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

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MSc in Media and Communications

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

**Veronica Leon Burch**

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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 the region, one example of it being the Ecuadorian president's program Citizen Link.

Most debates around these media wars have focused on political economy aspects and the power relations among different actors. While these aspects are crucial to understand the setting, not enough attention has been paid to the discourse constructed through the different media. I will contribute to these debates by proposing a discourse theory analysis.

Guided by the general question of ‘what role can a direct communication format play in a process of political change 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 will focus on the building of two political camps and the tensions between a counter-hegemonic process and its transition towards hegemony. 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.

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## 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 expansion of neoliberalism and the opening of markets, global corporate media has become more concentrated and entertainment-oriented than ever (McChesney, 2001). In the thriving of a 'society of the spectacle' (Debord, 2006), politics have become unthinkable outside a mediated frame, with a 'politics for show' at the expense of 'talk' taking the scene (Meyer, 2002: 70). All of this is leading to a decrease in political engagement and connection (Mughan and Gunther, 2000; Couldry and Markham, 2007). Yet, without involvement, democracy's legitimacy fades (Dahlgren, 2009: 1).

Latin America appears to be going in a different direction with a series of complex political processes, a total reconfiguration of its mediascape and an increase in political participation. After two decades of neoliberal deregulation and austerity measures, which resulted in a series of financial crises and growing inequalities (Harvey, 2006; Klein, 2007; Dello Buono, 2010), governments critical of neoliberalism emerged. Although there exist many differences between those governments, scholars have tended to dichotomise between moderate social-democrats – such as Brazil's Lula – and more radical 'populists' – such as Chávez or Correa. These governments converge in alliances and are seen as part of a regional 'left turn' or 'pink tide' (Beasley-Murray et al., 2009). This left turn has also brought about manifest 'media wars' (O'Shaughnessy, 2007). The private media, highly intertwined with the market and traditional powers, have become strong political oppositional actors (Kitzberger, 2012; Martens and Vivares, 2013), going so far as to support attempted coups (O'Shaughnessy, 2007). On the other hand, governments have deployed a series of strategies to regulate the media and gain media power of their own, which has generated many a debate and tensions (Ramos and Orlando, 2012; Kitzberger, 2012).

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), it becomes extremely relevant to analyse this new kind of dynamics, as well as to learn from its contradictions and missteps. However, these should be understood in their particular context, challenging the tendency to universalise notions deriving from a Western perspective (Curran and Park, 1999).

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The democratic legitimacy of the Ecuadorian government's media strategies has been subject of heated debate. Many scholars understand them as an ‘activist’ response to oppositional media (Ramos and Orlando, 2012; Kitzberger, 2012; Dello Buono, 2010; O’Shaughnessy,

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1 Source: <http://www.forbes.com.mx/sites/los-10-mandatarios-mas-populares-de-america-latina/>

2 Source: Latinobarometro <http://www.latinobarometro.org/latContents.jsp>

2007), while others have deemed them ‘populist’ in the sense of challenging democracy (De la Torre, 2013; Waisbord, 2011; Rincón and Magrini, 2011). Laclau (2007) claims that the term ‘populism’ has been widely used to undermine political processes of broad popular mobilisation, responding to a normalization of liberalism (19) and a ‘denigration of the masses’ (63); he thus advances a theory on populism that considers its democratic potential. Populism emerges as an interesting concept to frame this debate, for its approaches relate to different perspectives on democracy.

To frame my theoretical discussion, I shall start by considering Curran and Park's (1999: 2) suggestion to de-westernize media studies, to avoid generalisations from Western perspectives, for which it is crucial to analyse media systems in their own context. Laclau further argues that every social articulation is historical and contingent, and should be analysed as such (Howarth, 2000). In this sense, I propose to combine a set of theories with contextualisation, to uncover the socio-political contingent articulations of the region. [1] First, I shall situate the region's mediascape by looking into political economy analyses. [2] I will look into debates around the mediation of politics. [3] I shall situate Latin American populism and its tensions with liberal democracy, [4] to then approach Laclau's (2007) post-Marxist theories on populism. [5] Finally, I will use post-Marxist approaches to democracy to draw a normative hypothesis, which I shall then test through my empirical analysis.

### **An absent watchdog**

Theories focusing on political economy and media systems can shed light on the complex set of power relations in the region and on tensions around the watchdog discourse.

A former wave of media reconfigurations should be understood within the context of the expansion of neoliberal deregulation in the region, which was promoted by the influence of US neoconservatives since the 1980's (Harvey, 2006; Klein, 2007). With the opening up of markets, second-tier media companies in Latin America became more concentrated than ever and constituted powerful regional cartels, with tight alliances to US media corporations (McChesney, 2001). Lacking a public service media tradition, the media in the region also adopted a liberal discourse, highly influenced by the US (Waisbord, 1999). Regional organizations such as the Inter-American Press Association played an important role in promoting these values (Waisbord, 1999), and continue to do so in today's debates (Ramos and Orlando, 2012). Under a liberal model, the media's main democratic role is understood as that of a watchdog over the State, which implies complete independence from the State, guaranteed through its anchoring to the market; any regulation is thus deemed unacceptable (Scammell and Semetko, 2000; Curran, 2002). This notion differs from the European ‘public

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' interests (Martens and Vivares, 2013; Martín-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 Vivares, 2013).

We thus identify a tension between the liberal-watchdog discourse and the applicability of this model in the region, also crucial to understanding the oppositional role the media started playing in the last decade.

### **Presidents on television**

Analyses of the relationship between media and politics, particularly in the West, have pointed to an increased tendency towards 'celebritisation', leading to a debate between its potential to increase political participation and its downsides for democracy.

