Who are the people of the “Citizen’s Revolution”?  
An analysis of the populist articulation of collective identities in Ecuador

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1. Introduction

At the turn of the century, Ecuador was a country in which “the people in the streets deposed presidents, the military arbitrated the conflict and the political parties decided on the succession” (Larrea 2005 in Philip and Panizza 2011, 86). Between 1996 and 2005, mass protests led to the impeachment or forced resignation of three constitutionally elected presidents, namely Abdalá Bucaram, Jamil Mahuad and Lucio Gutiérrez. The weak legitimacy of Ecuador’s political system was blatant. A sense of constant institutional crisis and hostility against the political establishment became part of the social imaginary. The presidential election of Rafael Correa in 2006 marked a turning point. At the time of writing, he continues in office after having been re-elected for the third time and still enjoys relatively high levels of popular approval.1 Correa (2012, 90-91) defines his political project as a “Citizens’ Revolution”, namely a “revolt of indignant citizens” seeking to generate “a radical and rapid change in the existing structures of Ecuadorian society, in order to change the bourgeois state into a truly popular one”. Skeptic observers, however, resent his frontal anti-establishment discourse which leaves no room for compromise and criticize the extreme personalization of his regime.2 Correa’s calls for the empowerment of ordinary citizens are thus dismissed as part of some sort of populist strategy to manipulate the masses. In the light of these debates, this paper explores the concept of populism in relation to the contemporary political process in Ecuador.

The fact that populism is a contested concept has not prevented it from playing a leading role in the repertoire of modern politics. Perhaps it is exactly its ambiguity and the “verbal smoke” (Arditi 2005, 72) around it, that has allowed for the notion of populism to be so recurrent. As Canovan (1999, 3), one of the leading voices in the debate points out, “there is a good deal of agreement on which political phenomena fall into this category but less clarity about what it is that makes them populist”. One might argue that so far the mainstream approaches towards populism have remained descriptive and futile to the extent that they are based on “non-verbalized intuition” (Laclau 2007a, 3) about the topic. Should then the alleged elusiveness of the concept and the increasing pessimism about its

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1 See for example the findings of two opinion polls: Cedatos (2013) shows that the presidential approval rating in June 2013 reached 65%. Mitofsky (2013) states that Correa has the highest approval rating (90%) of any president in Latin America.

2 See for example: Connaghan and de la Torre (2008), Weyland (2009) and de la Torre (2013).
usefulness for political analysis discourage us from a study of populism? Looking the other way will certainly not erase the fact that populism is part of the modern political space (Panizza 2005, 1). A failure to address the topic, while implicitly confining it “to the realm of the non-thinkable, to being the simple opposite of political forms dignified with the status of a full rationality” (Laclau 2007a, 19), is but an exercise in concealing a particular construction of normality that dismisses populism as a dangerous excess. What is then the kind of political logic that is being demoted by framing populism as an aberration? For one thing needs to be clear -regardless of the widespread apprehension about it- populism is “a performative act endowed with a rationality of its own” (ibid., 18). It is this specific logic - or “mode of articulation”- that this paper attempts to assess.

Drawing from the insights of poststructuralist discourse theory, this paper recognizes that all social identities have a political origin. Hence, our discussion of populism is embedded in an attempt to assess the political articulation of collective identities. When we ask “who are the people of the Citizen’s Revolution?”, we acknowledge that the populist articulatory practice constitutes the popular subject it claims to represent. This is both the source of populism’s democratic potential, as well as its Achilles heel. What follows is, first, an attempt to reach a definition of populism which explores the dynamics involved in constructing “the people” as a political actor. The distinctiveness of populism is that it rallies together an heterogeneous mass of social demands and stresses its sameness in terms of a shared antagonism to a threatening Other. The rise of a hegemonic agent -or empty signifier- who functions as the nodal point of the popular bloc will also be explored. This will be done following Ernesto Laclau’s discursive theory of populism which has set the grounds for much of the scholarly debate on the topic. Subsequently, we will assess whether the discourse articulated around Correa’s political persona fulfills the criteria highlighted by Laclau. To what extent is the Citizen’s Revolution sustained by populist articulatory practices and what does this entail for the configuration of power relations within the country? It is my contention that the rise of Correa as the hegemonic agent signifying the popular camp has allowed for a transition to a more egalitarian polity. In the business of governing, however, there has been a constant displacement and re-articulation of the demands entering the representation process.
2. Defining populism and “the people”

2.1 Debates on populism

Despite the vast range of literature on the topic, populism remains a “difficult, slippery concept” (Taggart 2000, 2). As Panizza (2005) rightfully points out there is little hope in attempting to review the vast array of academic literature on populism. A more fruitful enterprise is instead trying to outline the major approaches to the topic and draw attention to convergences as well respective deficiencies. Following Panizza (2005, 2-9), we can differentiate between “empirical generalizations”, “historicist accounts” and “symptomatic readings”. The empiricist approach often develops typologies aiming to generate a sort of “checklist” of what are considered characteristic features of the populist phenomenon. Mere enumerations of features are nevertheless problematic. They are often overflowed with exceptions and fail to construct a conceptual core that sustains an otherwise loosely descriptive definition.\(^3\) Historicist accounts are an attempt to link populism to specific historical periods and social formations. Studies in this category often emphasize the multi-class sociopolitical coalitions that typically arise during early stages of industrialization, this being specially the case of the import-substitution-industrialization era in Latin America.\(^4\) The main problem with this kind of approach is that it fails to account for populism’s ubiquity, both in geographical and temporal terms. As will become clear later on, populism cannot be simply understood as an anachronism or a peripheral phenomenon at the margins of rational modernity (Mouffe 2005). This paper embraces the third “symptomatic approach”, which seeks to justify any descriptive or historic references in terms of a theoretically articulated whole.

