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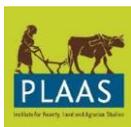


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# The Rural Roots and Consequences of Authoritarian Populism in Paraguay

Arturo Ezquerro-Cañete

## Introduction

Authoritarian populism is a key issue of our times. Conceptually it refers to the often contradictory ways in which a personalist leader appeals to a heretofore-inchoate mass of followers (“the people”) by tapping into their dissatisfaction with traditional politicians and established institutions (“the elite”) for its (real and/or perceived) frustrating or endangering of a number of demands, interests or identities (Dix 1985; Hall 1985; Eke and Kuzio 2000; Sondrol 2007; Petkovski 2015). De Cleen and Stavrakakis (2017: 310) propose the following definition to grasp the particularity of populist politics:

Populism is a dichotomic discourse in which “the people” are juxtaposed to “the elite” along the lines of a down/up antagonism in which “the people” is discursively constructed as a large powerless group through opposition to “the elite” conceived as a small and illegitimately powerful group. Populist politics thus claim to represent “the people” against an “elite” that frustrates their legitimate demands, and presents these demands as expressions of the will of “the people” (for similar definitions, see Laclau 2005).

Populist politics, of course, cover a diverse plurality of political spectrums and national settings. The demands located in “the people”, the question of who exactly is considered part of “the elite” and the reasons for treating “the elite” as illegitimate vary widely across the variety of populisms: left- or right-wing, fascist or egalitarian, military or civilian, authoritarian or democratic, and rural or urban (Jansen 2011, 82; De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017: 312).

In Latin America, the term ‘populism’ is habitually associated with movements based in the urban working class, such as Peronism (Weyland 2001). However, a growing number of studies have extended their gaze to explore populism as a phenomenon in predominantly rural societies (Gould 1990; Sieder 1995; Hetherington 2008). Dix (1985) concluded from his comparative study of authoritarian populism and democratic populism that

One salient contrast between the two varieties of populism has been the nature and strength of their ties to peasants. Such ties have been far stronger both quantitatively and qualitatively for democratic populists, whose parties regularly depended far more on the campesino vote than have the authoritarian populists (Dix 1985: 45).

Contrary to Dix’s findings –which argue that authoritarian populist movements in Latin America ‘do not rely nearly as heavily on *campesinos* for electoral and organizational backing as do the democratic populists’ (Dix 1985: 39)– it is maintained here that one of the strongest ties between a populist movement and a peasant constituency in Latin America can be found in case of dictatorial Paraguay under the Stroessner regime (1954-1989).

Table 1. *Types of Populism*

<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>Authoritarian</i>	<i>Democratic</i>
Leadership	Military, upper-middle class	Professionalism, intellectuals
Support	“Disposable” mass	Organized labour, peasants
Ideology and Program	Diffuse, unimportant Only Mildly anti-imperialist	More concrete, relatively important
Organization and Leadership Style	Loose, poorly articulated party organization Dependent on leader or leader’s myth	Economically nationalistic, especially in early stages Tends to outlast lifetime of the leader

Source: Dix (1985).

The Paraguayan experience provides a particularly useful case study for analysing the rural dimensions of authoritarian populism for several reasons. First, Paraguay's political history, perhaps more than any other country in Latin America, has been firmly rooted in a legacy of despotism and authoritarian rule, which can be traced back through a long lineage of right-wing populist-militarists, who present themselves as "indispensable" leaders saving *la patria* (the nation, or fatherland) from corrupt politicians, status-quo bureaucrats, and antinationalist foreign companies (Sondrol 2007: 59; see also Sondrol 1991, 1992).<sup>1</sup> Although military rule ended in the early 1990s, democracy remains shaky in Paraguay, as testified by the country's dismal democratization process which has included: three bouts of military instability (in April 1996, March 1999, and May 2000); the assassination of a vice president, Luis Argaña (1999); the indictment of two former presidents, Juan Carlos Wasmosy (1993–1998) and Raúl González Macchi (1999–2003), on corruption charges; a 'parliamentary coup' against Fernando Lugo (2012); and the occupation and burning of the National Congress building in protest of Horacio Cartes's (2013–2018) talks of a constitutional amendment that would have allowed him to run for a second term (Nickson 2008; Ezquerro-Cañete and Fogel 2017; Hetherington and Castillo 2017). Within this context, Paraguayans consistently scored lowest of all countries in the region on almost all rating of attitudes toward democracy, and Paraguay was the only country in region where support for authoritarianism, at 34 percent over the period 1995-2013, rivaled that for democracy (Nickson 2015: 188; Latinobarómetro 2013: 13-14). As compared to other regions of the world, Global Barometer results indicate that Paraguay, together with Russia and Taiwan, is amongst the most authoritarian (that is, strongest desire to have an authoritarian regime) in the world (Latinobarómetro 2003: 38).<sup>2</sup>

Second, unlike most Latin American countries, in the mid-20th century, Paraguay did not pursue the policy of import substitution industrialization (ISI), relying instead on an agro-export model of development throughout most its history (Weisskoff 1992) and it remains largely an agricultural country today (Ezquerro- Cañete 2016). In stark contrast to the traditional populist strategies pursued in Argentina and Brazil (under the charismatic leaderships of Juan Perón and Getúlio Vargas, respectively), which mobilized support within labour and industrial elites in the service of a nationalist development strategy, Stroessner discouraged industrialization because of the likelihood of it encouraging the rise of trade unions that might pose a threat to his rule (Klimovich and Thomas 2014: 190). Instead, Stroessner sought to build party support by repeatedly declared war on the elite *latifundistas* who owned most of the Paraguayan territory and promising land to small holders. Because of their demographic weight (Paraguay's population was 65% rural in 1950), the support of peasant groups formed a cornerstone of the Stroenista populism.

This paper traces the development of, and shifting rationales and reasons for, populist politics in rural Paraguay. Focusing our attention on the populist appeal and significant level of popularity among the peasantry and rural poor enjoyed by two of the county's foremost *caudillos* or *tendotá* (strongmen) – Alfredo Stroessner and Lino Oviedo– the purpose of this paper is to examine the meaning and

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<sup>1</sup> I am aware that there are important objections to be made to the sweeping nature and potentially cultural reductionism in highlighting the authoritarian nature of Paraguayan political culture. As Lane (1992: 364) correctly observes, "the attempt to apply the political culture concept to a whole nation has been a major error, forcing investigators into overly abstract conceptualizations ('modern' or 'traditional') and weakening the explanatory capacity of the culture concept". She also notes, that "political culture is not a static conceptual cage for classifying nations, but contains living principles that constantly interact in the political marketplace of daily political life" (1992: 375). The argument here does not mean to replicate an oversimplified and static image of Paraguayan political culture, but rather to reveal how Paraguay's tragic past 'of national wars, civil unrest, and lack of political stability' (Lambert 1996: 104) became recurrent themes in the populist discourse of the Stroessner regime.

<sup>2</sup> "[I]t is important to distinguish authoritarian characteristics from the desire to have an authoritarian regime. The former is a cultural phenomenon, which may be expected to persist for a long time, while the latter can be best understood as a minor counter-current, especially given the treatment accorded to ex-dictators and the sanctions that these leaders provoked against their own countries and citizens" (Latinobarómetro 2003: 38).

evolution of authoritarian populism in the context of Paraguay's protracted and truncated transition to democracy since 1989 –what various analysts have aptly termed 'a transition in search of democracy'. Thus, this paper offers a historical perspective on the rise of authoritarian populism in Paraguay, focussing in particular on the material, symbolic and emotional channels that enabled Stroessner to harness a high degree of rural mass support. An adequate understanding of these factors is important for several reasons (Scoones 2018: 4): (1) for understanding the current context in light of the emergence of authoritarian populism and its rural roots and consequences; (2) for conceptualising an emancipatory rural politics, posing questions and raising debates; and, most importantly, (3) for exploring forms of resistance and mobilisation, and the generation of emancipatory alternatives. The present study confines itself to the first of these three goals.

