Anti-populism and democracy, the history of a tense relationship

Much has been written about the rise of contemporary populism and the purported risks it presents to democracy; much less has been said about the anti-democratic roots of contemporary anti-populist ideas. This paper analyses the history of anti-populism in the Americas. I trace the origins of concepts used in academic and public discussions about the populist challenge today to concerns about the expansion of enfranchisement at the turn of the nineteenth century and the apogee of modernization theories after World War II. In particular, I focus on terms such as “irrationality”, “freedom”, “crisis”, “mob mentality” and lower classes “anxiety”, and how they were used in Latin America. The paper analyzes the way in which Latin American populist movements of the twentieth century became a template for the study of contemporary politics beyond the region.

Populism is an elusive category, yet widely used. Not being a native category, we rely on characterizations of nationalistic and anti-liberal movements elaborated by those who conceived them as a threat to democracy, particularly Cardenismo in México, Varguismo in Brazil and Peronism in Argentina. In other words: Not being a native category, “populism” owes much to those who have a critical view of “populism” as a historical phenomena.