Ernesto Laclau’s discursive theory of populism is one of the most influential references in this field of study. From his first texts on the topic, “Towards a Theory of Populism” (1977) or “Populist Rupture and Discourse” (1980), to his latest contribution, “On Populist Reason” (2007a), he has managed to develop a relatively solid approach to the notion of

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\(^3\) See for example Wiles (1969) or Germani (1978).

\(^4\) This approach bears a strong relation to economic perspectives which reduce populism to fiscal indiscipline. However, through a study of the convergences between populism and neoliberalism in the Peruvian case, Roberts (1995) has showed that definitions of populism should be decoupled from any specific model of socioeconomic development.
populism. His method, which counts with a significant degree of academic support, seeks to formulate a coherent concept of populism which justifies any descriptive references in terms of an analytical core. In his own words: “coherence can only be obtained if the different dimensions entering into the elaboration of the concept are not just discrete features brought together through simple enumeration, but a part of a theoretically articulated whole” (Laclau 2005, 43). This has led him to break away from essentialist definitions of populism based at the level of its contents and overflowed with exceptions, and move towards a more form-oriented approach.

In addition, what makes Laclau’s notion of populism so refreshing is that it raises uncomfortable questions about the nature of democracy and the political itself. The ethos guiding his work, as he confesses in the preface of “On Populist Reason” (2007a), is the suspicion that the disdainful rejection of populism entails the dismissal of politics tout court. Laclau does not conceive of populism as a marginal phenomenon. On the contrary, he argues it is present -albeit to different degrees- in the workings of any communitarian space. What is at stand is a specific way of constructing the political bond that is needed if politics are not to be reduced to mere administration. Therefore, dismissing the populist logic as an aberration would be inasmuch as declaring the political moment superfluous (Laclau 2007a, 225). When approaching the topic of populism we should keep a cautious and yet open mind as to the consequences of the populist mode of articulation for the workings of democracy. Taking all these considerations into account, it should come as no surprise that the logics and questions raised by Laclau’s discursive approach to populism are what will guide our argumentation in the pages to come. Before we assess Laclau’s method in detail, we first need to introduce some of the basic concepts of poststructuralist discourse theory.

2.2 Introducing poststructuralist discourse theory

In a nutshell, “discourse theory investigates the way in which social practices articulate and contest the discourses that constitute social reality” (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000,

5 “Stravrakakis (2005, 230) points out that “[b]esides its Marxist overtones, which are somewhat outdated, the kernel of Laclau’s theory still sounds essentially valid”. This is particularly true of his earlier contributions.

6 A wide variety of scholar contributions drawing from Laclau’s discursive approach can be found in Panizza (2005).
3). A key feature of discourse theory is the proposition that all objects are objects of discourse (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 107). This is not to say that there is not a a world external to thought -as if the existence of an earthquake would be put into question- but rather to assert that its specificity as object -either understood as a natural phenomenon or divine punishment- is always internal to a world of signifying practices (ibid., 108). In other words, we cannot conceive the world outside discursive articulations. Discourses constitute the “historically variable conditions of what we say, think, imagine and do” (Torfing 2005, 159); they provide the conditions of emergence of any meaningful object.

Central for discourse theory is the notion of “articulation”, which refers to “any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 105). Discourse theory emphasizes the relational and contextual character of the identity formation process (Torfing 2005). Identities are shaped by its relation to other meanings within a particular historical context, and the relational ensemble that emanates from this articulatory practice is what we call “discourse”. Discourses are thus contingent and historical systems of signifying practices that form the identities of subjects and objects. Accordingly, discourse theory rejects the notion of an “essential meaning that is to be revealed” and instead stresses the contingent character of all social identities.

Partial and temporary fixations of meaning are necessary conditions for the constitution of social reality. In fact, all political projects are an attempt to counteract society’s lack of closure by organizing communal life around idealized notions that refer to an absent totality. Any efforts to dominate a field of meaning so as to fix identities in a particular way are anchored in nodal points which can be conceived as “privileged signifiers” (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000, 8) that hold together a particular system of meaning. Nodal points “are not characterized by a supreme density of meaning, but rather by a certain emptying of their contents, which facilitates their structural role of unifying a discursive terrain” (Torfing 2005, 98-99). Emptiness, to different degrees, is thus revealed as an essential quality of nodal points. It is “empty signifiers” that give coherence to extended equivalential chains by signifying them as a totality and in doing so they also assume a hegemonic function. Through out this paper we take hegemonic articulation to be a
Hegemonic struggles are intrinsically linked to the construction of social antagonism. The latter involves the drawing of frontiers and the exclusion of a threatening Otherness, which discloses the lack at the heart of all social identity. In Laclau’s and Mouffe’s (2001, 125) words, when “the presence of the “Other” prevents me from being totally myself [then] the relation arises not from full totalities, but from the impossibility of their constitution”. Because the limits and the unity of the discourse cannot be found in an essential centre, the concept of a constitutive outside is eminent within discourse theory. It is through antagonisms that the frontiers of discursive formations are found. What is more, because the existence of antagonism cannot be reduced to a primordialist view of identities, the construction of antagonism needs to be understood as constitutive of those very identities it “divides”. Paradoxically, it is an “Other” that “constitutes and sustains social identity by posing a threat to that very identity” (Torfing 2005, 131). The unity and limits of a discursive formation are thus stabilized by a constitutive outside.

The category of the subject requires further elucidation. In discourse theory, there is no such a thing as a subject which is the source of its own ideas and actions. Therefore taking the subject as the origin and basis of social relations would be misleading. In this regard Laclau and Mouffe (2001, 115) write: “Subjects cannot [...] be the origin of social relations -not even in the limited sense of being endowed with powers that render an experience possible- as all 'experience' depends on precise discursive conditions of possibility”. Attention is therefore placed on how discourses provide multiple subject positions with which social agents can identify. In order to avoid deterministic assumptions about the supremacy of underlying social structures, discourse theorists also distinguish the category of political subjectivity which addresses the way in which social actors actually act (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000, 13). The emergence of political

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7 This approach radicalizes Gramsci’s conception of hegemony which still preserves some traces of social determinism, see Gramsci (1971, 161; 181-182).