### **The Deep Historical Roots of Authoritarian Populism in Rural Paraguay**

As anthropologist Kregg Hetherington (2008, 2011) notes in his ethnographic account of the politics of 'populist transparency' (to which much reference occurs below), national analysts in Paraguay have tended to avoid the word "populism" to describe Paraguayan history, preferring the more precise terms "*caudillismo*," "personalism," and "clientelism" (see, *inter alia*, Vera 1990; Brítez and Morinigo 1993; Romero Sanabria 1998; Bareiro 1999).<sup>3</sup> *Caudillismo*, perhaps the term most frequently used in the Paraguayan context, is that "aggressive form of hypermasculine leadership which creates personalist forms of political adulation through arbitrary patronage networks disconnected from formal, public institutions" (Hetherington 2011: 191).<sup>4</sup> Among its effects are

to link the peasantry and other lower class sectors to the elite, including the political elite. This effect has been noted in many countries. What seems distinctive about Paraguay is the way the dyadic contract complex is linked to the national political party system. This has the effect of politicizing the peasantry (and the urban lower classes), yet directing their political energies to the support of conservative groups which do not usually act in their interest (Hicks 1971: 90).<sup>5</sup>

This lineage of Paraguayan *caudillismo* goes back at least to the country's independence to Spain in 1811, after which the country's first sixty years of independence were marked by a succession of highly personalistic dictators: Dr. José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia (1814-1840), Carlos Antonio López (1841-1862), and Francisco Solano López (1862-1870). A brief description of each is provided as background for the discussion to follow.

Soon after independence, José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia was appointed dictator in 1814 in a truly Roman fashion –first for a two-year term and then as absolute rule for life (Abente 2005: 556). Thus the personalist tradition accompanied the creation of the Paraguayan state (Roett and Menéndez-

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<sup>3</sup> I shall say more about the specific contributions of these scholars in the updated version of this working paper.

<sup>4</sup> In the hands of new democrats, the term *caudillismo* is used with a pejorative connotation and refers to 'the behaviour of acolytes who blindly follow the superficial personalities of *caudillos* (strongmen) instead of the principles of rational deliberation. A comment heard pervasively in analysis of *campesino* mobilizations is that the majority of people who show up to demonstrations, roadblocks, and land invasions are merely the dupes of cunning, self-interested leaders who know how to attract followers with Guaraní speeches and empty, misleading, or violent rhetoric' (Hetherington 2011: 27).

<sup>5</sup> Examples of this 'dyadic contract' in Paraguay have traditionally included the exchange of privately appropriable goods (cash, food, clothing, or other goods provided by political patrons) and/or promises for improvement to basic services (such as feeder roads or schools) for votes and other forms of political allegiance in rural areas, with 'community leaders' playing a pivotal role in such patron-client relations. The most shocking of the vote-buying practices (which have been well documented in previous elections by the election observation missions of the European Union [EU] and the Organization of American States [OAS]) include the use of open trucks to transport voters from rural communities and enticing them with the prospect of an alcohol-fuelled barbecue (Nickson 2009a: 146), and the fencing of indigenous voters in open-air spaces, known in Spanish as *corralones*, where they are fed and kept until they go to the polls, so as to ensure they would not sell their vote to any other party (Meilan 2014: 365). For the most recent examples of the purchase of votes by party agents in Paraguay, see *ABC Colour* (2017) and *La Nación* (2018).

Carrión 1985: 345). Known as *el Supremo*<sup>6</sup> because of the mixture of fear and respect which he engendered, Francia pursued a policy of self-sufficiency through state control of the economy. Under this independent socialist regime,<sup>7</sup>

nationalist revolution in Paraguay was accompanied by a profound social revolution which set the country apart from other nations in the region. Whereas in neighbouring countries, the independence movement consolidated the power of Creole elites over *peninsulas*, in Paraguay, Francia placed the interests of the indigenous peasantry above those of either of these groups (Nickson 1996).

His policy of renting State-owned land for an unlimited period to peasant squatters ensured him of support among the popular classes (Nickson 1987: xiii). It is in this regard that '[a] compelling but tangential argument could be made in [favour] of considering... [Francia] to be [Paraguay's] first true populist, although his own anti-elitist tendencies may have had as much to do with personal paranoia and maintaining control of his peers as it had to do with any commitment to the concept of the "pueblo"' (Hetherington 2011: 256n12).

Ruling until his death in 1940, Francia was succeeded by Carlos Antonio López, who continued the same autocratic policies but opened up the door to greater commerce and allowed some very limited political liberalization. Nevertheless, he secured total power for himself and his family, particularly for his son Francisco Solano, who was made brigadier general of the Paraguayan army at the age of eighteen. In quasi-monarchic fashion, Francisco Solano López succeeded his father, who died in 1862. Solano López had been in Europe in 1852-1853 and was heavily influenced by the France of Napoleon III as well as by European geopolitical doctrines (Lewis 1980: 18; Abente 2005: 556).

Thus, in 1864, arguing that a partial invasion of Uruguayan territory by Brazilian troops constituted an indirect threat to the sovereignty of Paraguay itself, he declared war on Brazil. Later he declared war against Argentina because of its refusal to let Paraguayan troops cross Argentinian territory to engage the Brazilian troops. Finally, Uruguay itself declared war on Paraguay, although its participation was minor. The war ended five years later with the almost total destruction of Paraguay and the death of 'Marshall' López, who, true to his previous statements, heroically accepted death but not surrender (Nickson 1987: xiv; Abente 2005: 556).

The War of the Triple Alliance (1864-1870) marked a turning point in the history of Paraguay.<sup>8</sup> It left the country reduced to ruins, the economy in bankruptcy, the physical infrastructure destroyed, the population decimated, and the national territory reduced by some 60,000 square miles (Abente 2005: 566).<sup>9</sup> Posterity is sharply divided over Solano López's role in the war. As Nickson (2008) emphasizes,

To this day the Triple Alliance War and its aftermath is indelibly imprinted on the national psyche and marks a clear dividing line within the political culture of the country. On the one hand there are those who regard the then leader of the country, Francisco Solano López and his Irish mistress Elisa Lynch as solely responsible for the war and its devastating impact on the country's development, as well as initiating the 'authoritarian tradition' that has stymied the rooting of a democratic politics. On the other hand are those who regard López as the personification of a small and valiant nation in its heroic struggle against outside forces bent on the extermination of the proud Guaraní race. These diametrically opposing views remain central

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<sup>6</sup> In Augusto Roa Bastos's (1974) masterful novel, *Yo el Supremo* (I the Supreme), the character of the Paraguayan dictator, Dr. Francia, is at times alive and at others dead, yet always capable of interfering in Paraguayan politics in the past, present, and future, anachronistically, without time having the ability to restrict his actions to one particular period (Fowler 2006: 12).

<sup>7</sup> Established well before Marx wrote *Das Kapital* (1867).

<sup>8</sup> For serious analysis about the Triple Alliance War, see Abente (1987).

<sup>9</sup> Paraguay suffered terrible losses, now estimated at 65% of the pre-war population.

to any understanding of the contemporary political culture of Paraguay. They colour, even determine, personal attitudes towards the military, immigration, foreign investment, privatisation, and reform of the State.