The expansion of broadcast media brought about an increased mediation of politics and a 'new visibility' for politicians, more intimate and close to the people (Thompson, 2005: 38). Approaches to the 'mediatization' of politics have pointed not only to politicians' growing dependency on media exposure, but also to politics increasingly becoming "subordinate to

the logics of mass media” (Meyer, 2002: 56). In that sense, a ‘politics for show’ and ‘star-system’ predominate, at the expense of ‘talk’ and authenticity (70). This also points to a generalised propensity to ‘package’ policies for media presentation, with a predominance of soundbites over in-depth debate (Franklin, 2004). Against this background, Street (2012) has observed a rise of ‘celebrity’ politics, with politicians becoming celebrities and other celebrities supporting political movements, resulting in a ‘spectacularisation’ and ‘personalisation’ of politics. An important feature of this celebritisation has to do with favouring politicians’ personal lives and personality over political and policy-making debate (Marsh et al., 2010), which for Van Zoonen (in Marsh et al., 2010: 331), has led to a ‘lowering of the quality’ and ‘dumbing down’ of politics. In sum, a generalised notion of political content being eroded in the face of spectacle prevails among scholars, in a context where interest and involvement in politics has widely decreased, by which democracy itself seems to become threatened (Mughan and Gunther, 2000). However, scholars such as Coleman and Power have opted for analysing celebrity culture’s potential to draw audiences back into politics, considering the mobilizing success of certain formats, such as reality TV (Couldry and Markham, 2007). Given this debate, Couldry and Markham (2007), through empirical research, in fact detected a decrease in political engagement related to celebrity culture.

The high media exposure of certain Latin American presidents has also been understood as part of today’s tendency to ‘celebritise’ politics (Rincón, 2008). A new format of direct communication, like the program Citizen Link, has bloomed in the region: between 2000 and 2010, seven left-wing and right-wing presidents had their own TV or radio program (Ayala and Cruz, 2010). Coining the term ‘tele-presidents’, Omar Rincón (2008) deems politics are being reduced to a reality TV style spectacle that operates through emotions and a ‘melodramatic pact’, displacing argumentation and political debate. However, Rincón (2008: 12) denies any ideological difference between left-wing and right-wing politicians, by which the region’s complex set of power relations is overlooked. On the other hand, though playing on the affective dimension which Rincón mentions, these formats seem to be deviating from many global tendencies; namely, at the opposite pole, presidents take the podium and speak unfiltered and uncut for hours, thus combining a more traditional style of political speech with mediated spectacle and today’s ‘new visibility’. Finally, while Colombia, having had a right-wing tele-president, has maintained its voter turnout percentages below 50%, the region’s left turn countries have seen an increase in voter turnout to over 80%<sup>3</sup>, as well as increases in ‘trust in democracy’ and ‘political interest’<sup>4</sup>.

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3 Turnout database: <http://www.idea.int/vt/viewdata.cfm#>

4 Latinobarometro: <http://www.latinobarometro.org/latContents.jsp>

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 liberalism, can explain why it has become an endemic trend in the region, as well as its implications.

Among the many traditions of populism, Latin America has known a particular model, very different from European right-wing nationalism (Waisbord, 2011). Since the first post-war wave, Latin American populism was defined under three main angles: first, as an economic model of import substitution industrialization and Keynesian redistributive policies; second, as a political 'style' characterised by a charismatic leader, strong popular mobilisation, a nationalist rhetoric, and the demise of the ruling oligarchies (Demmers et al., 2001). The success of this style then turned it into a recurrent trend among both right-wing and left-wing politicians (De la Torre, 1997). The third key defining characteristic has been its tension with liberalism: populism has tended to bypass constitutional mechanisms and institutions, by considering them tools of oligarchic control, and thus claiming to represent the people directly (Beasley-Murray et al., 2009).

This antagonistic relation between populism and liberalism is better understood in the light of a decolonial analysis of the region. For decolonial scholars (Quijano, 2005; Mignolo, 2011; Escobar, 2010), Latin America was constituted throughout colonization and modernization by a 'coloniality of power'; that is, by marginalising and 'racialising' indigenous peoples, constructing knowledge under a Eurocentric rational form and constituting state hegemony and liberalism (Quijano, 2005). This coloniality of power perpetuated throughout the Republican and Neoliberal eras, in which the national elites controlled most – State and non-state – powers (Quijano, 2005; Escobar, 2010). Under this perspective, large sectors of the population, particularly the indigenous, never accessed full citizenship (Quijano, 2005), and liberalism existed under 'failed' versions (Beasley-Murray et al., 2009). This also explains a dimension of the success of populism, and its potential for political inclusion. Populism has

indeed functioned as a sort of ‘shock force’ enabling the political inclusion of marginalised sectors, despite this being often at the expense of democratic precepts (Beasley-Murray et al., 2009: 324). In Ecuador, traditional populism sought to bring the ‘marginal others’ into politics, by taking politics out of the elite cafés and into the streets (de la Torre, 1997). As citizenship was hardly accessible to everyone at that time, the notion of ‘*lo popular*’ – the popular – emerged to express extended social mobilisation (O’Donnell in De la Torre, 1997: 14).

This notion of *lo popular* was later incorporated as a constitutive element of identity by social and revolutionary processes during the 1960-70’s. Hence, the ‘popular education’ and ‘popular communication’ movements emerged, following the legacy of Paulo Freire (León, 2008). These movements started advocating for communication rights and democratisation, which would influence the current reconfigurations (León, 2008).

The media reconfigurations can also be read in the light of populism. Disputes over the media indeed arose since the first waves of populism, as under Perón (Repoll, 2010). Since the region’s left turn, progressive governments claimed communication to be a ‘public service’, as opposed to a private one, and started deploying a series of media strategies and regulations: new communication laws, the consolidation of public media, extensive media campaigns with spaces of direct communication – such as Citizen Link, and a strong rhetoric discrediting private media (Kitzberger, 2012). Waisbord (2011: 104) suggests these strategies do not correspond to either a state-run media monopoly nor to a mixed ‘public broadcasting and private ownership’; but rather to classical Latin American populism, characterised by the will to gain direct control over media outlets, the use of unfiltered access to audiences, and antagonising dissidents. Yet, beyond the need for media exposure in today’s context of mediated politics (Rincón, 2008), many of these measures have been understood as an ‘activist’ strategy to counter oppositional media, while others have responded to the historical demands put forward by social movements and civil society groups (Ramos and Orlando, 2012; Kitzberger, 2012). Critiques of these media strategies, on the other side, have mostly focused on their ‘populist’ dimensions, that is, their understanding of civil society and the State as inseparable, which sheds doubts on their ability to strengthen civil society (Waisbord, 2011) or truly represent ‘the people’ (De la Torre, 2013; Rincón, 2008). Martín-Barbero (2006: 288) also problematises the issue of states confusing their own need for stability with collective rights, under the claims to communication as a public service.

Thus, in a context where liberal democracy never really functioned, and in which many sectors of society have been systematically excluded from political life, populism has

continually resurfaced as an alternative of popular mobilisation, albeit with explicit disregard for liberal democracy. Is it possible, in this sense, to understand it as a democratic possibility?

### **Constructing the ‘people’**

The tensions between liberalism and populism, as we have seen, revolve around their different understandings of the State and the people. Laclau (2007: 19) understands the dismissal of populism as part of a ‘political prejudice’, belonging to a discursive construction of liberal normality and political asceticism, which seeks to exclude any defying logic. Chantal Mouffe (2005: 33) adds that the articulation between liberalism and democracy is merely contingent, by which other forms of democracy, through other contingent articulations, are possible (Laclau, 2007: 167). Following this logic, and considering Latin America's background, I will suggest that populism and democracy can be understood as a contingent articulation in the region.

Post-Marxism emerged as an intent to recover the left's struggles, surpassing Marxism's ‘essentialist’ notions (Howarth, 2000). Influenced by his own Latin American background, Laclau (2014: 2) set out to transcend the Marxist concept of ‘class’, which fell short of encompassing all social struggles. He thus developed a populist theory that advances the notion of constituting a ‘people’ as ‘the political logic of democracy’ (Simons, 2011: 201). Connected to his ‘discourse theory’ rationale, the populist formation of a people happens when, on the one hand, a political frontier is drawn between the people and hegemonic power, that is, through antagonising with the powers-that-be; and, on the other hand, when a series of demands are articulated (Laclau, 2007: 74). This articulation of demands takes place through the formation of an ‘empty signifier’ that constitutes a collective will with which people identify (166). Yet, this empty signifier goes beyond a simple ‘representation’ of all the demands, it constitutes their ‘totality’. In this sense, representation itself is unmasked as constituting social objectivity (163). Constructing a people also requires a ‘*plebs*’, a section of the community, to claim it constitutes the entire community, the ‘*populus*’ (81). Simons (2011: 215) further points to the crucial role of the media in the constitution of a people, given today's mass-mediated publics.

The antagonising aspect of populism, according to Phelan and Dahlberg (2011: 30), is what predominates and makes it so powerful, that is, creating an aligned opposition towards a power, clearly demarcating an ‘us’ from a ‘them’/‘enemy’, which enables ‘ideological closure’ (27). This also points to one of the weaknesses of populism: its ‘double of face’, or tension between the counter-hegemonic rupture and the moment of hegemonic reconstruction (Laclau, 2007: 177). Hence, if the populist ‘appeal’ is related to its subversive quality, when it

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, allowing excluded voices to be heard (Phelan and Dahlberg, 2011: 30). Mouffe (1999: 7) also contests the predominance of rationality, for she understands passion as a latent quality of politics, which should be mobilised towards building democracy, rather than suffocated. This affective dimension also relates to populism, and its mobilising potential, which for Chang and Glynos (2011: 109) tend to be misunderstood and underestimated under rationalist frames of analysis.

Therefore, building an agonistic public sphere would imply avoiding the suppression of adversarial relations (Mouffe 2005: 5), but also searching to overcome antagonistic relations that search to ‘destroy’ the enemy. This last point, however, clashes with the populist logic of equivalence. For Laclau (2007: 250), crucial to the balance between populism and democracy is the relationship between autonomy (civil society) and hegemony (state power), where the autonomy of social demands and their articulation must be collectively rethought, as well as the collective bodies to be constructed.

## **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 agonistic radical democracy. My aim has not been to discuss whether populism is a preferable model, nor which should be the best media system for the region, but rather to propose populism as the best-suited model to analyse the current processes, and as the ensuing normative framework to analyse their democratic potential. While most debates on the region's media have focused on more structural aspects of power relations, very little attention has been given (beyond aspects of antagonism) to what is actually being discursively constructed through the media. Hence, considering the discursive grounding of Laclau and Mouffe's theories, my interest is to focus on discourse and what it can tell us about the current process.

President Correa's program Citizen Link (CL) appears as the most suitable object of analysis for several reasons. First, because it can be understood as a central element of the government's media strategy, as a primary and constant space of enunciation, and because of its influence in setting the private media's agenda (Ayala and Cruz, 2010). Secondly, a space of direct communication between the 'leader' – Correa – and the 'people' seems most suited for analysing a populist discourse. And finally, for being part of the region's new 'tele-presidential' formats. My aim is thus to undertake a discourse theory analysis to test if, in fact, the program's discourse can be understood as fulfilling the democratic potential this theory offers. Rather than a thorough analysis of the political discourse as such, I shall focus on how political frontiers, us/them, are established, and what it can tell us about the populist construction of a people and a new hegemonic order.

### *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 (Andersen, 2003: 55). Discourse should also be understood as the primary terrain where objectivity is constituted, by which it is broader than just speech and text, and is constituted through relations (Laclau, 2007: 68). In this sense, Correa's discourse should be understood as more than just rhetoric, but as a set of policies, ideas, actions, and power relations. These relations, moreover, are constituted by establishing political frontiers dividing 'insiders' from

‘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 ‘tendentally 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 – all right-wing and left-wing traditional political parties were configured as one-and-the-same entity, representing all the ills of the past. This implies the language of populism will always be ‘imprecise and fluctuating’ (Laclau, 2007: 118), in which affect will play an important role. As a final point, ‘sedimentation’ occurs when a discursive form becomes common-sense, by which it contributes to concealing the contingency of any social order (Phelan and Dahlberg, 2011: 23).

Parting from DT's premise that “there is no position outside of some kind of ideology” (Dahlgren, 2011: 239), DT should also be understood as an engaged theory, which, Dahlberg (2011: 56) points out, should promote a radical political economy, critical of the ‘naturalized’ form of global capitalism and the media system supporting it by obscuring other alternatives, and should encourage the democratization of the media.