8 In a similar way, Foucault (1985) shows that a discourse is not held together by the same object of study but rather by the same rules of formation.

9 This draws from and further develops Althusser’s (1971) proposition that subjects are constructed -interpellated- by ideological practices. Althusser understands interpellation as the process of recognition of an individual as a concrete subject by ideological political practices. However, his approach remains deterministic for he asserts that ideological practices are determined by underlying social structures.
subjectivity is tied to the contingent character of discursive structures, which -when made visible- shatters existing identities and opens up opportunities for new identification processes. In short, the subject is internal to the discourse, but because of the constant dislocations of the orders of discourse its identity is never fully determined. Social agents are constantly seeking to identify with social constructions or myths that promise to suture the dislocated space in question. Identity is therefore not the source but the result of the subject’s mode of identification with discursive formations (Torfing 2005, 165).

Taken together, the concepts presented in this section will help us gain a better understanding of Laclau’s approach to populism, which I shall assess in more detail in the next part of this paper. For now it is suffice to say that at the heart of his method is the recognition that all social identities have a political origin (ibid., 154). The “primacy of politics” thesis acknowledges the social basis of politics and the state, while claiming that this basis is in turn constituted through hegemonic struggles. Discourses and the identities produced through them are inherently political for they are grounded in the exclusion of certain possibilities and in a consequent structuring of the relations between different social agents. A careful analysis of the process of articulation and sedimentation of politically constructed social identities has therefore always been a matter of great importance for poststructuralist discourse theory.

2.3 Laclau’s populist cosmos: the popular subject, social antagonism and hegemony

Laclau’s discussion of populism needs to be understood as part of an attempt to assess the political articulation of collective identities. Drawing from the insights of discourse theory, he rejects any essentialist conceptualizations of political formations as mere representations of pre-constituted identities. Instead, he urges us to acknowledge that social practices “do not express the nature of social agents but, instead, constitute the latter” (Laclau 2005, 33). Hence, when assessing populist outbursts, the unit of analysis cannot be a social group whose common interests are somehow taken for granted. It would also be misleading to take a methodologically individualistic approach to the question of agency, which presupposes individuals as self-contained, coherent totalities. Taking all of this into account, Laclau isolates the category of “demand” as his unity of
analysis, i.e. “as the elementary form in the building-up of the social link” (Laclau 2005, 35). In doing so, he rejects any notions of populism as being the ideology or type of mobilization of an already constituted group and, instead, he focuses on the specificities of the populist articulatory practice and the kind of collective identities it brings about.

2.3.1 On the logics of difference and the logics of equivalence

Demands are not teleologically predetermined to be articulated in a specific way. Whether they evolve from “request” to “claim” -and thus pave the way for a populist rupture- is the result of political struggles. Punctual demands that are absorbed by the system and addressed in a satisfactory manner do not constitute a threat for existing institutions. On the contrary, they reinforce the systemic logic for they constitute an implicit acceptance of the legitimacy of the rules and instances involved in each phase of the decision-making process. Laclau (2005, 36) refers to social dynamics obeying this format as “logics of difference” due to the fact that the particularistic nature of each demand is maintained throughout the whole process. In its ideal type, this highly institutionalized model presupposes social requests of an exclusive non-conflictive nature that can be addressed in an administrative way. If, however, the amount of demands not being satisfied increases substantially, social dynamics of a different nature are likely to emerge. According to Laclau (2005, 37) a social situation of shared frustration due to unmet demands is the first condition for the emergence of populist modes of articulation. In this case, the particularistic character of the demands is put on hold and, instead, demands tend to aggregate in their quest against the status quo. They come to form an “equivalential chain” in which all that they have in common is the relation of antagonism itself. In this sense, each punctual demand becomes part of a larger set of social claims. Metaphorically speaking, each demand constitutes itself as “the tip of an iceberg” (ibid., 37) against which existing institutions might collapse. Arguably, the worst the performance of the institutional system -in terms of differentially absorbing requests-, the more likely it will be for equivalential links to gain force and constitute popular subjectivities. A popular subject is thus constituted as the bearer of a plurality of unsatisfied demands.¹⁰

¹⁰ Laclau and Mouffe (2001, 115) state: “Whenever we use the category of 'subject' in this text, we will do so in the sense of 'subject positions' within a discursive structure”. The same applies for this paper.
2.3.2 On the dichotomization of the social sphere and the conditions for representation

To the extent that “the equivalences are only such in terms of a lack pervading them all” (Laclau 2005, 38), the emergence of a popular subject requires the naming of a common enemy. In other words, the symbolic division of the social sphere into antagonistic camps is the corollary of any process of populist articulation. In a seemingly manichean way, the populist formula reads established structures power vs. the underdog (Canovan 1999). For what is at stand is the creation of a popular bloc, namely “an agent which is another in relation to the way things stand” (Laclau 2005, 47). Assessing the representation of the specifically equivalential moment is an integral part of any study of populism. As has been shown previously, any populist rupture requires the discursive creation of an enemy. Yet, more in depth analysis is needed for understanding “how does the equivalence show itself” (ibid., 39 emphasis added by I.D.). Arguably, a particular demand needs to become the signifier of the popular camp so that representation can take place (Laclau 2007b). A relation in which a particular content takes over the task of representing an imagined totality -i.e. an equivalential chain- that is incommensurable with itself is what Laclau calls “hegemony” (ibid., 40-45). In other words, hegemonic practices are an attempt to articulate distinct subjectivities into a common project by means of a demand that transcends its particularity and poses as the signifier representing an absent communitarian fullness.