The self-reliant development strategy of the previous fifty years was overthrown as a result of the war, and replaced by a long period of extreme dependence on foreign economic and political forces (Nickson 1987: xiii). To pay off war debts, the post-war leaders of the defeated nation sold off much of the land to foreign buyers and ushered in a highly unequal system of land tenure that remains surprisingly little changed to the present day.<sup>10</sup>

After a dozen or so years of anarchy and violence in the wake of the war's devastation, Paraguay's party system began to take shape in 1887, when the country's two traditional parties, the Colorados, officially the National Republican Association (Asociación Nacional Republicana, ANR), and the Liberals (Partido Liberal) were created. The former dominated government between 1887 and 1904 and claimed lineage to the Francia and López dictatorships. The latter proclaimed themselves the vanguard of limited government and civil liberties but suffered antipatriotic stigma via their collaboration with the occupying Brazilians (Sondrol 2014: 259). On this point Lambert and Medina (2007: 344) write that,

it was ironically the Colorado Party, associated during the period 1870 to 1904 with the sale of public lands, the opening up of Paraguay to foreign companies, close links to Brazil and the concentration of land among an emergent oligarchy, that adopted the new romanticised nationalist discourse. [...] the Guaraní-speaking Colorado caudillos generally maintained extremely close links to the peasant population, both in terms of political clientelism and shared cultural references. As a result, the Colorado Party in opposition rapidly adopted the romanticised dissident nationalism that had deep resonance amongst the peasantry. Despite its key role in the scandalous sale of state lands to foreign interests following the Triple Alliance War, despite the dominance of landowning caudillos within the party, despite its lack of any social reform programme, the new nationalist discourse allowed the Colorados to assume the role of the party of the peasantry –of the marginalised, exploited and forgotten– of the mythical Guaraní race, and indeed of the nation itself (Lambert and Medina 2007: 344).

If the first sixty years of independence were marked by a succession of highly personalistic dictators, then, in contrast, the eighty years between 1870 and 1950 were marked by political turbulence and turmoil with a total of fifty rulers, six of whom completed their terms. The rest (with the exception of Higinio Morínigo [1840-1848], who was re-elected) were deposed (often as a result of armed rebellion) or did not finish their term (Roett and Menéndez-Carrión 1985: 359n1). A surprise coup by the Febrerista Party over both the Colorados and Liberals, in 1936, shortly after the Chaco War against Bolivia (1932–1935),<sup>11</sup> was the only time during the twentieth century that a third party took the Paraguayan presidency. It is during this period, argues Hetherington, that Paraguay's long history of agrarian populism began in earnest (although, as noted earlier, Francia could equally be considered the country's first true populist).

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<sup>10</sup> 'After 1870 Argentine, Brazilian, British speculators were the main beneficiaries of Paraguay's bankrupt economy. Foreign capital bought up vast tracts of land sold by the Paraguayan government seeking revenue for the destitute nation. The old state-owned lands of the Francia and vast tracts owned by the López family were parceled out in the land law sales of 1883 and 1885. By the time sales were curtailed in 1915 90,000 square miles (230,000 square kilometers) of land in Paraguay, comprising 35 percent of the area of the country, had been sold to foreigners' (Sondrol 2014: 259).

<sup>11</sup> Bridget Chesterton's (2013) historical study on the Chaco War (1932–1935) posits that the desire to defend Paraguayan territory and to honour the nation led rural agriculturalists to fight in the Chaco War (1932–1935) and that, due to this shared experience, the rural classes transformed the memory of Francisco Solano López from the liberal elite's interpretation of a selfish tyrant who led the country into the unwinnable War of the Triple Alliance (1864–1870) to a vision of a hero who saved the nation from oblivion from foreigners seeking to destroy it (Surreal 2015: 165-166).

Capitalizing on wartime xenophobia and on the sense of entitlement of returning troops, General Rafael Franco sustained a popular revolution for three years by addressing the masses publicly in Guarani, reviving a history of national victimization, and promising to redistribute lands lost during the *venta de las tierras públicas* [sale of public lands]. Though Franco was soon overthrown, the popular appeal of land reform remained the foundation on which the Colorado Party would rebuild its success (Hetherington 2011: 256-257 n12).

The outbreak of a bloody five-month civil war in 1947, between the Colorado-supported government and the Liberal-led rebel alliance, brought the political struggle for the ownership of nationalism to the forefront. While the rebels stressed the struggle for democracy, political rights and freedoms, the Colorado Party emphasised the struggle to defend the nation against elitist, foreign-inspired, *exótico* forces. The victory of Colorados against considerable odds is ascribed to the fact “that the party could count on considerable parliamentary support from the *py-nandi* (the barefooted), fanatical peasant supports, many of whom were *ex-combatientes* imbued with a strong sense of nationalist identity” (Nickson 1989: 190). The popular resonance of nationalism among the peasant majority proved a most effective rallying cry. As Lambert writes,

This assumption of the mantle of nationalism allowed the Colorado Party to not only win the war (in great part due to the decisive role of the *py-nandi*, or Colorado peasant militias) but also justify the subsequent purge of society and the armed forces in terms of the national interest. The Civil War showed that the Colorado Party had correctly identified the peasantry as the essence of *paraguayidad* (and key to political power). The subsequent purging of the armed forces in favor of recruitment of Colorado peasant *py-nandi* served to underline the historical link between the peasantry and defense of the nation—or in political terms, between peasant support and political power (Lambert 2006: 196).

This less-than-democratic political tradition culminated in the longest authoritarian regime in the history of the country, that of Alfredo Stroessner (1954-1989).

### **The Stroessner Regime**

Diego Abente Brun (2005: 569) provides a description of the socioeconomic structure during the first fifteen years, or so, of the Stroessner era:

Between 1954 and the early 1970s, the Paraguayan economy was characterized by very low rates of growth within the framework of a traditional social structure with widespread pre-capitalist forms of production in the countryside. Vast sectors of the peasantry were virtually excluded from the monetary economy and were devoted to subsistence crops on land they did not own. By the end of the 1950s, for example, 1,549 landowners controlled some 85 percent of the land, and only 0.9 percent of the territory was dedicated to agriculture” (Abente 2005: 569).

Despite these very unfavourable rural ownership and tenure conditions, Kleinpenning and Zoomers (1991: 279) write that “there was little or no peasant rebellion during [Stroessner’s] regime, and the rural masses were unable to force the government to improve their situation’. The quiescence of the peasantry during this period is partly explained by the harsh repression and violence against peasants. Through this tactic, the Stroessner regime managed to defeat or ‘bring to ground’ the rural social movements engaged in the land struggle. Most significant amongst them was a grassroots, Catholic-based social movement known as the *ligas agrarias* (agrarian league) which had emerged in the southern department of Misiones in the early 1960s as a reaction by land-hungry peasants to the grossly unequal system of land tenure (Fogel 1986). The *Ligas* were mercilessly crushed by the regime through a wave of repression throughout the country in 1975-1976. As depicted below:

Some fifty peasant leaders were killed, hundreds were exiled and over 5000 arrested. *Liga* communities were split up and families transported to distant parts of the country in order to

destroy the movement. As a result the *Liga* movement was forced underground (Kleinpenning and Zoomers 1991: 288).

Another example of the regime's violence against peasant uprising was the Caaguazú Incident of March 1980, when some twenty peasants, including women and children, hijacked a bus with the intention of driving to Asunción to protest against army repression of landless peasants. The regime's response was a massive counterinsurgency operation involving 2,000 troops, resulting in the arrest of 300 suspects and the murder of 12 peasant involved in the hijacking (Nickson 2015: 103-104).