*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 function it serves (Gill, 1996: 144), or, as Fairclough (1992: 214) puts it, from the signified (content) to the signifier (form), which constitute an “inseparable unity in the sign”. Yet, CDA's focus is not merely linguistic, but also intertextual (Fairclough, 1992: 194). Nevertheless, text and context are usually set apart in the methodological implementation, tending towards a ‘reified and static’ understanding of context (Phelan and Dahlberg, 2011: 10). In this sense, a DT approach should be able to incorporate linguistic and extra-linguistic analyses (Dahlgren, 2011: 233), thus broadening the scope of discourse.

Another characteristic of CDA, as Fairclough (1992: 212) stresses, is to focus on how social control and domination are exerted through text, especially in the media. A central aim of discourse analysis is thus to uncover the mechanisms through which language and the construction of meaning allow those in power to “deceive and oppress the dominated” (Howarth, 2000: 4). In this sense, CDA can be understood as a more top-down approach to discourse, which can be suitable to analyse a presidential discourse, yet, will be pertinently complemented with DT, allowing for broader understandings of hegemony and political articulation.

*Limitations*

Some disadvantages of my methodological approach deserve to be mentioned, most of which have to do with centering the analysis on media texts. First, as no interviews are being performed, no data on the speaker's intentions will be produced. I would like to insist on the ethical implications of this point, for this research is in no way attempting to decode president Correa's intentions. In this sense, I favour a Lacan-inspired ‘Foucauldian’ understanding of our relation to language, by which, ‘it’ speaks through us, rather than we speak through it (Andersen, 2003: 6). DT, which integrates elements from Foucault, post-structuralism and psychoanalysis, also points to an understanding of discourse as configuring the social, well beyond our rational intentionality (Howarth, 2000).

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 mediated communications. This study should thus be understood as a very partial analysis of its discourse. I am also focusing on its head figure, president Correa, yet clearly the government, and its political party, are composed by a wide range of diverse actors. Overall, no generalisations should be assumed from this study.

A final limitation concerns the program's language, which is Spanish; for which I shall follow Fairclough's (1992: 196) suggestion to perform the analysis in its original language, and then translate some of the sequences (these are available as appendices which can be requested from the author).

### **Deployment**

To operationalise my methodology, I conducted three levels of analysis: first, a general thematic analysis from which I derived a sample of sequences; second, a critical discourse analysis of the sequences, using a linguistic approach; and third, a discourse theory analysis using Laclau's populist reason postulates.

Previous to the discourse analysis, to ground my research, I have situated Ecuador's media and political context, and looked into a series of analyses on Ecuador's private media content. All Citizen Link episodes since 2010 are available online and previous episodes can be requested through the Secretary of Communication.

#### *Sampling and thematic analysis:*

The first level of sampling consisted of selecting 15 episodes from 2008 to 2014. After a pilot study focusing on electoral periods (see list in appendix 2), I concluded that I needed to look into a broader spectrum of political moments. I thus selected a series of key moments considered paradigm-changing for the government, and, most importantly creating tensions with either traditional political parties or social movements, which I complemented with some random episodes, to have a broader scope (see appendix 1 for full list). As a media-practitioner living in Ecuador, I have also been watching the program regularly throughout the years and was already familiarised with many of its contents and key moments.

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:*

I performed a linguistic CDA analysis of the sequences, by looking into the discursive structures and strategies. For this, I used two different sets of colour coding focusing on the building of 'insiders' (the people), 'outsiders' (the opposition), the political process (the government), and Correa's own image and interactions (see appendix 5). I then used these findings to analyse DT's notions of differential and equivalential chains, to identify the formation of political frontiers; and of nodal points and empty signifiers leading to the construction of a people. These elements would also shed light on the building of a new hegemonic order through discourse.

## **RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION**

For my interpretation, I will start with a brief overview of [1] the private media's attitude and discourse, to establish the setting in which Citizen Link emerged; as well as [2] the general aspects of the program. I shall then bring the three levels of analysis – thematic, CDA and DT – together and divide the interpretation by broad themes: [3] antagonisms and the construction of the 'other', [4] the construction of the people and [5] the building of a new hegemonic order.

### **The media as opposition**

When Correa came into power, the country had suffered a complete institutional meltdown: neoliberal policies had dismantled the productive sector and modest welfare state, with an ever-deepening corruption and governance crisis (Carriere, 2001). Traditional parties had

thus extensively lost credibility and votes, with which the media established themselves as a key oppositional actor (Reyes, 2011, Ramos, 2012). Journalists and media owners themselves have overtly admitted to being compelled to assume that role (Reyes, 2011). A crucial background element was the media's direct links to governments and the financial sector: in the 1990's, most TV channels were owned by bankers, who had direct ties to traditional political parties (Checa-Godoy, 2012). For instance, during the 1990's, frequencies were distributed at discretion among party leaders, excluding many other sectors requesting air-waves (15). This later created tension, for example when Ecuador went through a banking crisis in 1999-2000, in which more than 30 financial institutions went bankrupt in the midst of government bailouts: media outlets alluded to regional conflicts to put the blame for the crisis on politicians<sup>5</sup> (4). Previous analyses have also pointed to the media's influential role on the political scene, for instance, in the overthrowing of presidents Bucarám and Gutierrez (de la Torre, 1999; Reyes, 2011). In this sense, despite claims on a watchdog model, Ecuador's media system could be better understood as 'corporatist' with close ties to traditional powers. Nevertheless, the media sector positioned itself as the "sole defender of freedom of speech" and opposed any type of regulation (Reyes, 2011).

Against this background, the first regulation proposed through the new Constitution was to redistribute air-waves among the private, public and communitarian sectors, and to forbid financial institutions from owning assets in other businesses, particularly the media (Checa-Godoy, 2012). Ever since, the media have sustained massive orchestrated national and regional campaigns opposing any type of regulation, which managed to delay the completion of a communication law for years (Ramos, 2012: 71). With a tendency to 'editorialise' (Reyes, 2011), from the beginning the media engaged in sustained frontal attacks, with a language that de-legitimises and disavows the government by calling the president a 'dictator' and 'authoritarian' (Ramos, 2012); which some have understood as a tactic to build up a coup (Pinheiro in Ramos, 2012: 67). Coincidentally, days before the deadline for bankers to sell their media assets, a police uprising took place leading to the kidnapping of president Correa (Checa-Godoy, 2012). Ever since, the media have systematically denied this as an attempted coup<sup>6</sup>: "Now the dictator understood he must retract from his phantasmal tale, I offer him a way out: it is not reprieve he must negotiate, but amnesty..." (E. Palacio, *El Universo*, 6 February 2011).

