Social and Institutional Delegitimization in Latin American Populist Regimes from the Late 20th to Early 21st Century

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ABSTRACT

The construction of the enemy's image in Latin American populist regimes extends beyond political opponents, encompassing social actors and institutions. This essay examines such representations within populist movements and leaders—such as Peru's Fujimori, Argentina's Menem and Kirchner, and Venezuela's Chávez—active in the 1990s and early 21st century. Common features emerge across these populist regimes, particularly in identifying social enemies and institutional adversaries.

Keywords: Populism, Political delegitimating, Latin America, Social enemy, Institutional enemy.

La costruzione dell'immagine del nemico nei regimi populisti dell'America Latina va oltre gli oppositori politici, estendendosi a includere attori sociali e istituzioni. Questo saggio esamina tali rappresentazioni all'interno dei movimenti e dei leader populisti—come Fujimori in Perù, Menem e Kirchner in Argentina, e Chávez in Venezuela—attivi negli anni '90 e nelle prime decadi del XXI secolo. In queste ondate di regimi populisti emergono caratteristiche comuni, in particolare nell'identificazione dei nemici sociali e degli avversari istituzionali.

Parole chiave: Populismo, delegittimazione politica, America Latina, nemico pubblico, nemico istituzionale.

"The only thing I hope is that people understand that our true enemies are politicians"[1]. This is how Javier G. Milei commented six year ago on Argentina's critical economic situation and the political repositioning of many prominent and secondary leaders as the October presidential elections of 2019 approached. Upon closer examination, the practice of political delegitimization is not exclusive to recent times; it has repeatedly shaped history over the past centuries. The transformation of political opponents into "enemies of the nation", through strategies and rhetoric aimed at progressively excluding them from the legitimate political space, has deep roots that transcend contemporary history (Cammarano 2017; Cantù, Febo and Moro 2009). These dynamics — both rhetorical and policy-based — have also permeated populist regimes in the modern era. In Latin America, where populism has established deep roots, the concept of "enemies" has expanded well beyond the political sphere, meaning that well beyond political actors, such as parties (Fichelstein 2017). In these contexts, the idea that a segment of society opposes the core that embodies national identity is one of the key characteristics of populism, regardless of its definition — whether as a political strategy, a rhetorical practice, or an ideological form (Germani 1978; Canovan 1981; Rosanvallon 2020).

Specifically, the construction of the "enemy" has been a defining political feature of Latin American populist regimes that emerged between the late 20th and early 21st centuries. This demonstrates a pattern in the concept of populism resilient to political changes and social transformations within Latin American countries, particularly since the end of the Cold War. From the 1990s onwards, different types of populism emerged, often categorized in the media along the left-right spectrum in Latin America. On the right, neoliberal populisms arose, particularly in compliance with to structural reforms inspired by the Washington Consensus — examples include Carlos Saúl Menem in Argentina, Alberto Fujimori in Peru, and Fernando Collor de Mello in Brazil. Today, this list appears to be growing with the rise of new populist phenomena, such as Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil and Javier G. Milei in Argentina. On the left, redistributive populist regimes gained momentum at the turn of the 21st century in response to the socioeconomic crises of neoliberal populism, achieving significant success in the early decades of the new century. Examples include Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, and Evo Morales in Bolivia (Weyland 2003; De La Torre 2010).

The global political and social climate underwent profound changes during the 1980's and 1990's: the turning point marked some significant shifts in Latin American social dynamics. This was partly due to the deep crisis affecting the

[1] Interview with Elizabeth De Luca during the program "*Dame el Poder*" broadcast on Canal Metro, 06/13/2019, available online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5LQ5fjDFw-c [last access: 27/02/2025].

Import Substitution Industrialization model and partly due to the implementation of neoliberal policies applied in varying degrees across Latin America. The social consequences of structural reforms aimed at making the State more economically agile soon became apparent. In the early 1990s, unemployment decreased due to the rapid expansion of the tertiary sector, which outpaced the primary and secondary sectors. This process unfolded differently across regions, mainly impacting services and domestic trade, particularly those not subject to international market competition. Economic liberalization led to economic and social growth driven by the tertiary sector, reshaping labour market demand with lasting effects.