However, despite these and other well-documented acts of repression and violence (see, *inter alia*, Miranda 1990; Lewis 1980; Pittman and Brown 1988; Turner 1998), Stroessner's durability rested on more than just ham-fisted repression (Sondrol 1991: 612). Exploiting the concept of authoritarian populism, we are able to explore how authoritarian regimes "enjoy popular backing which cannot be reduced to coercion, but results from the role of iridology and cultural hegemony" (Petkovski 2015: 48). Indeed, as Scoones et al. (2018) correctly observe in the framing paper to the Forum on Authoritarian Populism and the Rural, dictatorships are often abetted by populist appeals. Paraguay was no exception to this and "it is an artifice of transition historiography to believe that Stroessner's success was not built primarily on massive rural support and loyalty" (Hetherington 2008: 63n5), the residues of which are still in evidence today. The following section, therefore, explores how the authoritarian regime of Stroessner adopted populist strategies that enlisted a massive following among the peasantry. It is argued that the specificity of Stronista populism lay in its ability to create '*el pueblo paraguayo*' and allow it to reclaim its place in history by providing channels for material, symbolic and emotional incorporation of a large constituency of Guarani-speaking *campesinos*. It is through these interlinked channels that we are able to explore the concrete strategies through which authoritarian populisms condenses "different discourses into its contradictory formation, and how it 'works' so as to recruit people to its different, often contradictory, subject position" (Hall 1985: 121).

For the purpose of this study, it is worthwhile adhering to De Cleen and Stavrakakis's (2017: 301) clear conceptual distinction between 'populism and nationalism as distinct ways of discursively constructing and claiming to represent "the people" as underdog and as nation respectively'. From this discourse-theoretical perspective, attention is drawn to the variety and complexity of populist politics. A focus on the 'discursive architectonics' of these two very different arrangements of socio-political antagonism (see Table 2) 'allows grasping how different political projects construct different discourses by connecting the building blocks of populism and nationalism in particular ways' (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017: 302).

Table 2. *Discourse-theoretical conceptualisation of nationalism and populism*

<i>Formal criterion</i>	<i>Nationalism</i>	<i>Populism</i>
Nodal point of chain of equivalence, and claim to represent	The nation and/or the people-as-nation	The people-as-underdog
Subject position offered	Citizen of "the nation"	Member of "the people"
Outside constitutive to creation of chain of equivalence/identity	Non-members and/or other nations	The elite/establishment
Orientation of relation between nodal point and constitutive outside(s)	Horizontal: in/out (membership, identity— related to shared territory and time)	Vertical: down/up (hierarchy, power, recognition, incorporation, socioeconomic and/or sociocultural position)

Source: De Cleen and Stavrakakis (2017).

The discursive potency of Stonismo derives from the cooccurrence of both these political discourses, i.e., a simultaneous construction of the people-as-underdog and the people-as-nation (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017). The people-as-underdog rhetoric was accomplished by

[addressing] the *campesinado* in the language of national victimization and redemption. Recognizing the reality (*realidad*) of suffering experienced by *el pueblo Paraguayo*, Stroessner's government used a language of identification that, ironically, was not far removed from that of liberation theology. The movement of radical priests that began several years into Stroessner's rule built a political pedagogy out of the daily lived experiences of rural people, linking the idea of poverty and suffering to a redemptive narrative of liberation from tyranny. Even though completely opposed in its politics, Stroessner's party used the same language as a form of recognition to enlist a massive following (Hetherington 2011: 192).

The people-as-nation rhetoric draw on the concept of the *raza guaraní* (Guaraní race), which

was invented to establish a myth of common ancestry, a common ethnic community with shared historical memories, traditions and culture. Paraguay's Guaraní roots were presented as a basis for the nation, rather than a reflection of barbarism or backwardness. The racial glorification of the Guaraní was, however, watered down significantly. In what was essentially a peasant-based discourse, it was the Paraguayan campesino, the mestizo of European and Guaraní descent, who was portrayed as the personification of the race, of the nation and hence of *paraguayidad* (the essence of 'paraguayanness') (Lambert and Medina 2007: 343-344).

It is here that authoritarian populism fully assumes its role in providing a grand narrative for the rural majority. *Campesinos* epitomized, in Stroessner's language, the people of Paraguay, *el pueblo Paraguayo*, and their betterment was coterminous with the betterment of the nation (Hetherington 2008: 47-48). Within this grand vision,

The essence of the nation was firmly rooted in the concept of the "warrior-peasant" as the bearer of national identity both culturally (through Guaraní language) and politically as the historical defender of Paraguayan sovereignty (Lambert 2006: 194).

What made the Stroessner populist? A defining feature of authoritarian populism is its depictions of 'politics as a struggle between "the people" and some combination of malevolent, racialized and/or unfairly advantaged "Other", at home abroad or both. It justifies intervention in the name of "taking back control" in favour of "the people", returning the nation to greatness or "health" after real or imagined degeneration to those Others' (Scoones 2018: 2-3). This familiar us/them dichotomy took on three principal forms under the Stroessner regime.

First, Stroessner sought to build party support by repeatedly declaring war on the elite *latifundistas* who owned most of the Paraguayan territory and promising land to small holders. Because of their demographic weight (Paraguay's population was 65% rural in 1950), the support of peasant groups formed a cornerstone of the Stroessner populism. Stroessner tackled landlessness through an ambitious internal colonization program, distributing state-owned land, much of it in the sparsely populated interior and border areas. The Agrarian Statute of 1963 provided a new legal basis and the *Instituto de Bienestar Rural* (Rural Welfare Institute – IBR) was created as the government agency to carry out the reform with the stated intent to increase rural welfare (Kleinpenning 1984: 164). In material terms, Stroessner's populist project involved the incorporation of small-holder through clientelist mechanisms, which gained him the allegiance of a large constituency of Guaraní-speaking campesinos.

Focusing his legislative energy on land reform in a country still predominantly rural, he built massive popular support for his regime by promising riches to the rural masses, *el pueblo Paraguayo*, "the Paraguayan people," a category which connoted rurality, poverty, and Guaraní, and by vowing to protect them against the theft of resources by the landed elite (Hetherington 2011: 14).

As Tai (1974: 234) explains, “public land settlement (or colonization) is an attractive idea. To settle people on new land and to develop it for agricultural use does not involve any basic alteration of the property rights of existing landowners; hence a public-land settlement program will generate no opposition from the landed class.” Emphasizing this same point, Kleinpenning and Zoomers writes,

When opting for a policy of agricultural colonization, or ‘horizontal expansion’ of the cultivated area, the Stroessner regime was well aware of the advantages of this strategy in comparison with land reform measures. While social tensions were relieved, the under-exploited eastern departments, with their dense subtropical forests and high potential for agricultural production, would be used more intensively... In the political sphere, the most important advantage was that radical land reform measures in the long-occupied Central region, which would be in conflict with the interests of the ruling elite and particularly with those of the large land-owners, would become less urgent or even unnecessary (Kleinpenning and Zoomers 1991: 290).

Second, as a nation under attack since its inception, Paraguay has suffered recurring threats to its territorial, political, and economic integrity with devastating results (Roett and Menéndez-Carrión 1985: 341). As a frontline veteran of the Chaco War and a supporter of the Morínigo government during the civil war, Stroessner’s own nationalist and political credentials were well established (Nickson 1989: 191). This fact allowed the Stroessner to espouse his self-proclaimed affinity with Paraguay’s traditional political culture and construct a populist saviour rhetoric, focused not only on enemies of the people and the promise of a better life, but the shared history of “blood and soil” that harkened back to a semi-mythic golden age of unity and prosperity (Dix 1985). This was achieved by establishing links between a number of perceived paradigmatic events or defining moments in the nation’s past:

- The Nationalist Era (1814-1870), for instance, was presented as a period defined by independent national development, which had brought progress, culture and industrial growth to the country.<sup>12</sup> Politically, the period was portrayed not as one of despotic authoritarianism, as in the liberal interpretation (e.g. the writings of Cecilio Báez), but of national autonomy, development and harmony, a golden age, when Paraguay had been the foremost regional power (Lambert and Medina 2007: 343).
- The three rulers of this period –José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia (1814-1840), Carlos Antonio López (1841-1862), and Francisco Solano López (1862-1870)– were rescued and elevated to the position of symbols of the nation. Above all though, was the official iconization of Francisco Solano López. An alleged hero of the Chaco War and the Civil War of 1947, Stroessner thus presented himself as the great rebuilder of the nation, “the continuation of the work of the three great leaders who forged the nation... the unyielding heir of the founding fathers,” the continuum of the most legitimate and *autóctono* Paraguayan governments of the past (Lambert 2006: 197-198; Lambert and Medina 2007: 343).
- As an extension of this, the Triple Alliance War was rescued from catastrophe to heroic defence and inevitable but glorious defeat against a powerful international conspiracy, which had sought to destroy Paraguay’s independent developmental model (Lambert and Medina 2007: 343).