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<sup>5</sup> The political scene was divided between political parties from the commercial sector of the coast and the landowning sector from the Andes.

<sup>6</sup> Journalist Palacio wrote an article accusing the president of faking his own kidnapping and committing 'crimes against humanity', which led to a libel suit from Correa.

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 sustained bias against the government in private media coverage, as well as an inverted bias in public media. Interestingly, with the reconfiguration of the political scene, the private media have opened spaces for oppositional social movements and sectors from the left that did not have much voice in their outlets before, however, León (in Harnecker, 2011: 192) suggests these ‘democratic’ openings ought to be better exploited to advance political proposals, beyond feeding into oppositional antagonising.

### **The program**

When Alianza País came into power, it was an almost improvised newcomer movement, with no institutional grounding and a strong anti-traditional-parties stance. Correa was thus immediately established as the main mobilizing force to start the process of change (Ramírez, 2010). Moreover, he understood that the media were the primary political adversary to beat (Ramos and Orlando, 2012). As soon as he came into office in 2007, he launched a weekly radio program, which started broadcasting on television in 2008. The program, ‘*Enlace Ciudadano*’, Citizen Link (CL), had a simpler presentation during the first years, usually shot in interiors with fewer cameras. Increasingly, the visuals have become more sophisticated: with more cameras, cranes, the use of a mountable stage with LED screens that render the episodes visually homogeneous, and an increased use of power point presentations, videos, as well as songs and anthems. It has indeed become more ‘spectacular’.

Many aspects of CL point to the government’s sustained strategy to ‘get close to the regions’ and ‘the people’ (Suárez in Harnecker, 2011: 157). From the beginning, CL has been broadcast from different parts of the country, as part of the government’s ‘itinerant’ cabinet meetings: every two weeks, the executive authorities meet in a different part of the country, covering very remote locations, where the program sets up camp and broadcasts live in front of a local audience. CL is also simultaneously translated to five indigenous languages, for broadcast on regional radios, and an indigenous presenter closes each program delivering a summary in *Kichwa* language. There are no overall ratings figures available, but the program is transmitted on national and regional public channels, and open for broadcast by any private or community channel. By 2011, more than 300 radios and many local TV stations had

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.ciespal.net/mediaciones/>

subscribed (Ayala and Cruz, 2010). To this, we must add thousands of viewings through official online channels<sup>8</sup>.

CL basically consists of President Correa addressing his audience for two to three hours. Presented as a tool for government accountability, the core section is a recount of his weekly activities, explaining every policy and project the government is working on. Other sections have changed over time, in particular, the incorporation of a section to analyse – and refute – what the private media are saying. Apart from these gradual changes, most episodes follow a similar structure and have similar types of content. The program is mostly a monologue, but includes short videos and brief interventions from Ministers or other authorities Correa invites to elaborate on some project.

Correa's tone is informal, using a conversational style and language: he addresses the audience directly, using expressions such as 'listen', 'you see?', 'as you know' (CL#239). He uses many sayings and proverbs, tells jokes, and always teases his Kichwa co-presenter. While narrating his weekly activities, sentences are structured in a conversational and improvised way, he often interrupts an idea to express another and inserts many anecdotes: "At 8:30 we were having breakfast in Duran. A hug to all the people from Duran! To Mrs. Julia, [her] amazing '*manguera*' soup. I found out that Mrs. Julia, where we always ate..." (CL#84).

As in this quote, he intermittently addresses a particular sector of society or person – the people from Duran, Mrs. Julia – which helps create a closer bond with these sectors. When referring to an important event or tragedy, he will enunciate and repeat every single name, for example, mentioning all the dead and wounded people after the attempted coup in 2010 (CL#190). In each episode, Correa offers many technical or economic explanations of the policies and programs the government is running. For this, the tone is pedagogical, using repetitions, explaining sophisticated accounts with simple language and examples: in episode #239 he explains the political dimension of state budget allocations through the example of constructing a bridge in an upper class sector or a popular one.

Overall, while the program appears structured and with high production standards, Correa's discourse seems non-scripted, which not only gives a dimension of authenticity and spontaneity, but also of him controlling his own discourse. This is reinforced by moments of interaction between Correa and the technical team of the program, in which, live during the program, he asks for certain visuals, changes the order of the sections and criticises mistakes,

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.comunicacion.gob.ec/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2014/04/Rendici%C3%B3n-de-Cuentas-Informe-2013.pdf>

thus appearing as if ‘directing’ the program. This feeds into his image of leadership, which we shall further analyse later.

### **Antagonism and ‘othering’**

Antagonism is undoubtedly a central aspect of the program. Secretary of Communication Fernando Alvarado has admitted the media strategy was to polarise, claiming the country's profound changes would have been impossible otherwise (Muñoz, 2012). In every program, a considerable amount of time is devoted to antagonising oppositional actors. We can identify a dualistic construction of insiders and outsiders, with a constant juxtaposition of positive mentions of the government and the people and negative mentions of the opposition. This is clearly visible in the coding with the interspersed green and orange highlights (appendices available upon request). This contrast is often presented as a before/after opposition: “*before*, most of the state budget was for foreign debt [...] *now*, go and see; the smallest part for debt, a huge part for education, health, a lot for infrastructure...” (CL#239). Many expressions emphasize this break with the past: “a past that will never return” (CL#335). In this sense, the citizen revolution is constructed as a ‘historical’ moment (CL#96-310), a break with the “long and sad neoliberal night” (CL#335).

