

Time to Start Reading Latin American History!

Written by Charles Jones

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CHARLES JONES, JUN 14 2017

So long as the European Union continued upon its stately course toward ever-closer union, comparisons with attempts at regional integration in other regions of the world seemed spurious. Fundamentally geopolitical motivation was common to most of these schemes despite their ostensibly economic motivation. Much of the initial impetus behind the Treaty of Rome in 1957 had come from the clear Cold War need to foster German industrial recovery as a bulwark against the USSR within a non-provocative political framework. In much the same way, the creation of ASEAN was a response to the threat of communism in the 1960s, achieving cohesion following the unification of Vietnam in 1976.

MERCOSUR had more to do with resolving smoldering enmities between a declining Argentina and rising Brazil than any external threat. What made Europe different – Britain included – was that its peoples had for centuries maintained dense webs of continental trade, elite intermarriage and cultural exchange, while the national economies of South-East Asia, as of many other parts of the post-colonial world, were more closely integrated with Europe or the USA than with one another.

Absent the historic advantages of Europe, plans for integration and cooperation elsewhere tended to stutter along, faltering from time to time only to be revived when regional tensions required it. The moral seemed to be that while the motive for integration might be geopolitical, success required pre-existing economic interdependence. Geopolitical need could not conjure up workable processes of economic integration. This made persistent scholarly interest in the value of Europe as a model something of a lure and a deception. There was no real basis for comparison.

Now the boot is on the other foot. For a century, Latin America has been the world's prime laboratory for experimentation with the lethal political virus of populism. This makes it the exemplar for Europeans wanting to understand why their own progress toward union is in crisis.

Populism is a style, not a program; it belongs neither to Right nor to Left. