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Dissertation submitted to the Department of Media and Communications,

# 'Popular politics': a discourse theory analysis of Ecuadorian president Rafael Correa's TV/radio program Citizen Link

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## ABSTRACT

At a moment when the relationships between media and politics seem to be challenging democracy, very polarised media wars have emerged in the context of Latin America's 'left turn'. The private media, highly intertwined with the market and traditional powers, have become strong political oppositional actors, while progressive governments challenging many neoliberal logics have deployed a series of 'populist' media strategies, which have generated many debates in terms of their legitimacy and democratic nature. In this context, a new format of direct communication has emerged in

## INTRODUCTION

Another sign of development will be when this mediocre press, thanks to the rejection of the Ecuadorian people, because no one believes in them anymore, stops being listened to and ceases to exist.

(Rafael Correa, Citizen Link #378, 21<sup>st</sup> June 2014)

Every Saturday, Rafael Correa, president of Ecuador, speaks to the Ecuadorian people in his program Citizen Link, where he actively contends his country's private press. This has raised many questions regarding the interrelation between media, politics and democracy.

In today's hyper-mediated world, both media and politics seem to be in crisis. With the

In Ecuador, Rafael Correa came into power in 2007 with the promise of a 'Citizen Revolution', after a decade of acute political and economic crisis (De la Torre and Conaghan, 2009). The financial sector had collapsed, levels of inequality, extreme poverty and migration had escalated, alongside a serious governability crisis: in 10 years, three subsequent elected presidents were ousted from power by popular mobilisation; a total of 10 presidents came and went during that period (Ramos and Orlando, 2012; Conaghan, 2008). Notwithstanding, with 9 consecutive elections and referendum victories, Correa has managed to remain in power until today, maintaining levels of popularity above 80%<sup>1</sup>, and with an increase in political participation and trust in democracy<sup>2</sup>. His success can be understood as a series of redistributive policies, the reduction of poverty and inequalities, and a flourishing economy, yet a central factor is attributed to his handling of the media (Ramos and Orlando, 2012; De la Torre and Conaghan, 2009).

Central to the government's media strategy, a new format of direct communication emerged: the program Citizen Link, which has given the president high exposure and disputes the narratives over social reality (Ramos and Orlando 2012: 30). Dismissed by opponents as a 'populist' strategy, many debates have emerged on the legitimacy of this format. Guided by the general question of "what role can a direct communication format play in a process of political 'turn' and what are its democratic implications", I will frame the discussion around Laclau's post-Marxist theories on populism, to undertake a discourse theory analysis of the program Citizen Link. I shall argue that while the format could play a role in legitimizing a process that has challenged many entrenched powers, it has failed to promote an inclusive and participatory arena, thus putting the whole political process at risk.

At a moment in which the relationships between media and politics seem to be challenging democracy (Meyer, 2002)



service' model, in which media's independence is to be assured through a public utility, rather than the market (Mughan and Gunther, 2000). A liberal underlying premise is thus to view the State as the main potential enemy, leaving the market unquestioned – and unscrutinized (Scammell and Semetko, 2000; Curran, 2002). With the media becoming 'big' business, and given their penchant for entertainment and profit-making, Curran (2002) has called the watchdog argument into question, doubting the media's capacity to protect the public interest and assure pluralism.

Latin America's watchdog model raises all the more questions, for, even in its own terms, the model was never properly applicable due to close-knit relations between media and governments, as much under authoritarian regimes as under democratic ones (Waisbord, 1999). These relationships, however, have not been completely symmetrical: governments have used regulation powers to pressure the media, while the media have used their own power to influence the political agenda (50). More recently, the media grew closely involved with both states and markets, thus undermining their capacity to oversee either of them (52). Many scholars believe the media in the region became so intertwined with the market that they tend to favour their corporate interests over the public good, thus mistaking the defence of 'freedom of speech' with the defence of these 'free market'

n-Barbero, 2008; Ramos, 2012). This also promoted a public imaginary of the media as business, rather than a public service, eroding its capacity to create a public arena (Ramos and Orlando, 2012). With the region's left turn, the private media started playing active and overt roles as opposition, strongly opposing regulation (Kitzberger, 2012; O'Shaughnessy, 2007; Martens and Viv





While theories on the mediatization and celebritisation of politics point to an impoverishment in political debate and a decrease in political interest in the West, Latin America has seen the emergence of highly mediated presidents drawing vast popular support and an increase in voter turnout. Without implying Latin American politicians are not part of today's hyper-mediated trends, this points to the question of what other factors beyond media exposure and spectacularisation can draw political participation. I will suggest populism as a best-fit theory to explain this identification.