Three main antagonists are mentioned in every viewed episode, through their distinctive appellations: the ‘*pelucones*’ (the bigwigs – elites); the ‘*partidocracia*’ (particracy); and the ‘*prensa corrupta*’ (private corrupt press). As we have seen, this process of ‘naming’ (Laclau, 2007: 118) allows grouping them as a sector and establishing them as ‘outsiders’. Other antagonists are linked to specific circumstances, such as the police officers participating in the attempted coup (CL#190). Certain oppositional social movements are mentioned intermittently since 2008, such as indigenous organisations (CL#91), and over time, more and more oppositional organisations and individuals are antagonised. Without generalising, we can identify a slight evolution, which corresponds to that of the country's political landscape. For instance, in program #84 from 2008, apart from the three main antagonists, bankers, the ‘golden bureaucracy’ and the IMF are mentioned; while in program #378 in 2013, more than 30 minutes are dedicated to antagonising NGO's, an indigenous march and ‘infantile’ ecologists. Overall, with no precise characterization, antagonists appear to be anyone opposing the government or its reforms, which have affected not only certain elite privileges (Ramírez, 2010), but also many long-standing clientelistic dynamics (Maldonado, 2009).

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 rather than labour rights. After criticising the article, Correa goes through the lawyer's curriculum and associates his ideas to the whole sector he belongs to: “this is the people we confront every day, those who write in the papers, the owners of the press; this is their thinking” (CL#335). A second element is contraposition: in this example, the critique of the lawyer is constantly contrasted with normative ideas: a ‘modernising bourgeoisie’ versus an ‘arrogant, excluding’ one, or with ‘the people's will’: “Our people, our working class [...] don't need his hand-outs, they need him to comply with his duties and to respect their rights, the rights of these workers” (CL#335). As outsiders are not always a clearly defined sector, they can be distinguished through certain characteristics attributed to them, using naming and contrasts: ‘cool’ versus ‘tacky’ social movements (CL#378), or the ‘true’ versus the ‘infantile’ left (CL#378), the ‘professional’ journalist versus the ‘ill-intentioned’ ones (CL#239), etc.

Opposition actors do not intervene during the program, yet Correa establishes a dialogue through a constant use of paraphrasing and hypotheticals, that attribute them voice and intent. They are also given voice through videos showing particular interventions. They can thus be constructed in certain ways: as not concerned about the country's needs, but mainly by their own interests: “These men who say they defend the water, all they want is to defend their ruling over the water councils” (CL#378). This also points to the government's logic of favouring the nation's interests over partial demands (Ramírez, 2010). Particular demands that do not adhere to the process seem to be dismissed from the equivalential chain. This is then contrasted to Correa's ‘technical’ or factual explanations: “[They say:] ‘it's the need for dollars’; [...] we will only receive 10% of those funds...” (CL#335). A contrast between ‘irrational’ or ‘ill-intentioned’ antagonists is thus established against Correa's ‘expertise’ and facts. In this way, antagonists are minimised and ridiculed, reinforced by the use of epithets and ironies: ‘good-will exploiters’ (CL#335), ‘clumsy and dumb’ bourgeoisie (CL#335). In this process of ‘othering’, the political frontier between insiders and outsiders starts to be clearly delineated (Carpentier and Cammaerts, 2006: 2).

Moreover, by invoking the people “not to vote for them” (CL#84), to “reject and repudiate” them (CL#378), not to listen to them (CL#378), etc., there is a call for these outsiders to stop being relevant in the public sphere, under the premise they do not represent anyone but their own private interests. There is also a use of language that puts them out of a legal/democratic framework: for example, by saying the prosecutor is “assassinating the truth” (CL#84); that journalists “interrogate and torture” instead of interviewing (CL#239), telling

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 in a way legitimises those who voted for the Citizen Revolution as constituting the ‘whole people’.

Overall, the discourse towards the opposition seems to be one of disavowal, thus following the private press's approach of denial and delegitimation, feeding into the climate of polarisation. We can detect a first contradiction in the path towards an agonistic public sphere. In the construction of the equivalential chain, by establishing a political frontier between two camps (Phelan and Dahlberg, 2011: 27), traditional (hegemonic) powers seem to be put on the same level as other oppositional organizations, such as social movements. In this sense, the political frontier seems to be drawn not exclusively in opposition to a previous hegemonic power, but between the camp of those supporting the government and those opposing it. We can start to see how insiders are built in contraposition to outsiders, yet, how are the empty signifiers established to constitute a people?

### **Constructing the people**

Throughout the program, insiders are evoked, on the one hand, by being included in the dialogue as addressees: as we have seen, Correa talks to the people directly in a conversational mode, he also greets the local populations from the audience several times during each program, he salutes migrants living abroad, the people he met during his weekly activities, etc. On the other hand, the notions of ‘the government’, the ‘Citizen Revolution’ and also ‘the president’ are constructed around that of ‘the people’ – *el pueblo*. The people are announced as the centre of the process: “the human over capital” (CL#263), “now the Ecuadorian people rule” (CL#239-310-335), also naming specific sectors – “we are with the farmers” (CL#84). Moreover, Correa/the government and the people are discursively construed as interchangeable in many ways. The ‘will’ of the people is invoked to justify the government's actions: “the Ecuadorian people will not allow [our weekly report] to disappear”

(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, his self-image is built as being close to popular culture, and distant from the elites: "this president has never been in the Union Club, in cocktails with bankers... but he is here in Yaguachi" (CL#84). When recounting his weekly activities he mentions the popular dishes he has eaten: in program #84 he remembers the places where he ate popular food in his youth, because his father taught him to "love what is ours", which he then contrasts to the elites who only "know the Bay Side in Miami" and "don't represent anyone". This, on the one hand, situates him as close to the people, and on the other, brings value to popular culture, which had been historically minimised, given the region's 'coloniality of power' background (Quijano, 2005). It thus points to a sense of empowering and nation-building, which I will further analyse later. Another element bringing him 'close to the people' is an 'impassioned' style, with a constant use of expressions denoting emotion.

