

## Editorial

# Challenges to the status quo: Populisms and discourses of inequality in twenty-first century political cultures

Desafíos al *statu quo*: populismos y discursos de desigualdad en las culturas políticas del siglo XXI

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Contemporary populisms, much like their classical predecessors, rely on discourses of inequality to appeal to common people. Yet the question of who elites are—and what is meant by «elite» values—has evolved significantly over the past few decades. In the Andean region and Latin America, real and imagined forms of privilege have been a key theme in political developments of the twenty-first century. At the same time, accusations of elitism and forms of speaking in the name of «the people» have been shaped by longer historical processes, including the development and reinforcement of race and class hierarchies, the legacy of authoritarian governments, experiences of urbanization and social mobility, and the vicissitudes of efforts to claim rights and seek alternatives to the neoliberal status quo. The six articles comprising this issue illustrate how debates about polarization and political styles are enriched through empirical attention to specific issues in specific national settings.

Focusing on Bolivia, Nell Haynes uses a moral geography lens to examine how ideas about El Alto (and Alteños) have shifted in response to broader social and political transformations. Wealthy and middle-class residents of La Paz (Paceños), once inclined to talk about El Alto in uniformly negative terms as a space of danger and disorder, began to modify their discourse during the 2010s as the La Paz-adjacent city experienced rapid growth and development. These changes were tied to cultural projects

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of the Evo Morales era that, among things, celebrated «Indigenous capitalists» and narratives of upward mobility. Haynes ethnographically documents how Paceños' views of El Alto, which is populated largely by migrants pushed from rural areas and their descendants, began to incorporate positive assessments of change (e.g., markets becoming more «orderly,» billboards replacing handmade signs on businesses) even as such observations tended to uphold La Paz as a kind of moral standard.

Yet social unrest in the aftermath of Bolivia's 2019 elections revealed the limits of this acceptance of—even exaltation of—a «new» middle-class and Indigenous uses of urban public space. Haynes juxtaposes the observations of her middle-class Paceño interlocutors with the circulation of explicitly racist tropes in social media representations of Alteño MAS (Movement towards Socialism) supporters (e.g., references to «*hordas maoistas*») during the protests. Haynes's discussion and analysis allows the reader to imagine the likelihood of finding both sets of discourses within the same individual. The reality that many anti-Morales protesters in La Paz could be characterized as belonging to an emergent middle class adds another layer of complexity, this pattern resonating with experiences of disillusionment documented in other former Pink Tide countries in South America in recent years.

Blas de la Jara Plaza's contribution surveys «non-cisgender memory» interventions in the Peruvian context. This article would have significant value even if its scope were limited to the informative synthesis of diverse initiatives that de la Jara Plaza offers, but the discussion also presents a compelling analysis of how non-cisgender memory projects have navigated and intervened in Peruvian politics and society. Consistent with other readings of queer memory politics in the country, de la Jara Plaza underscores efforts taking place in and around formal processes of transitional justice. A «counter-memory» approach interrogates ways that the lives of non-cisgender victims of Peru's internal armed conflict—even when registered by bodies like the Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission—are often reduced to accounts found in sensationalistic, transphobic sources of the era. Thematic and conceptual links with the language memory and human rights have been generative for artists and activists in other ways, including the use of Lima's Ojo que Lloro memorial as a site

for gatherings for the National Day to Combat Violence and Hate Crimes against the LGBTQ+ Population, along with critical engagements with the Place of Memory, Tolerance, and Social Inclusion (LUM) as a receptive but nevertheless official space.

While Peru continues to lag behind many of its regional counterparts when it comes to the acknowledgment of non-cisgender people as full democratic citizens—the long-stalled Gender Identity Bill in Congress being a prime example—de la Jara Plaza illustrates ways that non-cisgender actors and their allies «deploy memory narratives toward democratic plenitude.» The barriers to achieving such visions remain numerous. Formal political participation is constrained by factors such as the requirement that non-cisgender candidates' legal names appear on ballots (as opposed to the social names they campaign with). Another variable relates to the way that some rightwing sectors have come to tolerate forms of sexual diversity, but only insofar as they conform to conservative ideals of gender and family. Figures like Alejandro Cavero, the young far-right congressman who is openly gay and has accused the Ojo que Lloro of being a terrorist-associated site, embody this trend.

Laura Jiménez-Pérez offers a careful and well-designed study of sexual identity among professors in the faculty of education at a university in the Biobío region of southern Chile. Jiménez-Pérez's semistructured interviews with 10 participants address how these professors have experienced and perceived changes in constructs of gender and sexuality during their lifetimes. Key themes in the interview narratives relate to the balance that educators strike between personal-ideological acceptance of diverse sexual orientations and an awareness of the exigencies of maintaining professional identities as educators, often in settings that are fairly described as «traditionalist.» One of the educators in Jiménez-Pérez's study recounts his discovery of «sexual difference pedagogy» in postgraduate work in Spain. Another expresses her respect and understanding for colleagues who prefer not to disclose aspects of their personal life because they wish to avoid prejudice or accusations of bias. The study is not explicitly framed as an intervention in increasingly politicized discussions about sex education or how to address the topic of gender and sexual identity in schools. But it is somewhat refreshing to read thoughtful and

sincere narratives about a related set of issues in times when national discussions throughout the Americas are increasingly marked by slogans and attacks (e.g., «*con mis hijos no te metas*» in Latin American countries, the rhetoric of «grooming» in the United States) that are meant to accuse and denigrate rather than promote reflection and dialogue.