A populist alternative

An understanding of Latin America's long tradition of populism, and its tensions with





establishes a new order, it will need new fractures in the institutional system to sustain that appeal. Though, in the case of a major 'organic crisis', like in Ecuador, Laclau believes the reconstructive task prevails over the subversive one (178). Laclau and Mouffe's understanding of hegemony is central here, that is, as a contingent formation that has to be constantly fought over and thus is always vulnerable to change (Gaonkar, 2012: 189). In this sense, populism can also go either way; its "potential for radical democracy was taken up the Right to make an 'authoritarian popular'" (Bratich, 2011: 169). Moreover, under this model and considering today's social configurations, the more a society is fractured, the emptier the signifier bringing it together will be, and the articulation will remain fragile (Gaonkar, 2012: 202). To which Arditì (2010: 490) adds that, even if constructed as an empty signifier, the reliance on a leader to construct a people can lead to a personality cult, which also threatens people's empowerment.

To sum up, while the democratic potential of populism, its capacity to constitute a people, is related to a counter-hegemonic drive in the face of an institutional crisis, once this populist project becomes hegemonic state power, how can its democratic quality be assured? Laclau and Mouffe propose radical democracy and an agonistic public sphere; the transition from one to the other, however, remains less clear.

#### An 'agonistic' democracy

If populism and democracy are, in fact, contingent in Latin America, what kind of democracy should be expected? Laclau and Mouffe bring forward the notion of radical democracy and agonistic pluralism that challenge many liberal assumptions and the deliberative notion of public sphere.

Locating the flaws of today's democratic systems, Mouffe (2005) believes democracy should be radicalised. In the contingent articulation between liberalism and democracy, she finds an undecidable tension between liberal notions of "pluralism, individualism and freedom", and democratic ones of "unity, community and equality" (Torfing, 1999: 252). She understands power as constitutive of the social, thus as something that cannot be evacuated, by which any social order will be hegemonic; however, some forms can be more democratic than others (Mouffe in Carpentier and Cammaerts, 2006: 4). In that sense, the struggle over hegemony becomes a necessary and inevitable step towards democracy, as Laclau (2014: 9) points out, by which movements aiming for social change should fight over state power. Here, hegemony is not understood in the Gramscian terms of a commonsensical understanding of the world

(Howarth, 2000: 89), but as the articulation into a common project of several identities (Carpentier and Cammaerts, 2006: 2).

For Mouffe (1999; 2005), notions such as consensus and reconciliation in fact negate the intrinsic 'conflictual dimension' of politics. She thus proposes an 'agonistic' pluralism, in which a confrontation between distinct hegemonic projects is possible, by acknowledging the other as an 'adversary' rather than as 'enemy', in search of some sort of compromise. Thus a "democratic politics should create the conditions for the conflict to find its expression in agonistic terms, avoiding that it becomes antagonistic" (Mouffe in Carpentier and Cammaerts, 2006: 10). For this, however, legitimate demands must be differentiated from those that challenge the democratic institutions themselves (Mouffe, 2005: 120).

This approach challenges the Habermasian deliberative public sphere, an assumed normative model for the media, in which deliberation through rational argument, on an equal basis, should lead to consensus (Curran, 2002). This model relies on a notion of universal rationality, which, for Laclau and Mouffe, can only exist under a hegemonic universality (Phelan and Dahlberg, 2011: 12). Though Habermas himself updated his model since then, acknowledging that a 'universally shared context' is unviable, the underlying premises of rationality and a search for common democratic norms prevail (Garnham, 2007). For Laclau, concealing the radical tension between 'universalizing equivalences' and 'particular differences' leads to ideological masking; radical democracy thus emerges when this gap becomes visible

### Conceptual framework and research objectives

Throughout this chapter I have tried to bring forth a series of assumptions for building up a thesis regarding the Ecuadorean government and its media strategies. To sum up, in a context where the media has not assured the protection of the public interest and where liberal democracy has failed to properly integrate large sectors of the population, the government's media strategies emerge as part of a populist response, in the sense of a political project with massive support, opposing powers-that-be during a major institutional crisis. I have contended that populism and democracy appear to be a contingent articulation in the region, in which the democratic potential of populism is understood, under Laclau's terms, as its capacity to constitute a people, for which the media plays a crucial role. Finally, I have suggested that, under post-Marxism's own terms, if a populist project is to be deemed democratic, it should manage to make the transition towards an aded

### *Research questions*

The research questions and sub questions guiding my analysis will be:

- Following Laclau's populist theory, how does Ecuadorian president Correa's discourse construct a people and a political frontier in his TV/radio program Citizen Link?
  - How are antagonisms and the 'them/enemy' constructed?
  - How are empty signifiers built to constitute a people?
  - What does the political frontier tell us about the configuration of the political project and its new hegemonic order?