A second characteristic in the building of Correa's image is that of a servant: "don't thank me, the money belongs to the people" (CL#84), "I have never wanted anything for myself, just to serve my people" (CL#378). This is reinforced by references to the people as the 'real rulers' – *mandantes*, in which Correa's role would be to execute their will. For this task, he is also depicted as an expert, constantly using facts and numbers in his explanations: "As you know, I have the bad habit of being an economist" (CL#239). Then a third characteristic is that of leadership: "I have *ordered* works" (CL#84), "under this government, that will never happen" (CL#190). Correa reprimands ministers or public servants live on air when a project is not

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 function: his reason for being is to work for the people. President Correa is thus constructed as the empty signifier that links the people's demands (Laclau, 2007: 131), representing – embodying – the whole political process and the people's will.

Under this authority, Correa repeatedly appeals to the audience, or certain sectors of the population, for action or participation: “prepare yourselves, young people of Vicente”, “farmers of my motherland: plant, plant and plant!” (CL#84). Some of these calls are with a sense of empowerment, to participate in the process or claim social rights: “organize yourselves! [...] housing is not a commodity, it's a human right” (CL#84). Yet, other calls, more salient in recent years, are to support the government: by voting (CL#84), by marching or manifesting (CL#263), by tweeting (CL#378), etc. In this sense, while the people are presented as the centre, the ‘rulers’ of the process, in terms of taking action, there is a contradiction between an empowering sense of participation and a notion of critical mass or mob, whose main function is to defend the process. Here again, the political frontier is reinforced in terms of ‘supporters’ and ‘opponents’ of the Citizen Revolution, thus the notion of a ‘*plebs*’ standing in for a ‘*populus*’ (Laclau, 2007: 107). In this sense, those who support the process are ‘the people’, hence the process represents ‘all the people’. This understanding of the State and the people as equals, as we have seen, is the point that raises the most critiques against populism, questioning the State's capacity to truly represent – all – the people (De la Torre, 2013; Waisbord, 2011; Rincón, 2008).

### **The building of a new hegemonic order**

After seven years in power and ten victorious elections, clearly the Citizen Revolution has become hegemonic. In the discursive construction of this new order, we can identify many contradictions and tensions, which respond to the ‘double face’ of populism that Laclau (2007: 177) mentions, thus highlighting the tension between a subversive moment of rupture and the rebuilding of a new order.

The Citizen Revolution, as we have seen, is built through before/after dichotomies, around the notion of a historical rupture with the past: “one of the greatest changes in the country's history” (CL#378). This is reinforced by the political frontier creating a rupture with all the

signifiers that incarnate the past: “Here, bankers don't rule anymore, the ‘particracy’ doesn't rule anymore, media power doesn't rule anymore, the IMF, the international bureaucracy don't rule anymore [...] it is you who rule here, the Ecuadorian people [...] that is the path of the revolution” (CL#310).

This demarcation from the past, and all the hegemonic powers that “don't rule anymore”, establish the identification of a new ruling order: a new hegemony. However, this rupture is constructed as an ongoing ‘process’, with a frequent use of gerunds: “we are preparing” (CL#239), “we are working [...] for the future” (CL#378), and acknowledging the complexities of a project of change: “governing implies decisions, problems...” (CL#378). There is a first contradiction between the affirmation of a clear rupture with the past, as in the quote, and the notion of incompleteness and temporality.

This new hegemonic order is constructed, as we have seen, around the people and the process, yet heavily grounded on the notion of the nation-state, that is, the hegemonic institution sustaining the process. Given the previous institutional crisis and ensuing mistrust, since the first years, a strong emphasis in rebuilding confidence in the State and public institutions comes forth, with recurring expressions such as: “[the State] managed with clean hands” (CL#91-96-101-378) and notions of quality and efficiency, “public services can be of excellent quality” (CL#101). This also relates to the calls to participate and build civic culture, as already mentioned, in a context where citizenship and involvement in the State were weak. Even more emphasis is given to nation-building, with a nationalist rhetoric constantly alluding to ‘the motherland’, starting with the process's slogan: “the motherland now belongs to all”. There are references to historical symbols and ‘heroes’, such as the liberal leader Eloy Alfaro and leaders from the republican independence. Yet a stronger emphasis is given to popular culture: Correa constantly praises the popular dishes from each region, and mentions features from the places he visits and the region from which the program is being broadcast. Finally, there is a recurrent affirmation of sovereignty, particularly regarding external powers: “we must seek our own solutions, with our achievements and mistakes, but our own, not those imposed from abroad” (CL#378). These nation-building elements point to what Billig (1995) understands as an ideology that shapes a common-sense understanding of the world as nation-states; to legitimize the nation-state which sustains the institutional power. Thus, struggles for political power imply disputes over narratives about the nation and historical memory, which he calls a ‘flagging’ of the nation.

This grounding on the nation-state points to another tension. On the one hand, given the region's background of ‘coloniality’ – by which, for instance, indigenous organizations view

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 understood as the fixing of nodal points in the building of new signifiers of identity and of a new common-sense, in rupture with the neoliberal imaginary of the State, but which generates many tensions with certain social movements<sup>9</sup>.

The third contradiction relates to our previous analyses of the political frontier, and is clearly located in the tension between subversion and hegemony. Given the consolidation of the State and a new hegemonic order, the subversive character of the populist discourse seems to have lost ground. Without disregarding that there are still many tensions with certain global and factual powers, the antagonising in CL seems to focus more and more on any kind of opposition. As we have seen, the political frontier is drawn, not exclusively against hegemonic powers, but between the process's supporters and detractors. There is thus a tension between the ongoing antagonising, the 'populist appeal' (Laclau, 2007: 177), and the affirmation of a new hegemony, which could call for an agonistic form of politics. Moreover, with a language of disavowal towards opponents, the possibility of a space for dialogue and confrontation becomes extremely difficult. An agonistic public sphere seems remote.