Against this backdrop

Stroessner was portrayed as the natural successor to the foremost military leader of the nationalist period –Francisco Solano López. On the other hand he was also constantly referred to as the *Segundo Reconstructor* (second rebuilder), following in the footsteps of President Bernardino Caballero (1880-1886), who according to the historical mythology of the Colorado Party is credited with having re-established the war-torn economy in the aftermath of the War of

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<sup>12</sup> For treatment of this period, see White (1978), Szlajfer (1986).

the Triple Alliance. Stroessner, in turn, was deemed to have ensured political peace and economic progress after the period of political instability and rampant inflation which followed the civil war (Nickson 1989: 192-193).

The nationalistic project of Stroessner was of course a strategic one, aimed at creating symbolic capital for the regime to draw legitimacy from, a common strategy in authoritarian populist movements which point ‘to its candidates as the successors to leaders or regimes of strong authority and authentic national traditions from each country’s past’ (Dix 1985: 41). Intrinsic to this new nationalist discourse, was its exclusivity in the form of the ongoing conflict between the *autóctono* (the intrinsic values of *paraguayidad*) and the *exótico* (the foreign and the externally imposed). Paraguay, it was argued, was not only unique, but also in constant defence of its core values, characteristics and qualities (Lambert and Medina 2007: 344). To this day, political leaders in Paraguay constantly play up the historic reality of Paraguayan resistance to foreign aggressors.<sup>13</sup> As we shall see below, this narratives of ‘heroic confrontation with the Other’ (Hasan 2016 quoted in Scoones 2018) also features prominently in the political discourse of rural social movements.

Third, like other right-wing dictators in the region, Stroessner justified his extraconstitutional methods by citing the threat of communism (Lewis 1980: 179).<sup>14</sup> In return for generous amounts of economic and military aid and political legitimacy, General Stroessner became a staunch defender of America’s anti-communist foreign policy, breaking diplomatic ties with Castro’s Cuba, outlawing the Communist party, and voting slavishly with the United States in the OAS and UN (Sondrol 2014: 267).<sup>15</sup> Thus Stroessner seized and internalized the opportunity offered by the Cold War to align his regime and foreign policy with the United States. In defining the principal components of Paraguayan foreign policy, Stroessner stated:

In international policy, in general, the Government of Paraguay gives decided support to the United States of America, as leader of the free world in its fight against international communism, and we share with this great nation the ideals of justice, peace, rights and liberty, in order that the world in which we live can be more secure and have more collective and individual guarantees (Stroessner 1977: 211, quoted in Mora 2003: 313).

Stroessner’s staunchly anti-communist foreign policy also helped forge close economic, political and military ties with South Africa and Taiwan.<sup>16</sup>

Deeply embedded in each of these three narratives, however, are profound contradictions, which stemmed precisely from the clientelist mechanisms used by the state to gain the political loyalty of the peasantry. For instance, while the reform was nominally committed to proving land title and support to

<sup>13</sup> For example, Paraguay’s suspension from both the Union of South American Nations (Nations Unión de Naciones Suramericanas – UNASUR) and Southern Common Market (Mercado Común del Sur – Mercosur) for the interruption of democratic rule following the parliamentary coup against Fernando Lugo in June 2012, produced a wave of nationalism in Paraguay, which talked of foreign aggression, and the formation of “another Triple Alliance”. See <http://www.abc.com.py/nacionales/denuncian-otra-triple-alianza-contra-paraguay-419073.html>

<sup>14</sup> ‘In October 1955 the Chamber of Representatives passed the Law for the Defense of Democracy, which legalized searches and arrests without warrants, as well as suspending other constitutional guarantees, to enable the President to with his war on communism. Since communism was never defined by law, the executive was able to interpret his power broadly enough to justify the persecution of any critic of the regime’ (Lewis 1980: 179).

<sup>15</sup> A trend which continued after Stroessner’s overthrow. Most noticeably, perhaps, when Paraguay became the only Latin American country (indeed, is one of only seven countries including the United States, Israel, Albania Uzbekistan, Marshall Islands and Palau) to vote against the United Nations General Assembly on the resolution on the Cuban Embargo, as it did in the 1993 (Blum 2013: 186).

<sup>16</sup> Today, Paraguay is the only country in South America to maintain formal diplomatic relations with Taiwan. Somewhat surprisingly, perhaps, the issue of diplomatic recognition has not had significant influence on trade relations with China; in 2010, for instance, Paraguay was the country with the highest share of imports (34.9%) from mainland China and Hong Kong in all of Latin America (Jenkins 2012: 1340).

the landless peasantry, the bulk of the public land was allocated at extremely low official prices to politically connected associates of the regime (e.g. the armed forces, rural elites, and government officials), who in turn resold part of this land at favourable market prices to Brazilian companies and colonists. The IBR also sold land directly to foreign estate agencies and companies (Kleinpenning 1984: 173).

According to a recent report by the Paraguayan Truth and Justice Commission on illegal land ownership, between 1954 and 2003, a total of 7,851,295 hectares of land (64 per cent of the total land distributed and 19 per cent of Paraguay's total surface area) were allocated to both nationals and foreigners in an irregular and clientelistic manner (CVJ 2008). The study examined 200,705 awards of land and concluded that many beneficiaries were relatives of Stroessner himself, or politicians and army officers directly associated with his government. As a result, 'almost all members of Congress are also members of Paraguay's tiny landowning elite, with titles held either directly or in the names of friends and family' (Nickson 2015: 18). Such illegally acquired, or politically constituted, land is known in Paraguay as *tierra malhabida* (ill-gotten land), and continues to be at the heart of the country's agrarian question and land conflicts. Indeed, it was on land to which ex-Colorado Senator, Blas N. Riquelme claimed ownership that 17 people were massacred on June 15 2012, triggering the impeachment of President Fernando Lugo a week later, as is discussed in Ezquerro- Cañete and Fogel (2017).

Furthermore, as Nickson (1989: 193) rightly stresses, the historical parallels with military leader of the nationalist period are riddled with contradictions.

For while López fought to defend the nation against, among others, Brazil, under Stroessner Brazilian penetration of Paraguay has been extensive as a result of the Itapú Treaty and the associated immigration of over 250,000 Brazilian colonists into the eastern border region of Paraguay (Nickson, 1981,1982). Furthermore, President Caballero was the instigator of the massive land sales to foreign capitalists which laid the basis for Paraguay's highly unequal system of land tenure. In 1885 and 1886 alone over 114,700 square kilometres of Chaco land, comprising 35 per cent of the total area of the country, were sold off to a mere 60 individuals or private companies. Nevertheless, despite these historical facts which seriously contradict the Stroessner myth, the president was successful in continuing to tap the deep nationalist sentiment within Paraguayan culture to his marked advantage of both the Colorado Party and the armed forces.

