Argentina tiene una tremenda necesidad de reconstruir un Estado eficaz, razonablemente abierto a los ciudadanos. Este es un Estado que, por ejemplo, tiene organismos de control de concesiones, de obras privatizadas, que ni siquiera tienen constituidos sus directorios. Y donde los que lo manejan no son personas designadas por concurso sino designadas a dedo por el Poder Ejecutivo. Donde los enormes subsidios no tienen ningún control real en cuanto a su destino y utilidad. Un Estado que está fallando terriblemente en cuestiones que son el ABC de un estado responsable (O'Donnell 2010b).

O'Donnell sees in kirchnerismo a threat to democracy. The latter does not mean that he thinks that there are chances that the delegative behavior of kirchnerismo could open the way to a full authoritarianism, as was the case with Fujimori in Peru or Chavez in Venezuela. Rather, O'Donnell considers that the risk that democracy faces in Argentina is more imperceptible: in his view, the persistence to a delegative form of government can lead to the "slow death" of Argentine democracy, consequence of less spectacular path towards authoritarianism generated by the gradual accumulation of authoritarian practices. On the bright side, O'Donnell considers that there are counter-tendencies in Argentina that make the possibility of an authoritarian regression improbable. The strength of its civil society, of independent journalism, and of oppositional forces are three elements that place important limits on delegative leaders (O'Donnell 2010b).

5. Reviewing the populist and delegative diagnosis

As previously argued, the evaluation that Ernesto Laclau and Guillermo O'Donnell make of the Kirchner's period is deeply influenced by their conceptual models of populism and delegative democracy respectively. If the previous section showed the extent to which the phenomena of kirchnerismo reflects such theoretical models, the aim of the following one is to discuss some challenges that the former brings to both the populist and delegative arguments.

Let's begin with Laclau's diagnosis. In his eyes, the main 'deficit' of kirchnerismo was its inability to become a full-blown populism. He was constantly highlighting such shortcoming, repeatedly encouraging the Kirchner to take a more decisive polarizing stand. The latter did not prevent Laclau from being a fervent defender of the overall political experience to the extent that he evaluates the period as the one of the most progressive ones, if not the most progressive, of contemporary Argentine history. Kirchnerismo, he stated, "has been an historical miracle that resulted in a notorious expansion of the democratic horizon or Argentine politics" ("un milagro histórico que ha expandido notablemente el horizonte de la política democrática en Argentina")

Laclau's enthusiastic support for kirchnerismo –despite the latter's inability to become a full-blown expression of populist politics—raises some questions about the status of his general theory of populism. Specifically, it challenges important assumptions about the privileged status he grants populism as a democratizing strategy while weakening his critical arguments regarding the potentials of representative institutions. If, as his arguments and positions show, the Kirchner's were able to advance a very progressive political agenda without fundamentally challenging the institutional framework of liberal democracy, then he is acknowledging that representative arrangements can have a transformative potential that his theory as developed *On Populist Reason* seems to ignore.

The fact is that in several of his public interventions Laclau portrays a much benevolent picture of liberal democracy than the one he presents in *On Populist Reason*, to the extent that he is willing to consider as desirable a regime that rests upon "...an intermediate point between populism and (liberal) institutionalism..." (Laclau 2001a). Laclau seems to go further, considering that the creation of a consensual institutional regime organized around a right-left ideological axis could be an attractive alternative for Argentina:

Si en la Argentina se creara un marco institucional relativamente consensual como un proceso--no como algo que se dé de antemano--en el que hubiera una fuerza de centroderecha y otra de centroizquierda que creara el eje del sistema político, con elementos aberrantes marginales que va a haber en los extremos, pero sin posibilidades de influir en la situación política más fundamental, entonces se podría llegar a un sistema

político como el existente en Brasil, es decir, se podría llegar a un sistema institucional estable. Eso no lo veo imposible. (Laclau 2014)

It remains unclear if the previous statements entails a conscious revision by Laclau's of his conceptual standpoint, resulting in a welcomed recognition of the potentials of liberal institutions, or if he just considers such outcome as second-best alternative; one he is willing to concede given the factual limitations that a populist strategy encounters in political systems, like the Argentinian one, that had reached an important degree of development of its system of checks and balances on the one hand, and of its civil society.