Which leads us to the normative question:

- What insights can this bring regarding the tension between counter-hegemony and hegemony, and the construction of an agonistic democracy?

I shall end up by reflecting on the contributions this empirical analysis could bring to Laclau's theory on populism.

## RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

### Methodology rationale

Considering the theoretical framing and proposal, discourse theory (DT) comes forth as the logical method to analyse president Correa's discourse in the program CL. However, certain tools from critical discourse analysis (CDA) can be useful to support the implementation of this method.

### *Discourse theory and 'populist reason'*

Laclau and Mouffe understand discourse as an 'articulatory practice' organising social relations (Howarth, 2000: 102). Rather than analysing single battles over meaning, the aim of discourse analysis would be to reveal society's hegemonic relationships and struggles

'outsiders' (Howarth, 2000: 5). Social structures are also understood as "inherently ambiguous, incomplete and contingent systems of meaning" (Howarth, 2000: 4), by which meaning is not fixed, but rather becomes partially fixed by the construction of 'nodal points', that constantly shift through the discursive battle (Andersen, 2003: 51).

This notion of discourse is directly connected to Laclau's (2007) theory on populism in which a people would be constituted through antagonism, by establishing chains of equivalence and difference. In the logic of difference, outsiders (the opposition) are established by identifying their differences from the people; in the logic of equivalence, a heterogeneous social group will be brought together through their shared opposition to these outsiders, but also by linking their diverse political demands (Phelan and Dahlberg, 2011: 19). To link these demands, one of them has to become a 'tendentially empty signifier', thus a signifier representing them all (Laclau, 2007: 131), that will assume a universality which can only be a 'failed totality' (70). This operation by which a particular element acquires a 'universal' signification is what Laclau understands as hegemony (70). In order to construct a people, there will thus be a hegemonic dispute over the meaning of these empty signifiers, in which, if the political frontier is displaced, it will become a 'floating signifier' until its meaning is stabilised in a political camp (132-133). For instance, the notion of 'democracy' itself has different meanings among left-wing or right-wing discourses (Laclau, 2014: 20).

In this operation, 'naming' acquires a central role for unifying demands around an empty signifier (Laclau, 2007: 118). Populism emerges the moment it turns into a 'nodal point of sublimation' and the signifier gets detached from the signified – the name from the concept (120). For instance, when Correa coined the term '*partidocracia*' – partocracy



*Borrowing from Critical Discourse analysis*

As Phelan and Dahlberg (2011: 10-11) suggest, although DT offers a strong theoretical grounding, it tends to be 'methodologically abstract', whereas CDA is much more method-led and can be very helpful in facilitating a 'thick description'. Without disregarding their conceptual differences, CDA can offer useful tools for implementing a discourse theory analysis.

CDA grounds its methodology on a focused and in-depth linguistic analysis (Phelan and Dahlberg, 2011: 9). The aim is to shift the focus from the way an account is constructed to the

Another limitation has to do with what Couldry (2004) calls media-centrism. By privileging media texts, on the one hand, no information will be provided on how audiences decode the messages (Hall, 2003); for this, an audience analysis will have to complement this research. On the other hand, while proposing discourse as broader than text, I will not be performing a thorough analysis of all of the Ecuadorian government's policies and actions; nor even its

I then conducted a general thematic analysis of 5 episodes. As for the pilot, I did not focus on the topics mentioned, but rather on what I identified as the recurrent discursive articulations, such as: critiques of the opposition, praise of the Citizen Revolution, references to the people, etc. (see complete coding in appendix 4). However, I simplified the pilot's code, to focus more on aspects of antagonism and constructing a 'we', rather than highlighting all the content. Looking into the highlighted moments, I sampled 7 short sequences where I identified a wider variety of elements in a shorter time, and which related, on the one hand, to the political moments I identified for my first sampling, and on the other hand to the construction of insiders and outsiders.