First, economic indicators improved across all social classes: in the first ten years (during the entire 1990's decade), Latin America's GDP per capita grew by 1,4 % (with the highest increase in Chile, with 5,2% and the lowest in Cuba and Haiti, with a decrease of 1,9%). Second, goods that had previously been accessible only to the wealthiest sectors in the 1980s became available to the middle class in the 1990s, leading to a trickle-down effect that enabled lower-income groups to access goods and services previously reserved for the middle class. Third, informal employment increased, as many workers exited formal labour structures without being able to reintegrate into them. Fourth, a widening gap emerged between the more affluent and educated sectors — who benefited from global economic and social integration — and the lower-income groups, who, pushed into informal employment, contributed to growing poverty pockets. Within this framework, a process of social differentiation progressively consolidated, resulting in an intensified fragmentation of societal divisions, notably along, for example, the lines of gender, social status, and age (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean 2004).

The economic difficulties that characterize the transition between the 20th and 21st centuries exacerbate social fragmentation in Latin America. During this period, a sharp economic crisis struck the region, lowering economic indicators for nearly five years. However, this crisis was relatively short-lived, as the commodity boom provided economic fluidity and dynamism to an increasingly stagnant region, improving social conditions but failing to curb labour market informality. This period saw the widespread implementation of direct income transfer programs, which had significant short-term social benefits but also long-term economic drawbacks (Ocampo 2007; Bértola and Ocampo 2012; Ragno 2023).

The existence of increasingly stratified societies appears, in some ways, incompatible with the traditional populist discourse that divides the world into "the people" and "the anti-people." However, this perception does not align with the reality of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. The construction of the "people's" identity has evolved away from the use of iconic social figures, as seen in past

populist movements. For example, in Argentina, Juan Domingo Perón symbolized the "descamisado" as the embodiment of the chosen people he sought to represent. Similarly, Fidel Castro in Cuba elevated the "guajiro" as a national archetype. In more recent populist movements, however, this identity-building process has become more complex due to increased social differentiation. Consequently, the construction of an enemy image has become increasingly essential for defining political culture — both in right-wing and left-wing populist regimes.

The described social and economic policy changes have led to distinct political actions by Latin American populist regimes at the turn of the 21st century. Despite variations in policy approaches, there are profound similarities between these experiences. The first part of this essay will focus on these shared characteristics, using this perspective to outline the main features of populism. Initially, the analysis will explore the conceptual core around which the populist worldview and ideology are constructed. The second section will examine how populist regimes interact with political and social opponents, often stigmatizing them as "enemies of the nation", transcending the mere portrayal of political adversaries within the realm of electoral competition.

The Faces of Populism

Populism is perhaps one of the most frequently associated terms with Latin American contemporary history and politics. This type of regime has taken root in various national contexts from the mid-20th century to the present. Many social scientists have studied Latin American populism and, more broadly, populism as a political phenomenon (for some recent examples: Anselmi 2017; Zanatta 2013; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017).

Until the 1990s, Latin American populism was closely linked to the so-called "classical populist regimes", such as those led by Juan Domingo Perón in Argentina, Getúlio Vargas in Brazil, and Fidel Castro in Cuba. In many ways, the analysis of populism at the time was largely shaped by these experiences, with a few exceptions. The emergence of neoliberal populism in the 1990s revived academic interest in the subject, reinforcing the conceptual and ideological approach partially introduced by Ionescu and Gellner (1969), which became established in the literature by the early 21st century (Mudde 2017).

The conceptual approach to populism allows for the development of a strong core upon which the populist ideology, as well as the parties and regimes inspired by it, are based. The strong core of populism, in its more or less recent historical forms, corresponds to a moral and religious dimension of politics. This dimension does not concern, evidently, the management of public affairs (or at least, not in a specific and priority way). Rather, it serves as the horizon upon

which "regenerative crusades" are inspired - crusades that are obligated to moralize the citizenry, which over the years has been at risk of corruption due to the immorality of the ruling class (social, political, and economic). According to the main populist leaders, politics is thus a set of tools and processes aimed at reconstructing the unitary and monolithic dimension of the people - a dimension previously shattered by the entire political class, which is considered "corrupt" (Zanatta 2013).