As Brandenberger points out in his comparison of Stalin-era populism to the authoritarian populisms of a number of South American dictators during the twentieth century, despite 'all these leaders' talk about nation, national origins and national unity, they were not genuine nationalists, inasmuch as they believed in dictatorial power from above rather than self-determination from below' (Brandenberger 2010: 727). In the specific case of Stroessner,

few governments in the history of Paraguay have done more to appease foreign interests. Stroessner gave and received almost unconditional support to and from the United States during the Cold War, allowed mass migration of Brazilians into the Eastern Border Region (as well as tens of thousands of colonists from all over the world at extremely favourable agreements) and signed the treaty of Itapú, which was highly unfavourable to Paraguay ( Lambert and Medina 2007: 348).

The growing realization of the IBR's complicity in the process of Brazilian penetration, as exposed in the press and set out in a treatise titled *Paraguay: Fronteras y penetración brasileña* (Paraguay: Borders and Brazilian Penetration) by Domingo Laíno (1977), the leading opponent of the Stroessner regime, led to a resurgence of the *Ligras Agrarias* independent peasant movement in the Eastern Border Region (EBR) as the peasantry began to fight to defend their land (Kleinpenning and Zoomers 1991; Nagel 1999). In the 1980s, the survivors of the *Ligras Agrarias* regrouped and emerged much strengthened and also independent of the Church. A new peasant movement, the *Movimiento*

*Campesino Paraguayo* (MCP –founded on 25 December 1980), begun to mobilize the landless peasants and rural poor in the EBR. The MCP not only called for radical social and economic reform in the interests of the peasantry, but held openly nationalist views in terms of the defence of national sovereignty (mainly against foreign land ownership), agrarian reform and state-led autonomous development (Lambert and Medina 2007: 350). The MCP was

strongly influenced by the government Dr Francia [whose] effective defence of national sovereignty from external attacks by relying on peasant support provides a historical precedent for the MCP’s campaign to counter the growing foreign land ownership (Nickson 1988: 256).

Nationalism is, therefore, not limited to political parties. A nationalist orientation has long been visible within the peasant movement, although the word nationalism (associated with authoritarianism) is generally replaced by patriotism, *paraguayidad* or the Guaraní *Ohayhuva Paraguay* (‘those who love Paraguay’) (Lambert Medina 2007: 352). As Beverly Nagel explains, this is partly a consequence of the repression suffered by peasant organizations during the Stroessner regime: “Since class-based criticism could not be voiced, nationalist appeal provided the only real space for objections” (Nagel, 1999: 157).<sup>17</sup>

In more recent years the Federación Nacional Campesina (FNC) and the Mesa Coordinadora Nacional de Organizaciones Campesinas (MCNOC),<sup>18</sup> retain a nationalist analysis of Paraguay’s past (especially the Nationalist Era), associating past national struggles with their own social, economic and political demands, and highlighting the more egalitarian aspects of the period. As James Petras (1997) noted in his insightful, panoramic 1997 survey of left resurgence in rural Latin America over the course of the 1990s,

The national-ethnic question is linked to memories of Paraguay’s nineteenth-century nationalist experience. Successful state-directed industrialization had been pioneered in Paraguay and was only destroyed through external intervention during the war of the Triple Alliance. The historical memory remains because of the valour of the fighters, and the success of the experiment as long as it lasted (Petras 1997: 32).

The parallels with dominant hegemonic political discourse of the Stroessner regime are clear to see.

The difference perhaps is that while the Colorado discourse focuses on mythical questions based on the past, current social movements tend to base their version of nationalism (or patriotism) on more concrete and contemporary issues (such as soya) in order to galvanise opposition to corrupt or at least unwise government policy (Lambert and Medina 2007: 352).

In more recent years the rapid expansion of genetically modified (GM) soy production, in particular, has added to this resentment. As I have argued elsewhere, the ‘transgenic soyization’ of Paraguay’s agriculture has increased concentration of landholdings; dampened overall employment as rural labourers are rendered ‘surplus’ to the requirements of agribusiness capital; and led to a growing dependence on agrochemicals that compromise environmental quality and human health (see Ezquerro-Cañete 2016), leading to widespread marginalization and landlessness. At the same time, the country’s soy complex has a distinctly ‘translatin’ character, owing to the high influx of foreign (particularly Brazilian) capital, which controls 64 per cent of the land cultivated by soy in the

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<sup>17</sup> Article 71 of the 1967 Constitution stated that “hatred between Paraguayans or class struggle between classes will not be permitted” (quoted in Lambert 2006: 205 n. 45).

<sup>18</sup> The FNC was founded in 1991 and later helped establish the MCNOC in 1994, but left the umbrella organization in late 1997 because of leadership rivalries and ideological differences (Riquelme 2003, Piñeiro 2004: ch. 3; Levy 2013: 36). While the FNC remains the best organized of all national peasant organizations and has demonstrated a greater capacity for mobilization, the MCNOC is the largest national association and has maintained active ties with urban labour groups, as well as international movements such as the Coordinadora Latinoamericana de Organizaciones del Campo (CLOC–Latin American Coordinator of Peasant Movements) and the Via Campesina (Levy 2013: 37).

country's four most important *sojero* departments – Alto Paraná, Canindeyú, Caaguazú and Itapúa (Galeano 2012: 461). This process of foreignisation (*extranjerización*) began in the 1970s with the release of state lands for private purchase (see Nickson 1981), but has accelerated in the last two decades as Paraguayan lands are increasingly being integrated into the expanding agricultural frontiers of Brazilian and, to a far lesser extent, Argentina (Galeano 2012). While not yet a direct investor in land, the Brazilian government provides significant support to Brazilian investors, first by monitoring investment deals acquiring or leasing land (via the Brazilian embassy), and second by providing technical assistance (via Brazilian state agencies) in agricultural and cattle ranching ventures (Galeano 2012: 646).

Furthermore, in the face of increasingly militant agitation by landless peasants in Paraguay for redistribution of Brazilian-owned soybean farms, the Brazilian government issued strong warnings and threatened sanctions against such actions. In early October 2008, for example, Brazilian president Lula signed Decree 6.592, which regulates the National Mobilization System dedicated to confronting 'foreign aggression'. The first article of the decree defines foreign aggression as 'threats or injurious acts that harm national sovereignty, territorial integrity, the Brazilian people, or national institutions, *even when they do not constitute an invasion of national territory*' (quoted in *Ultima Hora* 2008b, emphasis added). In other words, any expropriation of Brazilian-owned land in Paraguay could be used as a pretext for Brazilian military action against Paraguay. In this regard, Brazilian (sub-imperialist) interests (i.e. the intervention of the Brazilian state in support of its nationals in land conflict) has proved a perennial obstacle to land redistribution as can be clearly seen in the case of Ñacunday (Fogel 2013).

Thus, the nationalist discourse of Paraguayan peasant organisation is particularly evident near the border with Brazil, where native Paraguayans feel aggrieved of their dispossession amidst land takeover by Brazilians and "Brasiguayos" (a pejorative label amalgamated from the Spanish words for "Brazilian" and "Paraguayan", used to describe Brazilian-born naturalized Paraguayans or Paraguayans of Brazilian descent).<sup>19</sup> The arguments and the rhetoric used are decidedly nationalist, with obvious parallels to the past Brazilian invasions (Lambert and Medina 2007: 352). In one poignant example of the growing animosity towards Brasiguayos cited in national newspapers in 2008, peasants burnt the Brazilian flag at an independence day celebration at Curupayty in the department of San Pedro (*ABC Color* 2008).