Either of the previously described options seriously undermines key conceptual assumptions of *On Populist Reason*. If populism loses effectiveness in societies whose political system has reached certain threshold of development, then the explanatory power of Laclau's theory of populism is greatly reduced. Far from being the royal road to understand the political, populism becomes a strategy that can only be applied in a limited number of cases and that will be rather ineffective in culturally plural and institutional dense societies. If, on the contrary, Laclau is willing to acknowledge that processes of democratic deepening can take place within a representative polyarchy, then it is legitimate to raise questions regarding the costs and benefits of populist strategies as compared with alternative ones. If there are viable competing alternatives to populism, why take the risks that the latter always entails in terms of authoritarianism? The risk of political authoritarianism might be a price to pay if there is no feasible alternative (given the negative neutralizing role that representative democracy exerts on "the political"). But if one is willing to concede an autonomy and transformative potential to liberal democratic regimes, then the option for the riskier strategy of populism loses attractiveness.

O'Donnell's evaluation of the period could not be more contrasting to Laclau's. Far from seeing it as a force that notoriously expanded the horizons of democratic politics, he considers that the delegative behaviors that marked the Kirchner's presidencies did not enhance the quality of Argentine democratic life. On the contrary, the assaults that many horizontal agencies confronted during the period deviates the country further away from any path of democratic betterment. Kirchnerismo simply followed on the tracks of a questionable political tradition that blocks any efforts at accomplishing the transition from a delegative to representative polyarchy.

There are, however three aspects of the Kirchner's period that set it apart from the standard delegative cycle. The first one is its temporal extension. It is a cycle that spans through three consecutive and full presidential periods, something that even the para-

digmatic epoch of *Menemismo* failed to accomplish. O'Donnell considers that unusual extension of the latest delegative cycle was favored by the extremely favorable circumstances brought about by the so-called "commodities boom". The latter generated extraordinary governmental revenues, giving the Kirchner's administration an unusually strong political leverage while simultaneously promoting a notable increase of domestic consumption that expanded the upward moment of the delegative cycle.

While the economic bonanza brought by the commodities boom might help explain the political momentum enjoyed by both Nestor and Cristina Kirchner in their upward cycle, there still remains an important question: was there a downward cycle? The question is important for it points to a key aspect of the delegative argument, which is predicated on the existence of an inexorable two-step cycle. This leads us to the second factor: the nature and dynamics of the kirchnerista cycle as compared to the delegative one. The patterns of support-withdrawal of support that characterized the twelve-year period of kirchnerismo did not correspond to the "roller-coaster" pattern of the delegative cycle. The Kirchner's enjoyed high levels of public opinion and electoral support, and that included CFK's final years in office. CFK ended her mandate retaining very favorable percentages of positive image. She was far from a lame-duck president and the 2015 presidential election resulted in a very competitive electoral process in which the official formula was defeated by a narrow margin. Thus no final crisis brought to a close the kirchnerista cycle. Instead, the transfer of government to the newly elected administration of president Mauricio Macri took place in an economic and political context of normality³.

While kirchnerismo managed to maintain significant degrees of electoral and popular support --fact that resulted in dynamics that did not resemble the roller coaster pattern that O'Donnell describes in his analysis about delegative democracy--there were several circumstances in which the presidential initiatives were defeated due to popular and institutional resistance. Of particular importance are those ones through which the Kirchner's sought to promote legal or constitutional to ease the existing restrictions to be elected for a third term, to promote a judicial reform that would have given the Executive greater control over the federal system of justice, and the sustained social conflict that resulted from the Executive's unilateral decision to increase export taxes. In addition, the presence of an autonomous Supreme Court --which was the result of a process of renewal by Nestor Kirchner--indicates the relevance and relative degree of

³ Such a situation of normalcy seems to be an anti-climax for the launching of a new delegative cycle. It is unclear, however, if the present situation is merely an interval between two delegative cycles or there are elements to consider that such cycle has been interrupted.

success of efforts seeking to block the delegative impulses of the Kirchner's administrations.