From this dynamic, a second characteristic of the core of populist ideology emerges: the unanimous representation of the people. According to this interpretation, the concept of "the people" is defined in three ways. The first is the unanimous people as the holder of sovereignty. This dimension takes shape from the Atlantic Revolutions, reinterpreting popular sovereignty as unlimited in its exercise and definition by laws and constitutions. In this sense, the idea that the consensus derived from this type of sovereignty should have no limits emerges — specifically, the absence of the so-called 'liberal checks and balances'. This conception operates in the same way as Rousseau's notion of the "general will," where the people reclaim sovereignty whenever the political class is seen as equivocating or corrupting the general will. The second interpretation is that of the people as a social entity — i.e., the "common people". In this view, a clear division is drawn between ordinary citizens and the establishment or elite, which is — by definition — corrupt and corrupting, according to the typical dichotomous representation of populism. This elite (understood in both economic and political terms) is blamed politically and morally for allowing the people to lose their foundational trait, the political unity. The third interpretation is that of the people as a national community. In this perspective, the people consolidate themselves using all the categories, rituals, and symbolism of nationalism. In this sense, the "anti-people" takes on the characteristics of the "anti-national" (Müller 2017; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017).

A fundamental characteristic of populist ideology is the leader's ability to establish a direct and unmediated connection with the represented people. The leader is able to sense the needs of the people and give voice to their demands by challenging the anti-people, the anti-nation, and the establishment. This creates a Manichean dynamic in which the people inherently represent good, while the elite (political, economic, or social) is portrayed as a harmful and corrupting entity, both for the people and for the nation as a whole. In this radical struggle between good and evil, the populist leader presents themselves as the embodiment of the people's will and needs, defining the people in a singular and undifferentiated manner (politically, economically, socially). The emergence of differences, in fact, is seen as an epiphenomenon of the moral corruption afflicting the national community (Andrews-Lee 2021).

This holistic dimension of the people clearly reveals the boundaries of legitimate political space. In this representation, if the populist leader or movement embodies the people in their entirety, there is no room for legitimate political opposition, because anyone who opposes them automatically becomes an enemy of the people and the nation and is thus delegitimized. In such a political system, political dialogue or institutionalized confrontation aimed at reaching a shared political decision becomes difficult. Alliances with a delegitimized opponent are not only impossible but, in some respects, immoral. This perspective, in short, demonstrates how defending minorities, guaranteeing opposition voices, or — more crucially — maintaining the separation of powers makes no sense: the sovereignty of the people is embodied by the leader, who, for this reason, has unlimited authority that transcends the limits established by the constitution and the law (Taguieff 2002; Moffitt 2016).

It is precisely on the issue of the separation of powers that another defining characteristic of populism emerges. Populist movements tend to promote dynamics that enhance the prerogatives of the executive branch at the expense of the legislative and judicial branches. The judiciary, for example, is often identified with the establishment that seeks to weaken the regenerative force of the people. In populist rhetoric, it is portrayed as an oligarchy that wields political power without having received direct popular legitimacy. This is why many populist leaders throughout history have framed the issue rhetorically: "We are elected by the people, judges are not". The legislative branch, in turn, is often labeled as "useless,", "slow," or "harmful," since it symbolically represents the fragmentation of the people along political and social divides — divides that, as mentioned, populism struggles to acknowledge (Meny & Surel 2000; López-Alves & Johnson ed. 2019).

Delegitimizing Whom? The Faces of the Enemy in Latin American Populism

Based on these conceptual cores that define populism, the "enemy" in populist regimes appears as the one who disrupts the harmony of the people, who are otherwise united by communal ties. This characteristic is also evident in Latin American populisms. But how do populist regimes of the late 20th and early 21st centuries identify their "enemies"? What characteristics do these enemies have?

Before addressing these questions, it is important to highlight the differences between contemporary populism and classical populism — differences that arose from shifting global dynamics after the end of the Cold War. At that time, there was a growing perception that liberal and representative democracy had definitively established itself worldwide. In this context, it seemed impossible to implement policies openly opposed to this political system — such as the

expropriation of media outlets, the imprisonment of political opponents, their exile, and the removal of public figures (including university professors or members of the judiciary) — that had characterized, in whole or in part, classical populist regimes such as Peronist Argentina, Varguist Brazil, and Castro's Cuba.

At the same time, the 1990s marked the definitive end of authoritarian experiences, many of which had been notorious for systematic human rights violations. From Brazil to Peru, passing through Chile, Argentina, and Uruguay, the experiences of the recent past had led to a widespread rejection among civil societies of the use of political violence and repression. However, political delegitimization of opponents remained a weapon still employed in public discourse — one that was directed against those "enemies of the people" who emerged from both the social and political spheres, using the discourses and the political practices. In this regard, as previously noted, this essay does not purport to examine the transformation of the political opponent into an enemy of the nation. Instead, its focus lies within the broader framework of civil society and institutional structures.

The Social Enemy

A type of delegitimization cultivated by populist movements and regimes is the one directed against specific social groups perceived as enemies of the Nation. But who are these groups? And, more specifically, which ones have been targeted by populism in Latin America over the last thirty years?

First and foremost, journalists and media outlets considered instrumental in fostering divisions within "the people." Journalism, in this sense, becomes fertile ground for widening the cracks in the monolithic concept of "the people" as represented by populists. In certain ways, journalism disrupts the direct and visceral connection between the leader and the people. It acts as an independent entity that reinterprets and, therefore, "distorts" the leader's message.

This was precisely the stance taken multiple times by Rafael Correa, during his presidency in Ecuador, when he stigmatized certain journalists, referring to them as "ink hitmen". A case in point was Roberto Aguilar, editor of the newspaper "Hoy", whom Correa accused — during one of his regular "enlace sabatino" broadcasts — not of practicing press freedom, but rather of engaging in "freedom of extortion (...). This man [Aguilar], if he bit his own tongue, he would poison himself. They [the] only spews hatred; they are just pathetic"[2]. Aguilar, however, was not the only journalist targeted in such terms. Correa also took a

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[2] On this, see the webpage of the Ngo Fundamedios: https://www.fundamedios.org.ec/alertas/presidente-correa-llama-sicario-de-tinta-periodista-al-tiempo-que-exhibe-su-fotografia/ (last access: 10/02/2025).

legal approach, filing multiple lawsuits against journalists working for newspapers such as "La Hora" (2007), "El Expreso" (2009), and "El Universal" (2011)[3]. Although these cases did not lead to significant consequences, there is no doubt that, in Correa's Ecuador, the media world became an enemy to be restrained, subdued, and ultimately broken.

A symbolic demonstration of this occurred in 2015 during the presidency of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, when Argentina's Chief of Cabinet, Jorge Capitanich, during a press conference, publicly condemned one of the country's main newspapers, "Clarín", as "garbage" and "lies", dramatically tearing up a copy of the newspaper in front of the cameras. In reality, the confrontation between the presidency of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner and the "Clarín" group had begun as early as 2008 in that occasion. The government accused the media conglomerate of supporting opposition to the controversial Law 125, which increased taxes on agricultural producers (Yeyati & Novaro 2013). In connection with this topic, The government actively promoted the approval of the law (the so called 2009 media reform), introduced by Law 26.522, aimed to dismantle the country's most powerful media groups, including "Clarín".

A key issue fuelling the delegitimization of the mass media is the financing of official government and State advertising. A recent study published by the Latin American Observatory on Media Regulation and Convergence (Observacom), with the support of UNESCO's Communication Development Program, has provided a snapshot of the situation in 11 Latin American countries. Discretionary decision-making, the ability to influence the market, the lack of specific legislation, and the absence of transparency are all defining features of this sector (Torres & Marino 2024). A system with such characteristics is highly susceptible to "patrimonialist" practices — typical of populist regimes — offering yet another means of exerting pressure on press freedom.