Social structures are "inherently ambiguous, incomplete and contingent systems of meaning" (Howarth, 2000: 4). Their formation thus leads to a series of contradictions, tensions and constant shiftings. As already mentioned, this is a partial analysis that does not contemplate all of the government's facets, so it cannot be generalised. Moreover, the analysis has pointed to a methodological bias focused on the antagonising aspect of discourse, at the expense of others. However, it has shed light on many aspects of the building of a discursive political frontier, which points to a series of contradictions and fragilities of the Ecuadorian process: [1] the constitution of a people around the empty signifier of Correa points towards a high reliance and centralism on the figure of the president, which as Arditi (2010) suggests, can jeopardize empowerment. [2] Antagonising feeds into the very polarised mediascape and does not facilitate the consolidation of an agonistic public sphere. Mouffe (2014) considers an agonistic relation with the opposition in the region is complicated, given that the traditional powers, including the media, have maintained a posture of disavowal and de-legitimation towards governments. However, the main problem relates to antagonising non-hegemonic

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<sup>9</sup> There are many other tensions relating to the government's development model and its ecological implications, but these are not the focus of this analysis.

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 raised in the theoretical discussion on how to transition from a counter-hegemonic populist process of rupture, to the consolidation of a new hegemonic order; a gap that seems to be in need of further development also in Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxist theory.

## **CONCLUSION**

A direct communication format such as CL has most certainly helped the Ecuadorian government build legitimacy to embark upon a thorough State reform process, around the image and charisma of president Correa and the reaffirmation of a connection to ‘the popular’. However, the antagonistic dimension, beyond its capacity for ‘appeal’, remains problematic and polemic at a moment when the process has become hegemonic. With private media showing little capacity to protect the public interest and the unlikelihood of a public service model, given the polarised context, democratising the media seems to rely more than ever on civil society. With the redistribution of frequencies due for this year and certain conquests in the new communication law, certain changes can be expected.

Many other aspects from the program still remain to be explored, however, namely, its ideological and pedagogical dimensions, and its impacts on cultural and political change. To fully understand its outreach, an audience research would be essential, which could consider some key aspects derived from this analysis. For instance, what drives Correa's massive support and what elements from CL play a role in this? Hence, to what extent do the government's policies validate its discourse and vice-versa? This could lead to a further inquiry into cultural changes and the building of a new common sense, regarding, for example, national imaginaries, popular culture, social rights, political culture, etc.

The central aspect of this research, however, relates to a pivotal issue regarding the region's processes. As Laclau (2014: 9) stresses, one of today's greatest challenges towards a democratic future is the articulation of the horizontal dimension of autonomy – social movements – and the vertical dimension of hegemony – State power – for autonomy alone cannot sustain change, and, most of all, hegemony without strong civil involvement leads to a ‘bureaucratism’ that can easily be colonized by ‘forces of the status quo’. Ecuador's process

could be leaning that way if a more participative process is not fostered. Yet civil society and social movements also need to further develop a culture of 'being of the State'.

Europe has tended to be more prejudiced with the notion of populism, as Laclau (2007) himself points out, probably due to its very different history. Nevertheless, these tools of analysis seem to become useful in today's shifting political environment. For instance, a very interesting subject of analysis is the new political movement *Podemos*, rapidly growing amid Spain's current institutional crisis. Looking into Latin America's left turn, *Podemos* has borrowed many of its discourses and practices, for instance, calling the traditional parties a 'cast', thus stirring up the scene of the political (nearly) two-party system. This movement is searching for ways to establish participative platforms using information technologies. Though the extent of their electoral success is still to be seen, they most probably have been learning from the missteps from the Latin American processes.

While lacking a notion of 'the popular', Europe has been looking into possible links between popular culture and politics. Coleman stresses political disengagement has to do with a too narrow view on politics that disregards popular culture (Dahlgren, 2009: 140), an idea that resonates with Laclau's (2007: 63) 'denigration of the masses'. Thus, both celebrity politics and populist theory have approached the notion of affect and enjoyment as a potential for engagement (Dahlgren, 2009; Glynos, 2011). There appears to be a dichotomy between a notion of 'celebritization' that leads to de-politicisation and one that can generate engagement (Marsh et al., 2010). In my view, the second one could be better understood in terms of populism; such as with Russell Brand's 'anarco-populism' (Gerbaudo, 2013). Laclau's populist theory can thus be a valuable tool for celebrity politics theories, to better understand the construction of empty signifiers leading to an identification and populist 'shock value' appeal.

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## **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 Villaflores; 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)
- Program #263, 17/05/2012, broadcast from Spain; 1<sup>st</sup> indigenous 'water march'
- Program #310, 23/02/13, broadcast from Naranjal; after presidential elections
- Program #335, 17/08/2013, broadcast from Checa; liquidation of project Yasuní ITT
- Program #363, 02/03/2014, broadcast from Cutuglagua; after municipal elections
- Program #378, 21/06/2014, broadcast from Tambillo; random (most recent)

### **Appendix 2: List of sequences analysed for the pilot study**

- Program #190, 02/10/2010, 1:22:56 – 1:27:12; attempted coup
- Program #310, 23/02/2013, 0:33:15 – 0:36:36; presidential elections
- Program #363, 02/03/2014, 1:14:37 – 1:19:27; municipal elections

### **Appendix 3: List of sequences analysed**

- Program #84, 30/08/2008, 1:32:28 – 1:39:18
- Program #239 24/09/2011, 1:06:05 – 1:09:59
- Program #239 24/09/2011, 1:16:55 – 1:18:58
- Program #335 17/08/2013, 2:52:30 – 2:58:40
- Program #335 17/08/2013, 1:57:00 – 2:03:00
- Program #378 21/06/2014, 0:11:40 – 0:16:32
- Program #378 21/06/2014, 0:54:00 – 0:57:26

#### 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
- Historical references, before/after comparisons
- Economic/administrative explanations
- Regional integration, international support
- Technical complaints to program staff
- Correa's personal, family life

#### Appendix 5: CDA analysis code

list of themes selected and corresponding colour code

1. The people, the people's will,
2. Government's achievements, good will
3. Call for action, duty
4. Correa: self, emotions
5. Call of Unity
6. Normative affirmations...
7. Tradition, family values
8. Country's qualities
9. Economic/administrative explanations
10. Opposition/before: negative features
11. Opposition press: negative features
12. Complaints to bureaucracy, Ministers...
13. Address/complaint technical staff...
14. Addresses colleagues
20. **Interpellations to the people**
21. *Hypotheticals, attributes motives*
22. *Paraphrasing*

(Other appendices not included, please contact author to request them if needed)

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