A punctual demand that assumes the function of universal popular representation will, therefore, gradually lose its connection with its particularistic content. We can in fact argue that the longer the equivalential chain gets, the more “abstractness” is needed from a demand that attempts to encompass it all. Laclau (2007b, 42) refers to this tendency, namely the “emptying of a particular signifier of its [...] differential signified”, as a condition for the emergence of popular subjectivity. In short, populism relies on tendentially empty signifiers in order to rally together an otherwise heterogenous mass of social demands. Arguably, the name that is most suitable for carrying out this homogenizing function is that of the leader himself. At its limit, the figure of the leader becomes an empty signifier that functions as a nodal point which stabilizes the emerging popular bloc (Laclau 2005, 40). All in all, hegemonic operations and the logic of substitution that they entail take place at two levels in the case of populist articulation. First, a particular signifier from within the popular
camp comes to represent the equivalential chain as a whole. Second, the emergent popular bloc claims to stand in for society as a whole (Beasley-Murray 2006, 364).

Due to the partial emptiness of the signifiers at the heart of a populist articulation, the political meaning of the whole operation is particularly susceptible to undergo deep transformations. This is to say that the ambiguity of the central signifiers opens the door for the chain of equivalences that they represent to be re-articulated as a result of constant hegemonic struggles. Social demands are thus vulnerable to be summoned under the most varied political projects, so that the identity of two antagonistic camps is open to contestation and redefinition. In this sense, one might argue that the populist operation is inherently unstable and decidedly exposed to changes of its political sign. The migration of signifiers of radical protest between different political projects is indeed a phenomenon worth studying. This, however, does not need to rest credibility to the concepts of populism itself. As we have seen, populism is a mode of articulation in which the equivalential moment prevails over the particularistic nature of the demands. The actual contents of the populist articulation are not taken into consideration when conceptualizing the term. Hence, in Laclau’s approach we see a movement “from contents to form” (Laclau 2005, 44), which is better suited to deal with the ubiquity of the populist phenomenon.

2.3.3 On populism, politics and institutionalism

Asking “to what extent is a movement populist?” is the same as asking “to what extent does the logic of equivalence dominate its discourse?” (Laclau 2005, 45). It is important to point out that the primacy of an equivalential logic does not presuppose the total elimination of difference. In order for popular subjectivity to emerge, the initial, particular demands need to persist provided they recognize themselves as part of a larger set of social claims. It follows that political articulation is a trade-off between the logics of equivalence and difference, and that the dominance of either one does not entail the complete elimination of the other. What we have is a discursive field that constitutes itself as a continuum between populism and institutionalism. Hence, the importance of asking to what extent instead of whether or not a movement is populist.

According to Laclau (2007a, 18) populism is “a constant dimension of political action which necessarily arises (in different degrees) in all political discourses”. He argues that the
simplification of the political space and the association of social singularities around opposing camps is a condition of political action. For Laclau politics is a struggle around internal frontiers that constantly reinvents the subjects of social change. Ultimately, any political project aims at dominating a field of meaning so as to construct social reality in a particular way. According to him, a condition of the political is the prevalence of traces of social division, without the latter only administration is left. It is the “chasm between universal communitarian space and the particularism of the actually existing collective wills” (Laclau 2005, 49) that allows for politics to take place.\footnote{Liberalism’s illusion of pluralism without antagonism or Marx’s classless society are both social utopias that exemplify the end of politics, albeit from very different trajectories.}

2.3.4 Summary: the people and a structural definition of populism

All in all, the notion of “the people” reasserts itself as a political construct with no fixed referent. There is no such a thing as an original popular identity that needs to be revealed. On the contrary, the latter is called into being by the very populist articulation of the political space. If we agree with Laclau, then “the people can only be constituted in the terrain of the relations of representation” (Laclau 2005, 48). As has been shown, the emergence of a popular subject is the product of a hegemonic operation that articulates several demands around an empty signifier. It follows that battles over the transformation of political subjectivities will take place at the level of relations of representation. This has a direct impact on the prospects for agency and any related attempts to contest (or defend) the status quo.

Taking all the previous considerations into account we are now in a position to develop a coherent concept of populism which follows Laclau’s discursive approach. First of all, the construction of a popular subject lies at the heart of the populist appeal. However, the centrality of the notion of “the people” alone is not enough to define populism.\footnote{In fact, most narratives of political modernity have in common the centrality of the people in their discursive strands.} The populist articulatory practice also implies the division of the social sphere into two antagonistic camps. These two features are connected with each other in that the emergence of a popular subject is only possible in relation to a threatening “Other”. The logic of antagonism is constitutive of those identities it divides. It is through antagonism...
that social identities are constituted and sustained. Last but not least, the creation of an equivalential chain between a plurality of unsatisfied demands requires the rise of an empty signifier which functions as a nodal point stabilizing the identity of the emerging popular block.

3. Looking through the “Citizen’s Revolution”

In the following section of the paper we will assess the impact that the political narrative of the Citizen’s Revolution has had on the Ecuadorian political space. Our emphasis is to explore the political construction of popular identities. Because processes of identification are prompted by structural dislocations, we will first assess the accumulated histories of popular discontent that paved the way for a hegemonic transition to take place in the Ecuadorean context. Then we will deem our attention to Correa’s rise to power and the ways how he managed to capitalize on widespread anti-establishment sentiments. Building on this we will assess the status of “the people” and the antagonisms unfolded by Correa and the Citizen’s Revolution.13

3.1 Structural dislocations and accumulated discontent

First of all it is important to look at the context in which Correa rises to power. Many scholars see Correa as the political heir of the so-called “Forajido movement”14 whose repertoires of collective action triggered the ousting of president Gutiérrez in 2005 (Ramírez 2010a, Philip and Panizza 2011, Flumenberg 2008). This, the third presidential dismissal in less than ten years, took place in the midst of mass popular mobilizations rejecting outspoken executive attempts to hamper the judiciary. While it lasted, the Gutiérrez administration had been fairly controversial. Soon after reaching office, Gutiérrez turned his back on the left-wing parties and social organizations that had helped him come

13 Even though our analysis pays special attention to the early stages of Correa’s government (first term 2007-2009), populist articulatory practices have spilled over throughout his years in office. See for example: de la Torre 2013.