Moreover, in the last decade, populist political leaders have increasingly turned to new forms of communication, particularly social media, as a powerful and direct tool to bypass journalistic interpretation and strengthen their bond with "the people." Thanks to smartphones, the leader can enter the private lives of individuals autonomously and directly. A striking example is Jair Bolsonaro's 2017 election campaign, during which he made bold and aggressive use not only of Twitter and Facebook but also of WhatsApp to attack the Partido dos Trabalhadores, labeling it as "corrupt" and "immoral" — thus positioning it as an enemy of the Nation. Between a personal message and a work-related one, citizens

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[3] See Paúl Mena Erazo, "Ecuador: se agrava la pugna entre Correa y la prensa en los estrados Judiciales", in *BbcMundo*, 1/04/2011 available on line at the following link: https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2011/04/110331_ecuador_correa_periodistas_denuncia_fp (last access: 10/02/2025).

would receive campaign messages personally crafted by the leader himself (Brandao 2022).

Then there is the delegitimization directed at professional associations, such as labour unions and industrial or producer organizations. The former, for example, were targeted by Argentina's Carlos S. Menem in the 1990s because labour unions opposed the structural reforms that, according to Menem, the country desperately needed. Once in office, Menem championed a revision of his movement's political culture — *Justicialism*, the Peronist party historically tied to labour unions. "I am implementing true Justicialism, an updated, modernized Justicialism", he declared[4]. This led to a kind of Peronist paradox: the evolution of the political movement, which had emerged with the support in the 1940's of the trade union, initiated a process of delegitimization of trade unionism, seeking to weaken and divide it. On this, Menem acted on two fronts. First, he sought to divide the labour movement by sidelining Saúl Ubaldini, who had led the *Confederación General del Trabajo* (CGT) since the early 1980s. Ubaldini's gradual exclusion from both the labour movement and *Justicialism* coincided with the increasing co-optation of union leaders who had opposed him over time. The Union leader of a group of CGT, Jorge Triaca, for instance, was appointed Minister of Labour, while Luis Barrionuevo (labour union representative in the food service sector) was put in charge of the newly created public agency, *Administración Nacional del Seguro de Salud* (Novaro 2013, 338-358).

A similar approach was taken by Fernando Collor de Mello in Brazil, who repeatedly attempted to weaken unions while also seeking to co-opt them. As in Argentina, this was evident in the appointment of the labour unio leader Antônio Rogério Magri as Minister of Labour from 1990 to 1992, until he was removed due to a corruption scandal. In terms of weakening union power, Collor's government attempted several times to limit their financial resources by banning direct worker contributions. In August 1990, a provisional measure was approved to effectively eliminate this funding mechanism. However, following criticism from unions and even internal government opposition, the administration decided to veto the measure. A similar proposal was later sent back to Congress, including provisions for a new registration system for union members (Vila 2016, 74-136).

Unions, much like the press, are portrayed as independent actors that distance the leader from the people, breaking an intimate and direct bond. *Mutatis mutandis*, in the 21st century, it is business owners who have become the target of populist movements, accused of seeking individual profit at the expense of the

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[4] "El Cronista Comercial", 2/7/1989. On the subject, it should not be forgotten that since 1983 (i.e., the end of the last Argentine military regime), an internal rethinking within Peronism began. At that time, some of the key figures in this debate blamed the unionist wing of the Peronist movement for the electoral defeat in the 1983 presidential elections (Sindicaro 2010[2], 152-155).

national community. In 2010, for instance, Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez declared an all-out "war" on local entrepreneurs, reviving a starkly dualistic rhetoric: "I declare myself in economic war and call upon the people and workers to join the fight. Let's see who is stronger — you, petty bourgeois without a homeland, or us"[5].