**Discourse analysis:**

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thus extensively lost credibility and votes, with which the media established themselves as a

Up to this day, in a highly polarised atmosphere, and despite the series of regulations and regulatory bodies the government has put in place, the media have continued to discredit and disavow the government. Studies by academic institutions in association with the Latin American Communication Observatory<sup>7</sup>, have detected a sustain





Beyond the appellations, antagonists are also grouped through synecdoche and generalizations. This is very clear in CL #335, when Correa reviews a news article in which a lawyer defends his past interrelation with a domestic worker, based on exchange of favours



environmentalists that “what is criminal, is children dying of diarrhoea” and not oil exploitation (CL#335), or by accusing institutions, such as NGOs (CL#226), of destabilizing democracy. There is thus a justification for exclusion that resonates with Mouffe’s (2005: 120) notion of discriminating legitimate demands from those who challenge the democratic framework, to be part of the agonistic public sphere. In Correa’s argumentation, the notion of democratic representation is heavily grounded on the elections, as he dismisses oppositional postures as not being validated through elections: “they want to impose their policies without being approved in the ballot” (CL#378), “they can’t even win elections [...] and then they pressure and distort...” (CL#94). The discourse here alludes to a populist construction of the people in the notion of a ‘plebs’, the electoral majority, standing in for the ‘populus’, the entire population (Laclau, 2007: 107). This discourse

(CL#310). This thus corresponds with the government's stance, most evident when antagonising the opposition: "citizens are losing fear of the corrupt press" (CL#263), "[the parties] are rejected by the Ecuadorian people" (CL#378). In the discursive structure, we can see how the people's will and the government's actions are frequently interspersed, whereby the first is used to explain the latter. This can be read as double articulation, on the one hand, empowering the people, making them feel they lead the process, and on the other, legitimizing the government through the people's will.

By expressing this will, Correa is in fact speaking *for* the people: "the people believe in the Citizen Revolution" (CL#188). As he is monologuing, to keep a conversational tone he constantly asks questions, particularly for pedagogical explanations. Yet these can function as paraphrases expressing the audience's questions, to which Correa brings answers:

"[What] is the instrument that reflects the allocation of resources? This, I insist, depends on power relations; power relations determine the allocation of social resources. And where is this allocation of resources reflected? Mostly in the state budget..." (CL#239).

By speaking for the people, Correa is constructed as both part of it and as its representative.

Also, coming from a middle-class background

working (CL#335), by which he appears as the direct link between the people and the whole state apparatus. To sum up, Correa is constructed as a driving force of the process and the legitimate representative of the people. Moreover, distinct from the tendency among 'celebrity' politicians (Marsh et al., 2010), there is very little mention of his personal life – his family remains distant from the media, by which his whole life appears to be imbedded in his



the nation-state as a colonial heritage (Quijano, 2005), social movements in the region had developed 'post-liberal' positions and discourses, some of which had been included in the new Constitution, such as plurinationality (Escobar, 2010). Yet, on the other hand, after the neoliberal weakening of States, the region's new political processes have strongly focused on recovering and reaffirming the State (Beasley-Murray et al., 2009). The emphasis on nation-building, in this sense, can be und re W n2 (n) -4 (ts)-1 ( ) -94 (i) 2 (n) -4 ( Tf [ (a-4 (t O 0.0s) BT ) -841.( Tf

powers, which comes into view as an abuse of power. [3] A participatory process seems to be lacking. As León (in Harnecker, 2011: 171) suggests, there is no communication policy in accordance with a participative vision of citizenship. A media strategy highly relying on the figure of Correa seems to be favoured over the articulation of a social fabric. Santos (2014) thus wonders if the Citizen Revolution has “someone to defend it”. Finally, [4] this points to the dilemma of the Citizen Revolution: how to defend it, the the(i)-3 (r) -4 (e) -4 (z) 1 (t) -6((i) 1 (l)th) distusti(i)-3



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Santos, B.S. (2014) '¿La Revolución ciudadana tiene quien la defiende?' [Does the Citizen Revolution have someone to defend it?], URL: <http://alainet.org/active/73679&lang=es> [20 August 2014]

## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1: First sampling of episodes, and corresponding key moments

- Program #84, 30/08/2008, broadcast from Yaguachi; random
- Program #91, 18/10/2008, broadcast from Cuenca; after constitutional referendum
- Program #96, 22/11/2008, broadcast from Manta; announcement debt audit
- Program #101, 27/12/2008, broadcast from Manta; results of debt audit
- Program #124, 13/06/2009, broadcast from Latacunga; end of debt liquidation
- Program #188, 18/09/2010, broadcast from Rocafuerte, random
- Program #190, 02/10/10, broadcast from Quito, 2 days after attempted coup
- Program #198, 27/11/2010, broadcast from Villaflora; end of oil rent renegotiation
- Program #226, 25/06/2011, broadcast from Quito; launching of Celac
- Program #239, 24/11/2011, broadcast from Queens NY, USA; random (from abroad)
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Appendix 4: Thematic analysis code

list of themes selected and corresponding colour code

- Account of presidential activities
- CR advancements and projects
- Ecuador's great qualities
- Call for union, supporters of CR
- Problems in government (bureaucracy, delays...)
- Critiques to opposition press
- Critiques to opposition
-

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