

Populismo, Guerra Civil, Crisis, Violencia

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Discussion Questions:

1) By gathering civil war, violence, crisis, and populism as a series of key concepts, we hoped to run with the hunch that these concepts translate differently, encounter differential use and reception, and move with varied investment and habit across participants' national and institutional differences. Perhaps there are times when latin americans say "crisis", when north americans say civil war; perhaps violence is sometimes, for someone - can we say for sure who? - a word-picture that serves to stoke the flames of projective identification, a despised and unwieldy fragment of the self that an ego keeps at bay by knowing precisely where it irrupts, but also knowing that this irruption is never not external to itself. But then, we thought, aren't these the very sort of differences that split into an infinite game of differences in a populist movement? Wouldn't it be so very deliciously populist of us to presume that informal debate could best proceed by offering the chance to reject these theories of social determination in favor of a search for the satisfaction of the groups' multitudinous individual demands or expectations of the event by way of a conversation that only unsatisfactorily retains these key terms as empty signifiers to establish that under their charismatic aegis we have, in fact, convened something together? In light of this, we ask for your candid associations with the terms. How do they show up in your work? What are you working on that makes them necessary? And how do you describe that need? What sort of circumstances might lead you to describe it differently? Where within what you're doing are you theorizing to the end of offering, or do you want to offer, a new way to think about them? Where do you borrow the theoretical tools of others, and whose, and how?

2) What is the status of the concept of institution in a theory of populism? How does thinking with populism - as a social phenomenon, as a political tactic, as an academic reply to the instability of familiar forms of analysis and interlocution, as a lurking possibility of anti-institutionalism, as ethico-political demand - inflect, if not require, that institutionality be thematized? Perhaps leading the question a bit too far, we would also like to ask why do we care about institutions?

3) What is the relation between the civility of civil war and the state?

4) How do civil wars arise? What counts as civil war, as war, as violence in the domain of political theory? In other intellectual pursuits, and in accord with other disciplinary parameters? To what tropes do we take recourse when establishing violence as primary emphasis of debate? Put another way, what makes for a good discussion about war?

5) In this age of populism, what do we talk about when we talk about social structures? Or don't we any longer have a need for thinking structurally about the social? And what *was* that old need, again, shelved and dusty with anachronism?

6) Taking advantage of the widely varied scholarly backgrounds in the room and experience with different forms of populism, historical and present, we'd like to consider a feature of populism that is often touted in the rise of Trump: racial resentment. In *Black Reconstruction* (1835), amidst a detailed description of the revanchism of white americans that followed after the abolishment of slavery and the end of the Civil War of 1861-65, WEB Dubois offers a take on the matter that may feel eerily prescient in this era of "fake news", noting that "particularly has the South suffered spiritually by the effort to use propaganda and enforce belief. This always results in deliberate lying. Not that all white southerners deliberately lie about the Negro, but to an astonishing degree the honest South allows known lies to stand uncontradicted. The wide distortion of facts which became prevalent in the white South during and after Reconstruction as a measure of self-defense has never been wholly crushed since..." (705) There is, it would seem, a certain populism at work in this account, except that the empty signifier - the means by which to draw sociologically dispersed constituencies together, from the poor to the richest of the rich - is whiteness. Whiteness steps in when the institutions, "peculiar" and otherwise, that were in place before the war are no longer working, and it relies upon what Spanish philosopher José Luis Villacañas calls "affect" to bind up its interpellative power, where conceptual purchase of political discourse cannot be achieved.

And yet, where Villacañas might indicate a "demanda de ser pueblo" that "no tiene representación concreta" (68), helping the lies to smooth over problems instead of ripping open wounds, new or old - where there is a theory of friend and enemy at play that ensures a manichean vision in which populism sings sweet possibilities of tomorrow to the masses who consider themselves to be the excluded - Dubois also raises the specter of "self"-defense: that there is a racial hierarchy in which the populist in question figures themselves superior to another's inferiority. This is in the end a

defensive strategy; the signifier in question is not entirely empty, albeit neither does the heft of the “necessary empiricity” (Balibar) that fills it easily give up the nature of its empiricism. For it is blackness that, if we excuse the clumsiness of the phrase, fills the void.

This brings us to the final discussion question for the group. What are the populisms that have arisen over the course of the 20th century defending against? Is defensiveness the condition of possibility of populism’s very description, insofar as it entails an affirmation of the inescapability of what Dubois calls “a wide distortion of facts”? Citing Brett Levinson, Villacañas argues that in populismo “hay cierto miedo a la implosión social verdadera” (91), but what sort of social implosion is there to fear if a theory of populismo also presupposes “el fin de la teoría marxista de la sociedad” (42)?

Let’s suppose, for the sake of argument, that, if the overarching argument of Dubois’s work from this point on is that there is a specific rise in globality as an onto-epistemological context in the late 19th century that can only be understood through the experience of the african american - if it the african american experience is, therefore, “good to think with”, as Nahum Chandler avers- and if, by that measure, the value of citing this historical particularity is not to enlarge its significance to the elision of other populist phenomena so much as in the hope of raising different sorts of historical questions that may continue to drive critical analysis and the critical inhabitation of critical discourse, then what are we to make of the claim that, following this historicist tact, the populisms of the 20th century arise within the paradigm that Dubois is describing? Do we buy this historical argument? Do we dismiss it out of hand? Does it matter? To whom?

Bibliography

Villacañas, José Luis. *Populismo*. Madrid: La Huerta Grande, 2015.

DuBois, William Edward Burghardt. "Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America." *New York: Free Press*. 1992 (1935).