However, the delegitimization of business associations and the productive and commercial sectors has not been exclusive to 'radical populists' like Chávez. It has also been employed by 'neoliberal populists', a fact that might seem counterintuitive, given that these latter forms of populism are often associated with powerful economic groups in mainstream narratives. A symbolic case is that of Brazilian President Fernando Collor, who, in the second half of 1990, faced severe inflation issues. In a nationally broadcast speech, he condemned those who continued "to abusively adjust prices, reaping profits unparalleled anywhere in the world, as if this were a way to protect themselves from inflation, when in reality, they were its main cause" (Collor 1990, 50). His rhetoric echoed the moral discourse that had propelled him to the presidency, framing excessive profits as a cause of inflation and highlighting the "unpatriotic" nature of the business sector.

A somewhat different case of delegitimization occurred in Peru, targeting the terrorist group *Sendero Luminoso* (Shining Path). This case differs because *Sendero Luminoso* had sought to destabilize Peru's political institutions since the 1970s, through both the years of dictatorship and the transition to democracy. However, the 1990's President Alberto Fujimori fully employed the tools of delegitimization in his discourse and social practices. A striking example is the treatment of the group's leader, Abimael Guzmán, after his capture. Displayed as a wild beast finally subdued, Guzmán was stripped of his humanity and portrayed with animalistic traits — a process of 'beastialization' of the terrorist. His trial was not held in a civilian court but in a military one. This capture followed the institutional crisis triggered by Fujimori's *autogolpe* (self-coup) in April 1992. In this way, once again, the two dimensions of political adversary delegitimization — symbolic and institutional — intertwined (Tanaka 2000; Conaghan 2005).

The Institutional Enemy

The case of Peru under Fujimori leads us to identify another category of "enemy" constructed by populism: the "institutional enemy". In line with the populist notion that legitimacy exists only in the direct bond between leader and people, any institution that distances itself from or disrupts this chain of political

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[5] Cfr. "Hugo Chávez declara "guerra económica" a empresario", in *Semana*, 3/6/2010 [available on line at https://www.semana.com/internacional/articulo/hugo-chavez-declara-guerra-economica-empresarios/96993/, last access: 10/2/2025]

representation creates a *vulnus* — a harmful breach. This applies particularly to the legislative and judicial branches, as well as local governments. Consequently, these institutions are continually attacked through both rhetoric and the political practice of delegitimization.

On this Peruvian case, Fujimori frequently targeted institutions such as Parliament and the Judiciary, branding them as "charlatans and unproductive entities" (Conaghan 2005, 30). These rhetorical formulas played into the anti-oligarchic and anti-elitist discourse that had characterized *Fujimorismo* since his presidential campaign, in which he defeated the liberal candidate Mario Vargas Llosa. In this context, political parties as such — along with opposition forces within Parliament — were similarly delegitimized.

This process extended beyond rhetoric to concrete actions aimed at limiting the legislative power while expanding the executive one. In November 1991 alone, Fujimori sent Congress a package of 126 presidential decrees. Around the same time, his government rejected a parliamentary proposal to increase social spending. To further neutralize these institutions, Fujimori launched a "self-coup" in 1992, which set in motion a constitutional reform process. The new constitution, ratified by referendum in 1993, sought to replace "formal democracy" — characterized by party politics — with what was framed as a "real democracy" (Cotler 1995, 350-351).

President Fujimori, on that occasion, stated that "The current democratic formality is deceptive, false; its institutions often serve the interests of all privileged groups": thus, the reasons for the coup lay in

> the old and rotten order of politicians, judges, and corrupt authorities who prevent true democracy. In such a way that the fate of the Republic is governed by true national interests and not by pseudo-democratic formalities that have only contributed to hindering the country's progress. Peru has only one way out: national reconstruction. Nothing will change if this does not take place and if, at the same time, the people's will for change and desire for renewal are not ensured, without being sabotaged by sterile parliamentarism, corrupt judges, and officials. The country must understand that the temporary and partial suspension of existing legality is not the denial of real democracy but, on the contrary, the starting point for the pursuit of a genuine transformation that ensures a legitimate and effective democracy[6].