This nationalist rhetoric is only emphasized by the country's linguistic distinctiveness. Paraguay is the only country in Latin America where a majority of the population speaks a single indigenous language, Guaraní, even though they do not politically identify as indigenous. According to the 2002 census, Guaraní is preferred by 59% of the households compared with 35.8% that preferred Spanish (DGEEC, 2004). In rural areas, Guaraní remained by far the predominant language, preferred by 82.5% of the population. As a result, there has been a tendency—not unbroken or free of contradictions—for the Guaraní ethno-linguistic composition of the Paraguayan peasant movements to stand in for as an analogue class (Fogel, 1997; Petras, 1997: 21). As will be discussed below, in recent years, the Guaraní *language* factor has becoming an increasingly important variable in the populist appeal of politicians, particularly among the rural poor.

### **Transition to Democracy and the Rise of Oviedo**

The growing resentment at the failure of the 'transition' to deliver improvements in living standards was evidenced in the region-wide opinion surveys by Latinobarómetro (Table 1). Table 3 reveals that support for democracy in Paraguay reached lows of 35 percent in 2001, 32 percent in 2005 and 33

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<sup>19</sup> The use of the term "Brasiguayos" has been subject to particular critique for its implied dichotomy between wealthy Brazilian agriculturalists devoted to soybean production on the one hand, and impoverished and marginalized Paraguayan small-scale farmers on the other. In reality, "the majority of Brazilian immigrants in Paraguay are small-scale farmers who, like many of their impoverished Paraguayan neighbours, have faced constant marginalization" (Blanc, 2015: 145).

percent in 2007, while preference for an authoritarian regime rose from 20 percent in 1995 to 32 percent in 2013, with a peak of 44 percent in 2005 (Latinobarómetro 2013: 13-14).

Table 3. *Support for democracy in Paraguay, 1995-2013*<sup>20</sup>

	<i>Democracy is preferable</i>	<i>Authoritarian government</i>	<i>It doesn't matter</i>	<i>DNK/DNA<sup>a</sup></i>
1995	52	20	18	10
1996	59	26	13	2
1997	45	42	10	3
1998	51	36	11	2
2000	45	41	13	0
2001	35	43	19	4
2002	41	37	20	1
2003	39	43	17	1
2004	39	39	19	3
2005	32	44	19	4
2006	41	30	24	5
2007	33	36	23	8
2008	53	29	16	2
2009	46	29	24	2
2010	49	33	14	6
2011	54	25	17	4
2013	50	32	17	2
Average	45	34	17	3

Source: Latinobarómetro (2013) available at [www.latinobarometro.org](http://www.latinobarometro.org)

<sup>a</sup>Did not know/did not answer

The revealing data from these annual polls provide a context propitious to both increased social conflict and the rise of authoritarian populism post-Stroessner.

It was the frustration of various popular sectors with the continuous state of crisis, with the complexities and contradictions of transition, which the political elite symbolized, that created the conditions for the raise of populism in Paraguay after 1989. The disillusion with the limitations of electoral democracy, along with the staggering array of all-too-real political and economic problems endemic to Paraguay –corruption, fiscal reform, rural poverty and landlessness, and growing inequality– only augmented combined to Oviedo a sizable following among the rural poor (Lambert 2000: 395; Sondrol 2007: 59). As Lambert explains

Conservative electoral rule and a lack of social and economic reforms, under conditions of extreme poverty, social polarisation and entrenched elite interests, does not lend itself to the full exercise of citizenship or to democratic consolidation... Not only is it both cause and evidence of political exclusion, but it increases the possibility of demagoguery, populism and a possible return to authoritarianism, as reflected in Paraguay in the rise of ex-General Lino Oviedo (Lambert 2000: 389).

Lino Oviedo achieved fame as an army colonel for his involvement in the 1989 overthrow of Stroessner.<sup>21</sup> He is also credited with winning the presidency for Juan Carlos Wasmosy in 1993 (through vote rigging in the December 1992 primaries and then engineered strong military backing for

<sup>20</sup> Q. *With which of the following statements do you agree most? Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government.*

<sup>21</sup> It was rumoured, though never confirmed, that Oviedo had threatened General Andrés Rodríguez (who led the coup against Stroessner) with a grenade if he did not launch the coup. Equally outlandish was the rumour that Oviedo stood over Stroessner with a grenade to force the dictator to sign his resignation letter.

Wasmosy in the General Election) and became head of the army that same year. Following an alleged coup attempt against Wasmosy in April 1996, he retired from the army in exchange for indemnity from prosecution. Oviedo immediately announced plans, initially dismissed by observers, to stand for the presidency in the General Election of 1998.

Rising phoenix-like from the ashes of his failed coup attempt in 1996, retired general turned populist politician Lino Oviedo convincingly captured the Colorado nomination in September 1997. Using a potent mix of the starkly nationalist rhetoric characteristic of traditional Paraguayan politics and Stroessner-style loosely articulated policies promising a better life for the nation's legions of poor, Oviedo was able to construct a new and very powerful faction within the Colorado Party (Fournier and Burges 2000: 13).

However, Wasmosy quickly revived charges against Oviedo to prevent him from formally assuming the Party's candidacy. In March 1998, a military court found the retired General guilty of treason for the 1996 incident, sentencing him to ten years' imprisonment just before the Colorado Party's internal elections (which themselves were far more important in deciding the president than were the national elections).

Many Colorados believed that in the absence of Oviedo, the leadership naturally fell to his chief rival, Luis María Argaña, former president of the Supreme Court, under Stroessner, and leader of the party's old guard. But Oviedo would overcome Argaña as well. He named a stand-in from jail, an extremely wealthy engineer by the name of Raúl Cubas, who won the party nomination. The sharply divided party came to a political compromise, nominating Cubas for president and putting his arch-rival, Argaña, on the ticket as vice president. Cubas easily won the 1998 election on the slogan "Cubas in office, Oviedo in power," and on the single promise to pardon Oviedo (Hetherington 2011: 50).

On taking office in August 1998, Cubas made good on his promise, releasing Oviedo and refusing to comply with a Supreme Court ruling that Oviedo be returned to prison several months later. On March 23, 1999, Vice President Argaña was shot dead in mysterious circumstances, and the media accused Oviedo of being behind the killing. After his supporters were alleged to have shot dead eight protestors outside the Congress building, Oviedo fled into exile in Argentina.

The *marzo paraguayo* refers to events in the period 24-28 March 1999, beginning with the assassination of Vice-President Luis María Argaña, continuing with street battles in Asunción as residents and peasants defended Congress against what was perceived to be an attempted *coup d'état* by Lino Oviedo, and ending with the impeachment of President Cubas and the exile of both the president and Lino Oviedo (Lambert 2000).

#### *Marzo Paraguayo* (Paraguayan March Massacre)

Regular peasant protests were scheduled for March of that year, when the assassination of Vice-President Luis Argaña triggered a political crisis. In exchange for the forgiveness of public-sector loans made to their members, national campesinos organizations joined student-led opposition to a coup attempt by General Lino Oviedo. Campesino leaders (along with student groups) were able to mobilize large enough numbers to defend constitutional government. The nature of this exchange was plainly clientelistic: political support for the incumbent government in exchange for debt forgiveness. Furthermore, leader's secured material benefits for their followers by betraying the political preferences of their bases, among which were many Oviedo supporters (Setrini 2010).

Kregg Hetherington recounts,

During large demonstrations in the years I was there, campesinos made frequent reference to *Marzo Paraguayo*, suggesting that they could win their demands by bringing the government to

the brink of collapse. But in other contexts they referred to Marzo Paraguayo as one of the main reasons that so many campesinos left the Federación Nacional Campesina in 2000 and stopped participating in the annual cotton demonstration. Many felt as though they had been duped. By no means were all campesinos I knew Oviedistas, but those who were deeply resented what they saw as their unwitting participation in the overthrow of their political savior. And they read it as yet another symptom of their increasing marginalization within a system which included them only when it found them useful, and otherwise derided them as backward and fearsome (Hetherington 2011: 56).