14 Spanish for “The Outlaws Movement”.
to power in the first place and, instead, sought to create clientelistic networks in order to secure popular support. In a “bait and switch” fashion, he tried to govern from the right and implement market-oriented policies (Philip and Panizza 2011, 34). However, after he attempted to dismantle the Supreme Court, popular discontent against his government could not be contained any longer and, once again, politics moved to the streets. The progressive loss of support for the country’s traditional parties and their stronghold of power, the Congress\textsuperscript{15}, led to a generalized rejection of the political establishment. This became clear when the formula “Everybody out!” was the one dictating the pace of the demonstrations in the streets of the capital, Quito. The crowds’ anger was not only directed against the president, they also demanded a complete renewal of the political elites and a purge of the existing institutional arrangements (Ramírez 2010b, 87).

Unlike the two previous cases of a president being removed from office, this time the street protestors were not led by the indigenous movement which up until that point had been the hegemonic agent signifying the popular camp (Ramírez 2005a, 76).\textsuperscript{16} In their social make up, the forajidos were mainly middle-class urban citizens whose collective action articulated relatively novel repertoires of contention. Public rallies were staged as rather joyful and pacific mass performances, relying mainly on radio programmes to coordinate their actions.\textsuperscript{17} Arguably, what took place in the streets of Quito in 2005 was a civil uprising in which demonstrators broke away from party tutelage and exercised their right to rebel against a blatant breach of trust by the incumbents of the state apparatus (Ramírez 2005b). Strongly politicized unions -or any other formal political organizations- did not play a decisive role either; it was rather an amorphous mass of individuals without affiliation that took over the streets. Each one of them, as bearers of particularistic demands and motivated by personal indignation with the state of affairs, came to form part of these partly spontaneous partly organized forms of collective action whose only -and yet powerful-equivalential links were strong anti-establishment feelings. Indeed, the forajido discourse

\textsuperscript{15} “Congress” refers to Ecuador’s parliament.

\textsuperscript{16} Starting with the 1990 uprising, the indigenous organization CONAIE became an important catalyst for wider social movement activity in Ecuador (Roberts 2008). However, CONAIE and its political party Pachakutik lost much of its mobilization potential after their failed alliance with Gutierrez. Gradually, Pachakutik has come to be seen as “just” another establishment party (Ramírez 2005a, 76).

\textsuperscript{17} Nonetheless, during the last days of the insurrection violent episodes spilled over due to the harsh repressive measures deployed by the regime in its last hours. This also led to a reconfiguration of the socio-economic mapping of demonstrators. For more see: Ramírez (2005a).
provided subject positions with which social agents could identify in a radical attempt to suture a dislocated political order.

Even though it is possible to trace back the anti-party, citizen-oriented rhetoric to the 1990s with the emergence of the indigenous movement and the political unrest initiated by the first presidential dismissal in 1997, this discursive position was never as strong as after the April insurrection. However, one also needs to look at the limits of any discourse structured around an “Everybody out!” logic. The kind of social empowerment that emerges out of it is ambiguous. Once the president was officially impeached by the Congress, his successor was named following the established constitutional provisions. Political pragmatism outran the people in the streets. To the extent that there were not other feasible alternatives, the new administration was accepted by default (Ramírez 2005b). However, one should not disregard the various spaces for public debate that were opened by the April mobilizations. Looking back, Correa (2009, 90) states: “we couldn’t let the expectations that had been raised, the feeling that things could be done differently, end in disappointment”.

In the midst of an increasing crisis of political representation, the need to institute a new sense of order prompted the emergence of new forms of political identification. As we know now, Correa and his movement were the ones who successfully imposed their reading of the situation and embarked on the quest to represent the anti-establishment camp. Nevertheless, it would be misleading to expect that a populist articulation of this kind would emerge automatically out of any institutional debacle. Social anomie and increasing apathy towards the political could also be an alternative. In any case, the social configuration that prevails is the result of a hegemonic struggle whose outcome depends on which discursive position manages to make most sense out of the generalized dislocations. In this sense it is important to assess in detail how Correa managed to seize the political and moral-intellectual leadership of the popular camp.

3.2 The rise of Correa: antagonism unfolded

When Correa first ran for the presidency in 2006, he was a political outsider who embodied an anti-establishment discourse. He was a college economic professor with no party affiliation and whose only experience of public life was a brief period of time as economic
minister. His candidature was promoted by the newly founded movement “Alianza PAIS” (Proud and Sovereign Motherland Alliance or AP), which was composed by former leaders of traditional left-wing parties, scholars and activists of the new left, public figures from novel social movements and personal acquaintances (Ramírez 2010a,178). Without clear organizational structures, this amorphous bloc constituted itself as a versatile political project whose nodal point was Correa’s charismatic leadership. Equivalential links were established through the shared aversion against the existing party system - the goal was to break the “partidocracia”\(^{18}\) and the will to put an end to neoliberal reforms -commonly referred to as “the long and dark neoliberal night”. Clearly, what shaped the identity and strength of AP was its antagonism to the traditional political and economic elites.