6. Concluding remarks: contrasting visions on kirchnerismo?

Laclau and O'Donnell present two contrasting evaluations of the nature and legacy of kirchnerismo. Their analyses are heavily tinted by their respective theoretical perspectives, which find one another in open contraposition. O'Donnell's perspective organizes a spirited defense of a representative model of polyarchy. For him, the process of democratization that Argentina inaugurates in 1983 after the horrors of the last military dictatorship, should be canalized within the parameters of a liberal form of democracy which could effectively guarantee citizen's rights against any form of state discretion. Political liberalism, in his view, should serve as the inspiration for any progressive democratizing agenda:

Hemos conquistado los derechos políticos... pero nos falta lo que en Europa fue precondición de las luchas políticas: los derechos civiles. Por eso entiendo que -aunque resulte paradójico--un programa progresista hoy consiste en sostener una política agresivamente liberal. En dos sentidos... uno una batería de derechos garantizados no solo contra el Estado sino contra otros civiles--los grandes poderes privados--; el otro que tiene un componente anti-paternalista... entendido tendencialmente como *empowerment*... (O'Donnell 1997:64)

O'Donnell consequently argues for a "second transition", the latter not necessarily implying a process of regime change like the original ones whose point of departure was a bureaucratic-authoritarian state, but one that results in the replacement of one form of polyarchy (delegative) for another (representative). The success of such transition will largely depend on the capacity that the novel democracies exhibit at democratic betterment. From this perspective, the quality of a democratic regime is directly related to the capacity that a regime has to effectively enforce the principle of limited government (Peruzzotti forthcoming). Since they are the principal obstacles conspiring against the success of such project of democratic betterment, delegative (and more so populist) forms of political self-understanding should be eradicated.

Laclau's point of the departure is the opposite of O'Donnell's. He is not interested in perfecting the institutional arrangements of representative polyarchy for he considers them the expression of a conservative *institucionalismo*. His theory of populism openly challenges the representative ideal of limited government that served as model of in-

spiration for the quality of democracy approach. Actually, he goes further than that, openly challenging the very notion of political institutionalism. His realistic understanding of institutions –in which all institutional orders are seen as the crystallization of power relations-- leads him to ignore the normative regulative role played by institutions, particularly democratic ones. If all institutional orders are mere expression of de facto power equilibriums, the search for a truly democratizing force must be looked for elsewhere. Laclau's notion of populism expresses a politics of the extraordinary, that is, a politics that unfolds outside of the normal channels of institutionalized democratic politics. If O'Donnell wanted to perfect the arrangements of representative democracy, Laclau seeks to transcend them (Peruzzotti forthcoming).

It is thus not strange that given their differing point of departure, Laclau and O'Donnell end up presenting contrasting evaluations of *kirchnerismo*. If Laclau sees in the Kirchner's an innovating political force that has positively transformed the Argentine political scenario, O'Donnell sees in them the latest incarnation of a political style that prevents the full accomplishments of the potentials of representative democracy. What for Laclau represents a source of strength and innovation (unconstrained presidential leadership), O'Donnell views it as a menacing authoritarian force.

Interesting enough, their analyses about *kirchnerismo* tend ultimately to converge: given its incapacity to become a full blown case of populism as well as the strength that formal and informal checks on government played during the period in deterring Executive initiatives, Laclau's *kirchnerismo* seems to be closer to O'Donnell's delegative model than to his own conception of populism. O'Donnell also recognizes that the delegative initiatives of the Kirchner's arose significant resistance from sectors of the state and of civil society. In the end, although clearly not with the same intensity, *kirchnerismo* was unsatisfactory to both. For Laclau, for he would have wished for a stronger leadership action to overcome the traps that any representative order sets to transformative politics. For O'Donnell, for the period reiterates his conviction regarding the difficulties that Argentina encounters at overcoming delegative democracy.

Contemporary Argentina finds itself in an equidistant point that is as far from the populist project that Laclau yearned for as the model of representative polyarchy that O'Donnell wished for. Perhaps that is not such a bad place to be. It might be concurrently indicating an accomplishment as well as a shortcoming of Argentine democratic life. On the one hand, it might be a signal that both the political system and society had developed strong enough antidotes to make a populist project improbable while setting clear limits on presidential aspirations to perpetuate a delegative cycle (Peruzzotti 2013). On the other hand, they might also be calling attention to a democratic shortcoming, in the sense that such antidotes seem to be not strong enough to fully eradi-

cate delegative behaviors from the national scenario. However, if such developments can put an end (or at least attenuate) the vicious patterns of the delegative cycle (as the analysis of the kirchnerista period and of the last transfer of power seem to suggest), the persistence of delegative behaviors could, hopefully in a not very distant future, become a non-threatening presence to the stability of the democratic order.

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