In other words, the other side of the coin of delegitimization, which involves the 'institutional enemy,' is the constituent drive typical of populist regimes. Like Fujimori, the aforementioned Menem also implemented substantial

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[6] A. Fujimori, "Mensaje a la Nación del 5/04/1992" (Martínez Lillo and Rubio Apiolaza 2016, 330-35).

changes to the Argentine Constitution in 1994. A few years later, Chávez in Venezuela (1999), Morales in Bolivia (2009), and Correa in Ecuador (2008) followed suit. The objective of all these constitutional reforms was to institutionalize the 'populist revolution' initiated by these leaders. This was also the case with the 1994 Argentine constitutional reform, despite the fact that it received contingent support even from the radical opposition.

The Bolivian case of the new constitution, drafted during Evo Morales' presidency, from the perspective of the construction of the institutional enemy, brings together the critical issues that arose with some provincial authorities and those with the judiciary. The authorities of certain regions (Beni, Pando y Santa Cruz, referred to as the Bolivian *Media Luna*), opposed the constitutional reform by proposing deeper autonomy (and in some cases independence) from the political center, with resounding street protests between 2008 and 2009. At that time, Evo Morales initially announced a complaint against the judges of the Supreme Court for irregularities in the case of an armed group advocating for the separation of the Santa Cruz region[7]. A few months later, the President himself appointed five judges to the Supreme Court (along with eight others to various high-ranking positions within the judiciary)[8]. The clash with the judiciary ended with the drafting of the new constitution and the law that implemented its changes in the judicial sphere, the *Ley del Órgano Judicial*. This marked a complete transformation in the organization, functioning, composition, and method of selection for the highest positions within the Bolivian judiciary.

When considering the Argentine case, the relations between the executive and the judiciary were particularly significant during the 1990s and 2000s. With specific reference to the Supreme Court, Menem initially proposed and secured an increase in the number of its members from 5 to 9. His argument was a delegitimizing one: he claimed that the Supreme Court was not impartial since it had been appointed by his predecessor, Raúl R. Alfonsín of the Radical Party. Menem believed that the Court represented the will of the latter movement, and therefore, the addition of four more members would rebalance its political inclinations (Aboy Carles 2001). A few years later, in 2003, the newly elected President Néstor Kirchner launched an attack against the new court, branding its actions as "outrageous" (Novaro 2021). In recent years, Cristina Fernández (wife of Néstor Kirchner, President from 2007 to 2015, and later Vice President from 2019

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[7] M. Vaca, "Morales contra jueces de la Corte", in *BBCmundo*, 26/08/2009, available on line at https://www.bbc.com/mundo/lg/america_latina/2009/08/090825_2304_bolivia_corte_suprema_irm (last access: 10/2/2025).

[8] "Magistrados de Evo tomarán el mando judicial", in *El Dia*, 18/02/2010, available on line at https://www.eldia.com.bo/noticia.php?id=26689&id_cat=357 (last access: 10/2/2025).

to 2023) has expressed her intention to once again increase the number of Supreme Court judges to fifteen.

The issue of the number of judges on the Constitutional Court also marked Fujimori's presidency in Peru, particularly after the self-coup of 1992. During those same years, continuous purges of the judiciary took place, along with the use of intelligence services against the judiciary at different levels, from the local courts to the Constitutional Court itself (Levinsky and Loxton 2012, 174-175).

In this context, there are also other forms of delegitimizing actions that, at first glance, seem to have less impact on the institutional architecture. Regarding the impartiality of the judiciary, among Latin American populist leaders, the idea has spread that legal systems and their mechanisms are used for political purposes to support or oppose certain leaders, parties, or movements. This practice has been defined as *lawfare* and has recently been invoked multiple times by populist leaders as a defensive strategy in response to corruption charges — charges that, over time, have affected all major figures of Latin American populist movements between the 20th and 21st centuries, from Argentinians Menem and Kirchner to Ecuador's Correa, as well as Brazil's Collor de Mello and Peru's Fujimori.

The judiciary, being independent from the executive power and therefore distant from the leader-people chain, becomes the target of both practical measures (such as the continuous change in the number of Supreme Court judges) and delegitimizing rhetoric (such as the discourse on the political use of the judiciary, now known as *lawfare*) (Garcia Holgado 2023).