The target audience was the unorganized citizenry, whom they could appeal without having to go through other already constituted organizations. The decision to avoid generating links with other political organizations was both a reflection of mutual mistrusts within the progressive camp and a strategic move in order to avoid endless struggles for leadership (Larrea 2008, 129). The need to constitute a political force capable of gaining the presidential elections right away reflects a widespread sense of urgency within the organization which continues to dictate several of its dynamics until nowadays. The logics of political articulation that can be glimpsed are thus signs of a partial tradeoff between collective action dynamics and strong personalist leadership (Ramírez 2010b, 90). The bold pragmatism of the movement’s leadership and their particularly successful campaigning strategies allowed them to place themselves in the political map in a short period of time.\(^{19}\) In what was perhaps their strongest anti-establishment statement, they did not present any candidates for Congress. Instead, they run a campaign based on the promise to call for a Constituent Assembly that was to set the grounds to “re-found the nation”. This and the fact that Correa was running against one of the embodiments of Ecuador’s oligarchy -multimillionaire Álvaro Noboa- secured Correa’s ticket to office. It was an election embedded with rejection, to some extent the “everybody out” of the April insurrection was being translated into ballots against “more of the same”.

Once in office, Correa maintained his anti-systemic discourse and called for a referendum to convene a Constituent Assembly. With a hostile Congress, it was only through new

\(^{18}\) Spanish for partyarchy or system of rule by political parties.

\(^{19}\) See Conaghan and de la Torre (2008) for a detail assessment of the campaigning strategies deployed by AP.
constitutional arrangements that he could consolidate his political project while depriving the opposition of their previous institutional strongholds. Struggles over the approval of the referendum led to a deadlock between the executive and the legislative. This was solved - without too much consideration for the letter of the law - by the destitution of 57 congressmen and the go-ahead for the constituent process (Conaghan and de la Torre 2008). Breaking previous patterns, a president whose only political capital was popular support prevailed in a fight against the other branches of the state. Despite its questionable legal status, this move was effectively legitimized by a massive “yes” vote in favor of the Constituent Assembly and an overwhelming majority of AP’s candidates elected to draft it. The rise of Correa as the hegemonic agent signifying the popular camp was on the making. Due to the radicalization of the antagonistic logics constituting AP’s discourse an increasing number of social demands could be articulated to it. The Citizens’ Revolution - as reflected in the government’s programme - was not only against political parties, but also against the “corrupt” banking system, the “monopolized” media landscape and “oligarchical” business elites (Ramirez 2010b, 92). To this we turn our attention now.

3.3 “Now the motherland belongs to everyone!”20 Who is everyone?

“Citizen’s Revolution” is the name coined by the government and AP to identify their political project. As Correa (2012, 90-91) points out, the terms refers to a “revolt of indignant citizens” seeking to generate “a radical and rapid change in the existing structures of Ecuadorian society, in order to change the bourgeois state into a truly popular one”. This political project is thus articulated around the promise to redistribute political power, dismantle neoliberal economic reforms and restore the autonomy and managerial functions of the state. In order to do so it envisions a “constitutional revolution”, a “social revolution” -understood as the exertion of social citizenship rights- and a “revolution in defense of Latin American dignity, sovereignty and integration” (Senplades 2009, 5). In doing so, the “Citizen’s Revolution” integrated several of the demands put forward by various social movements for the past fifteen years.

Because this political narrative emerged as a response to a crisis of representation, its content and legitimacy are deemed to constantly refer to the failures of the previous state

20 This is the official slogan of the Citizen’s Revolution.
of affairs (Barros 2005). With the motto “Enough is enough!”, it distances itself from a
delegitimized “political class, which no longer represented anyone except itself” (Correa
2012, 90). Simultaneously, it promotes national pride and praises the virtues of the
common folk that -so the line of argumentation- has endeavored years of oppression but is
finally awakening. Official statements insist that what is at stake is a heroic feat, a turning
point: “Now the Motherland belongs to everyone” (Correa 2007, 3). Like this, joyful feelings
of unity and hope are evoked, the revolution is done “with infinite love”\(^2\). Stressing the
magnitude of the task ahead, the “Citizen’s Revolution” claims to be following the steps of
traditional historical figures -such as Eloy Alfaro\(^2\) and Simón Bolívar\(^3\)- and contemporary
revolutionary ones, e.g. it is common for Correa to finish his speeches with the phrase
“Hasta la victoria siempre!”\(^4\). Yet, there is a constant reminder that the “revolution” has
only started: “Let’s not be naive. We won the election, but not power. Power is controlled
by economic interests, the banks, the partyarchy and the media connected to the
banks” (Correa 2007 in Conaghan and de la Torre 2008, 278). Through the permanent
reference to a threatening Other the idea and the need of a “united people” are stressed.

The notion of “the people” occupies a central space in the narrative of the Citizen’s
revolution. As was shown previously the frontiers of the popular terrain can be conceived
in many different ways. In fact, if we take the constant references to the “motherland” into
consideration, the people of the Citizen’s revolution appears to be tied to the idea of
nationhood.\(^5\) This political project also seems to be particularly appealing to “the
underdogs” in that it takes on a battle against the country’s political and economic elites.
The following is an abstract from Correa’s inaugural speech in 2009:

“Ours is the revolution of the oppressed. Of those who were silenced [...] by the perverse elites. This is the
revolution of the marginalized [...], of the indigenous, the Afro-Ecuadorians, the bakers and the teachers; the
students that yearn for a better future and a place in history; the peasants [...] that know that the soil belongs
to those who work it [...]; of the forgotten housewives who have been ignored [...] despite their sacrifices and

\(^2\) Some of the first drafts of the “2008 Constitution”, which were distributed to the public for free, had the
phrase “with infinite love” written over. The slogan is also used in several of the government spots.

\(^3\) Eloy Alfaro (1842-1912) played a central role in Ecuador’s “Liberal Revolution” in 1985.

\(^4\) Simón Bolívar (1783-1830) played a key role in Latin America’s Independence struggle and is well known
for his dreams of regional integration.

\(^5\) Spanish for the phrase “Until victory, always!” which was made famous by the guerrilla leader Ernesto
“Che” Guevara.