Debates over if, or to what extent, media coverage reflects the concerns of ordinary citizens provide the background for Jaime Cordero's investigation of the notion of *mermelada* in Peru. Defined as the «exchange of economic or publicity favors between the state and media in return for favorable coverage,» *mermelada* has become a key concept in understandings of media-elite dynamics in Peru. Always bearing a negative connotation, the term is used by actors and commentators on both ends of the political spectrum, and in some cases, politicians have sought to benefit from announcing their refusal to engage in transactional relationships with the media. Without discounting the reality of the *mermelada* phenomenon as such, Cordero presents government spending data that point to the Peruvian state's diminished capacity to influence media coverage in recent years. Since the turn of the century, amounts designated for media and advertising peaked during the Alan García administration. The dramatic drop in government spending for such purposes since the COVID-19 pandemic only sharpened an existing trend. (And such amounts, it is worth noting, are dwarfed by advertising money coming from the private sector.) Cordero interprets the *mermelada* concept's prominence in historical and political terms, acknowledging how memories of brazen media capture during the government of Alberto Fujimori inform contemporary discussions, and underlining the added force of «*mermelada*» accusations in an age of heightened polarization. It remains to be seen if developments like recent legislation that directs a greater percentage of state publicity funds to local and regional outlets will have a discernible impact on how Peruvians conceptualize the relationship between political elites and the news media. Yet Cordero's analysis speaks to ways that the cultural meanings and associations of money in state-media interactions often extend beyond assessments of budgets or regulatory regimes.

The role and influence of the media («new» and traditional) is also a significant concern in Inés Ruiz Alvarado's article, which addresses continued

government inaction in Peru surrounding the issue of justice and reparations for victims of forced sterilizations that took place during the second half of the Fujimori government (1996-2000). Ruiz Alvarado organizes the discussion around a deceptively simple question: Why haven't initiatives like the Registry of Victims of Forced Sterilizations (REVIESFO) or proposed modifications to the Law of Integral Reparation (PIR) been able to emerge as mechanisms for effecting meaningful change?

Drawing on interviews and an analysis of media and activist discourses, the author chronicles a series of advances and setbacks. Noting the visibility of forced sterilizations and their legacy during 2011 presidential elections, Ruiz cites findings from that period indicating that most Limeños lacked knowledge of the issue. Further, the exclusion of forced sterilizations from the mandate of the Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission has consistently hampered efforts at reform. The «cyberfeminist» campaigns of organizations like DEMUS (Studio for the Defense of Women's Rights)—notably their 2015 «We Are 2,074 and Many More» initiative—have increased awareness and shaped public opinion. Yet Ruiz Alvarado reports that there has been no continuity since 2020 with the REVIESFO, and despite attempts during the interim government of Francisco Sagasti to revive the proposal to modify the PIR, the law remains unchanged.

Ruiz Alvarado's article also explores how activism responding to the impacts of forced sterilizations takes on a politics of its own. Esperanza Huayama, an affected individual Ruiz Alvarado interviewed, critiques Lima-based activists' tendency to speak of victims as «the poor» and «the illiterate.» Some women's organizations have remained silent on the topic. Additionally, a nontrivial number of forced sterilization victims are supporters of Keiko Fujimori, despite the politician's consistent denials that women were coerced or not fully informed of the procedure's consequences. Taking into account such phenomena, Ruiz Alvarado's analysis retains a cautious optimism when it comes to cyberfeminist interventions' capacity to reconstruct virtual spaces and cultivate intergenerational ties among activists.

The question of representation, and the politics of speaking for histories of marginalization, is central in Fernando David Márquez Duarte's article on rightwing appropriations of Indigenous identity in Mexico. Using rhetoric surrounding the National Action Party's (PAN) 2024 presidential candidate Xóchitl Gálvez as a case study, Márquez Duarte draws attention to how right political actors in Mexico have sought to incorporate indigeneity within neoliberal-capitalist agendas. As the author notes, such efforts take place in a regional context that has witnessed the resurgence of openly racist discourses among right-wing politicians throughout the Americas. Márquez Duarte reviews examples of ways that Gálvez's claims to Otomí identity have been contested, including by people in her hometown of Tepatepec, Hidalgo. In addition to being labeled a «usurper» of Indigenous identity, Gálvez's self-presentation as a model of rags-to-riches entrepreneurial success (or the embodiment of «*echaleganismo*») is complicated by aspects of her family background and upbringing. Also important, of course, is Gálvez's record in public office, including her tenure as general director of the National Institute of Indigenous Peoples during the PAN government of Vicente Fox. Márquez Duarte's critical assessment of how Gálvez's public persona becomes tied to an ideological adherence to extractivist and neocolonial projects is suggestive of new directions in research on national political cultures. Although Gálvez's recent presidential bid was unsuccessful, it seems likely that that producerist-entrepreneurial appropriations of indigeneity that characterized her campaign will be a recurring theme in Latin American politics in the years to come.

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