In populist regimes, the legislative and judicial powers thus become institutional enemies when they assert their independence from the executive. By distancing themselves, opposing, or seeking to control the Presidency, these two powers restrict the popular sovereignty that populist leaders instead conceive as unlimited. As with the previously discussed case of social enemies, the political delegitimization of institutions becomes the tool used by populist regimes emerging between the late 20th and early 21st centuries to instill the idea that powers independent of the Presidency are enemies of the nation.

Conclusions

What do these forms of political delegitimization in recent populist regimes in Latin America reveal? Answering this question is not easy without first considering the entrenchment of democratic institutions in the region. This entrenchment has taken on peculiar forms, particularly in countries where populist movements have developed since the mid-20th century. These forms are characterized by the marginalization of the liberal-representative dimension,

while a substantive, corporatist, and, in some respects, authoritarian democracy remains central.

For this reason, the idea of a citizenship shaped by political differences, whose reverberations reach representative institutions and thus lead to the existence of legitimate political opponents, has little success. On the contrary, populist regimes and movements portray their political adversaries in delegitimizing terms: the opponent is not merely a competitor for political representation but rather someone who disrupts the monolithic unity of the national people and is therefore deemed anti-national.

However, these are not just standard processes of delegitimization common to other political systems that characterized Western politics between the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Cammarano and Cavazza ed. 2012). The delegitimization processes in the populist movements analyzed in this article extend beyond the political sphere, affecting social and institutional actors as well — from Parliament to the mass media, professional associations, and the judiciary.

Moreover, it becomes evident that the delegitimization of political opponents in Latin American populism persists over time, despite shifts in the spirit of the times — from a neoliberal era to one that is deeply critical of its predecessor. In other words, drawing on Michael Freeden's (1998) theoretical framework on nationalism, Mudde (2017) argues that populism functions as a 'thin-centered' ideology, relying on the support of more structured ideologies.

For these reasons, with the neoliberal structural reforms of the 1990s, populism demonstrated its ability to change form compared to the past and to integrate itself into a completely different *Weltanschauung*. Having definitively shed its fascist past by the 1990s (Finchelstein 2017), populism began operating within liberal-democratic political systems, infiltrating and, in some respects, hollowing them out. These practices remain evident in the populist movements of the early 21st century.

So, Populis ideology, as a 'thin-centered' ideology, modified some political practices. Such actions are implemented through the progressive alteration of the rules of the game, the playing field itself, and even the referees overseeing it. These political movements, in essence, seek to create a system that resembles a *cancha inclinada* (a slanted soccer field), designed to favour the continued dominance of the populist movement in power. This defining feature — clearly visible in 21st-century populist regimes as well — relies fundamentally on social and institutional delegitimization as a way of engaging with the "enemy." The way democracy is practiced in populist regimes over the past forty years has thus been marked by the central role of constructing the enemy in political, institutional, and social terms.

In this sense, the expansion of the practice and rhetoric of political delegitimization is oriented towards actors who, strictly speaking, are not political. This includes journalists, business and labour sectors, and the judiciary. In populist regimes, the political sphere is highly pervasive, exceeding the boundaries established by constitutions and existing associations and even intruding into the private lives of citizens.

In this context, the concept of the "total citizen" resurfaces, as discussed by Norberto Bobbio in "The Future of Democracy", drawing from Dahrendorf's (1977) reflections. Bobbio writes that "total citizen" is based on the principle that "everything is politics, meaning the reduction of all human interests to the interests of the *polis*, the complete politicization of the individual, the dissolution of personal identity into citizenship, and the elimination of the private sphere in favor of the public one": this type of citizenship aligns with Jean-Jacques Rousseau's vision of democracy (Bobbio 1995[3], 35), which underpins what thinkers like Jacob L. Talmon once termed "authoritarian democracy".

In the case of Latin American populism at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, this phenomenon clearly reflects a religious conception of politics — one that does not merely seek to govern or manage societal conflicts but aspires instead to "redeem" a people. This is the grand myth of "todo tiene que ver con todo" ("everything is connected to everything"), which serves as the foundation for political debates and institutional relations. Even today, this myth exacerbates political conflicts and irreversibly undermines institutional stability.

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