An in depth analysis of the convergences between populism and nationalism in the Ecuadorian case would
go beyond the scope of this essay. It would, however, be a welcomed contribution to the topic.
devotion [...] of the patriotic artists and scholars [...], in sum all those who are the motor of history: the human beings that will never be victimized again by the neoliberal machinery and savage capitalism” (Correa 2009, 45-46, translated by the author).

The subject position articulated by this discourse offers a site of identification for a wide variety of social agents. In fact, it allows for the emergence of a popular subject whose nemesis is neoliberalism itself. If “populism is, quite simply, a way of constructing the political” (Laclau 2007a, XII), then we could argue that Correa’s populist articulation marks a critical juncture in Ecuadorian history in that it breaks away from the politics of the “Washington Consensus”. The latter stands for the hegemony of free-market reforms and trade liberalization which dominated the Latin American continent throughout the 1990s. They were anchored in depoliticized visions of the polity, in which governability and technocratic politics where assigned higher value than participation and mobilization. On the whole, these reforms meant a retrieve of the state and the expansion of market relations at the expense of great social deficits. In stark contrast to this, Correa’s interpellations openly promote political polarization and reassert civil society as a locus of resistance against the rule of capital. Through his radical left-wing discursive articulation, politics regain supremacy over markets (Philip and Panizza 2011).

Many would probably argue that this is but a case of “populist manipulation” in which vague and pompous rhetoric is used to seduce the crowds. Arguments of this kind not only risk being profoundly elitist in that they reduce the masses to the “irrational Other” (de la Torre 1997), but they also fail to identify that discourses are constitutive of the social itself. All social identities are contingent discursive constructions. This is to say that “who the people are” is always a matter of hegemonic struggles. The people as such are a political construct that can only emerge through relations of representation. The modes of identification anchored in the discursive strands of the “Citizen’s revolution” are, indeed, one of many possible ways of constructing the social. The question therefore is not whether they truly represent the “popular camp” but rather how they represent it and what effects this mode of articulation has had upon the configuration of power relations within Ecuadorean society. Indeed, the people of the Citizen’s Revolution are invented but this does not make them any less real in their consequences.
3.4 Discussion: who speaks for the people?  

If we look at the specificities of the Ecuadorian case when Correa first comes to power, it seems plausible to argue that the “invention” of a unified people was required in order to set the grounds for a more inclusive polity. The displacement of discredited elites and unresponsive, ossified institutional structures required the emergence of a popular subject—as the bearer of unmet demands—who could confront the status quo. Although by no means the only possible articulation, the partial stabilization of the popular camp around Correa’s “Citizen’s Revolution” allowed for a reassertion of popular sovereignty. To use Canovan’s (1999, 9-11) words, it was an “upsurge of faith” needed to “lubricate the machine of politics” and avoid “a nemesis of political quietism”. Correa’s populist rupture allowed for the junction of several social forces around one political project that promised to bring an end to neoliberal policies which had shifted wealth from marginalized peoples to elite corporate interests.  

To this extent, it can actually be seen as “the triumph of all the accumulated histories of the indigenous and popular struggles in Ecuador” (Cholango 2007, 3). However, this new configuration of social forces also implied that Correa’s political persona colonized the political spaces that were previously occupied by social movements (Becker 2011). Despite the fact that Correa explicitly objects this, one cannot overlook the fact that the Citizen’s Revolution is deeply articulated to his political persona. Correa has been presented as both just another citizen as well as the embodiment of the citizenry as a whole (de la Torre 2013, 36).

The “Citizen’s revolution” praises itself as a universalist project and not one based on interest groups. Accordingly, Correa has avoided any kind of corporatist arrangements within his government. For him and his closest advisors these forms of political representation do not constitute milestones in the history of the incorporation of the masses to political life (Larrea 2008, 132). On the contrary, they seem to think that the attribution of public status to interest groups is an obstacle for the construction of the “common good”. This is a hint to what is perhaps one of the most distinctive features of the Citizens’ Revolution in relation to other forms of populist articulation. It offers a mode of

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26 Panizza (2005, 18) poses this question in his comprehensive introduction to “Populism and the Mirror of Democracy”.

27 Some of the main demands included in Correa’s government programme were: to promote a new Constitution, to oppose any free-trade agreements with the U.S., to ratify the expiration of the state’s contract with OXY, to renegotiate the external debt and to fight outsourcing practices.
identification tailored for a universal, abstract citizen, in which organized forms of interest representation do not entirely fit.\textsuperscript{28} Thus it is the moral virtuous -but unorganized- citizenry that is increasingly interpellated as the agent of social change. Gradually, this has led to a re-articulation of the “popular camp” signified by the Citizen’s Revolution. Corporatist social movements of teachers, students, indigenous peoples and public employees -that once stood side by side with Correa- are not longer articulated into the equivalential chain constituting the people of the Citizen’s Revolution. Arguably, the fight against the partyarchy or neoliberalism does not longer serve as a nodal point holding together all these social agents normally associated with the left.

As was discussed earlier in this paper, hegemonic operations involve “a universalization of particularity and a particularization of universality” (Torfing 2005, 168). What is taking place in Ecuador can be understood as a split between “hardliners, who remain true to the original particularity, and a group of pragmatics who wish to fulfill the role of universal representation” (ibid., 168). Clearly Correa belongs to the latter. In an interview he states: “We always said that after defeating the right through elections, the major danger for our political project were going to be infantile leftism, environmentalism and indigenism” (Correa 2009, 4, translated by the author). The political meaning of the Citizen’s Revolution is clearly undergoing -and will continue to do so- deep transformations, for the articulation of social demands around different discursive strands is the site of permanent hegemonic struggles. In the business of governing the transformation of empty signifiers into concrete decrees and legislation has tackled their capacity to hold together the popular bloc. This means that more identities have been excluded from the political project of the Citizen’s Revolution.