On his voluntary return to Paraguay in June 2004, Oviedo was arrested and detained in a military prison to serve out the remaining nine years of his 1998 sentence for sedition.<sup>22,23</sup> In September 2007, he was surprisingly absolved of all charges and released by the Supreme Court, a move believed to have been engineered by President Nicanor Duarte Frutos (2003-2008) in an attempt to split the opposition vote in the General Election of 2008. Oviedo was allowed to stand as a candidate, coming in third with a sizable 22 percent of the vote, despite being the only leading candidate to advocate a national policy of accommodation with Brazil over renegotiation of the Itaipú Treaty (Folch 2015). His party's representation in Congress also rose considerably. Oviedo remained a significant political figure during the presidency of Fernando Lugo, heading a party machine run with military precision, and bearing allegiance solely to its leader. He announced his presidential candidacy for the General Election of 2013, but on 3 February 2013, he was killed in a helicopter crash in the Chaco on his return from an election meeting in Concepción.<sup>24</sup>

Despite widely suspected links to corruption, contraband and other illegal activities, and a highly authoritarian political project, 'Oviedo was probably the most popular politician in Paraguay throughout most of the 1990s... Indeed, had he been allowed to stand, [he] would undoubtedly have won the presidential elections in 1998' (Lambert and Medina 2007: 351). What factors explain the persistent political appeal of the much-maligned Oviedo, to the Paraguayan people "whom surely all Paraguayans recognized as not only exciting but anti-democratic, if not dangerous, in his fulminations against corrupt, inept civilian politicians, and who offered simple solutions to complex problems" (Sondrol 2007: 56)?

Peter Lambert (2000) and Gregg Hetherington (2011) go far in explaining the persistent political appeal of the much-maligned Oviedo to the Paraguayan people. Among their conclusions are the following:

Oviedo successfully developed a populist, nationalist discourse, promising greater democracy, land reform and a concerted campaign against political and economic corruption. Most importantly, he exploited his own ties to the peasantry, using his understanding of the way of life, or *teko*, of the people, and exploiting the failures of a centralised and ineffectual government to bring tangible socio-economic benefits to the poor (Lambert 2000: 390-391).

...appeal was neither rational nor reasonable, but unsettlingly messianic, and he was able to convince people that his rise to power would unequivocally lead to the nation's salvation. In short, he was a classic *caudillo*, generating powerful links between his own blustery charisma, the masses, the military, and vested business interests who wanted to jump on the right bandwagon in case the transition to democracy failed. One of the discourses that General Oviedo was most able to capitalize on was "corruption." The new democrats' project of creating transparency as an antidote to corruption had brought Wasmosy's dealings to light (Hetherington 2011: 48)

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<sup>22</sup> This paragraph draws heavily from Nickosn (2015).

<sup>23</sup> Although expectations of a popular uprising on his return proved to be wildly exaggerated, he retained considerable popularity during his imprisonment.

<sup>24</sup> The fact that he died on the anniversary of his involvement in the 1989 overthrow of Alfredo Stroessner gave rise to speculation of a conspiracy.

Milda Riverloa (2013: 335-337), one of Paraguay's foremost political analysts, gives a few illustrations of Oviedo's messianic appeal:

The celebration of his birthday on September 23 was surrounded by ostentation and obsequiousness, reminiscent of praise heaped on Stroessner, with paid adverts in newspapers, replete with the signatures of leaders of public employees' unions, and the use of official vehicles for transporting guests to the party and any necessary repairing of roads to do so.

The distribution in 1997 of 100,000 UNACE booklets bearing photos of Oviedo and the pope had already opened the way for the later abuse of religious symbols by this messianic leader. Such reiterated allusions offended the Catholic clergy, and the bishops who compared him to Hitler in 1997 and later criticized him indirectly in statements about "the despots who would have our people believe they are the Messiah" and the "populist caudillos who lie to the people" during the celebration of the Immaculate Conception in December 1998."

The minister of agriculture exclaimed, I have a God in Heaven and Lino Oviedo on Earth,' while attributing to him 'ten out of ten for intelligence, managerial ability and a range of virtues, he is a philosopher; comparable to Bolívar'.

Oviedo successfully convinced his followers that he was above party politics, that his first commitment was to the formation of the Paraguayan nation. His personal dynamism and charisma placed him above all other figures on the Paraguayan political stage. Speaking principally in Guaraní (the *autóctono* language of the people), communicating directly with the peasantry and developing a self-image as the true peasant-warrior of the *raza guaraní* (Lambert and Medina 2007: 351), Oviedo presented himself as an almost mythical figure, as the champion of the peasantry, a continuation of the line of past heroes who would defend the essence of Paraguay in a present characterized by corruption, foreign domination, and sociopolitical and economic crises (Lambert 2006: 202). As Andrew Nickson (2009b) explains:

The introduction of Guaraní on the national political scene began in the mid-1990s, when... Oviedo became the first politician of national significance to deliver speeches primarily in Guaraní. There is general agreement among observers that his ability to deliver speeches in a fluent and often poetic Guaraní was a major contributing factor to his political appeal, particularly among the rural poor. [...] Such was the impact of the language factor in contributing to Oviedo's popularity that the leading politicians of all major parties subsequently used Guaraní in their own political campaigning to a much greater extent than they had in the past. A striking example was the televised debate during the presidential election campaign in April 2003, when, for the first time, all three leading contenders sought to demonstrate their fluency in Guaraní. Nicanor Duarte Frutos, candidate of the Colorado Party for the 2003-2008 presidential term, displayed a notably greater fluency than his two opponents, and this was a factor that contributed to his election victory. It would be no exaggeration to say that, post-Oviedo, fluency in Guaraní has become a prerequisite for anyone who aspires to high political office in the country.

Reflecting on this very phenomenon, Lambert (2006: 202) notes that

president Nicanor Duarte Frutos, apparently inspired by the success of Oviedo, has returned to a discourse and style that draws heavily on images and myths of national identity, stressing his role as *tendotá* (strong leader), his peasant (and Guaraní-speaking) background, his aversion to elites who have lost contact with the true spirit of Paraguay, and the inherent relationship between the Colorado Party and the nation. In such an atmosphere of crisis, the hegemonic version of national identity lives on, perhaps in more moderate form, but with the latent threat of authoritarianism and violence always present.

## Conclusion

Given these shifting national dynamics, and in the regional context of a receding ‘pink tide’ and return of the right (Petras and Veltmeyer 2018), wherein left-wing governments have failed to produce more radical changes with respect to agrarian and agricultural policies (Vergara-Camus and Kay 2017) – culminating in Paraguay with the ‘parliamentary coup’ against President Fernando Lugo in June 2012, instigated by the landlord class (Ezquerro-Cañete and Fogel 2017) – what are the possible sources of change, reform and emancipatory rural politics required to confront authoritarian populism? The historical perspective of the *agrarismo* presented in this paper puts us on a suitable footing to ask pertinent question about the particular factors needed to move beyond *caudillismo* and toward alternative rural politics. This, however, would be the subject for another paper entirely (but see Levy 2013; Valiente 2014; Rojas 2015; BASE-IS 2017; Vera and Riquelme 2017).

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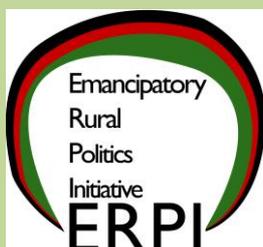
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**The Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiative (ERPI)** is a new initiative focused on understanding the contemporary moment and building alternatives. New exclusionary politics are generating deepening inequalities, jobless 'growth', climate chaos, and social division. The ERPI is focused on the social and political processes in rural spaces that are generating alternatives to regressive, authoritarian politics. We aim to provoke debate and action among scholars, activists, practitioners and policymakers from across the world that are concerned about the current situation, and hopeful about alternatives.

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