So far the Citizen’s Revolution has served as a vehicle for social demands that bypasses interest groups and appeals directly to the grassroots who, nevertheless, are interpellated mainly as public opinion. Rapid fire plebiscites are the source of legitimization for the regime but behind that few attempts have been made to organize its followers.\textsuperscript{29} Panizza (2005, 18) asks “Who speaks for the people?”. Hegemonic success depends on the leader’s capacity to assume the task of expressing the sameness of the negated demands. A core feature of populist identification is the dignity and recognition that leaders

\textsuperscript{28} In contrast, the populism of the ISI era in Latin America was sustained by corporatism.

\textsuperscript{29} For instance, AP’s first national convention only took place in November 2010.
grant to their followers. At the limit, the name of the leader embodies a promise of redemption for “the people”. In the Ecuadorian case, Correa uses the media to bond directly with his constituents. Every Saturday he appears on live television for approximately three hours and lectures his audience on his daily tasks, the accomplishments of the government and the obstacles they have faced. In the eyes of his detractors this is a clear sign of the personality cult that is being built around Correa. What is more, they often denounce the aggressive rhetoric used by the leader against his political opponents, i.e. bigwigs, gangsters, liars, etc. Official versions, on the contrary, justify the programme as a way of democratizing the access to information and a valuable means of accountability. Without falling into partisan arguments, one can at least agree that the “Enlace displays the Correa regime in microcosm” (de la Torre 2013, 37). To some extent, the dynamics of populist articulation which constitute the Citizen’s Revolution surface during the broadcasts. As a “political figure who seeks at the same time to be of the people and their leader, the populist leader appears as an ordinary person with extraordinary attributes” (Panizza 2005, 21). Indeed, Correa seems folksy, uses colloquialisms and, in general, embodies several signs associated with the “popular culture”31. At the same time, he elevates himself as a “president-professor” (de la Tore 2013, 37) who drawing from his technocratic knowledge -albeit in a accessible way for the public to understand- lectures the nation, making sense of people’s present condition and offering a path towards a better future.32 He speaks for the people and yet it is he who speaks.

30 The presidential broadcast is called “Enlace Ciudadano” (Citizen Connection).

31 Following Hall (1998, 448) we do not take the “popular culture” as self-contained, nor as tradition to be idealized as a timeless feature. Just as “the people”, “the popular culture” is also a political construction enmeshed in “the tension and oppositions between what belongs to the central domain of elite or dominant culture and the culture of the periphery”. Assessing the power relations that sustain this distinction is therefore a matter of great importance.

32 The reader might note that this is “what politicians usually do” which would, in turn, support Laclau’s argument that to some extent populism is constitutive of the political.
4. Conclusion: the “invented” people and their shifting frontiers

Going back to our original question, who are the people of the Citizen’s Revolution? It has been shown throughout this paper that the notion of “the people” is a political construct with no fixed referent. There is no such thing as an original popular identity that needs to be revealed. On the contrary, the latter is called into being by the very populist articulation of the political space. In the Ecuadorian case, the discourse of the Citizen’s Revolution set off to construct social reality by opposing the virtuous -ordinary- citizen to the corrupted political and economic elites. In a time of profound structural dislocations -a party system at the lap of collapse and a completely unresponsive state apparatus- this project promised to displace traditional power holders and give voice directly to the citizens in a new constitutional order. Correa -the charismatic leader- assumed the task to represent the accumulated histories of popular struggles against neoliberalism. Like this, his political persona has gradually become a site of identification for a heterogenous mass of neglected demands. However, the popular subject constituted by this discursive strand has not been static. The frontiers of the popular bloc had shifted as part of continuous hegemonic struggles to re-signify the political context. The political meaning of the Citizen’s Revolution is always under construction and so are their people.

The populist articulation constructs grievances, and thus delineates who the sufferers are. However, one should also consider the limits of hegemonic operations. Leaders cannot organize constituencies as they please. Grievances cannot be constructed from scratch (De León, Desai and Tugal 2009, 199). Particular discursive strands become relevant at specific historical moments. In Ecuador, the populist rupture was a backlash against the social and economic dislocations of the neoliberal era. It meant an “excess of politics vis-à-vis the liberal scheme” (Beasley-Murray, Cameron, Hershberg 2009, 326) which aimed to correct its democratic blind spots. In a context of massive inequalities and social exclusion, Correa embarked upon a project of redistribution which secured him the support of a big bulk of the population. However, his revolutionary urge and contempt for long deliberative processes have also prompted him to lose valuable alliances with social movements. As de la Torre (2013, 37) points out, “the rhetoric of revolution paints politics as a clash of opposing historical projects. It forces people to take sides in conflicts of epic proportion, with space for democratic dialogue reduced accordingly”. The message seems clear,
those who are not with the revolution are against it. This is profoundly problematic because it delegitimizes dissent. Because “the people” is a political construct and the site of constant hegemonic struggles, the populist promise needs to come to terms with the fact that popular sovereignty requires compromise and the toleration of differences.

As has been shown throughout this paper antagonism is constitutive of politics because it allows us to envisage alternatives to the status quo. Nonetheless, the populist utopia -i.e. the promise of plenitude once the enemy is vanquished and the imaginary of the people in complete harmony with a leader- is also profoundly problematic. Needless to say, the final unity of the people remains a chimera. Therefore populist articulatory practices are deemed to constantly generate a “dialectic of aspiration, disappointment, and grievances” (Panizza 2005, 28). This, however, does not downplay the legacy of Correa’s political project. The Citizen’s Revolution has played a leading role in constituting “a new discursive center of reference for politics” (Arditi 2008, 71). The right has had to abandon its market orthodoxy and move closer to a discursive configuration coded by the left. To paraphrase Arditi (2008, 72), if we connect the Citizen’s Revolution to its impact on the re-signification of the political center, then it is possible to envisage the endurance of its effects long after Correa has left the political stage.
5. References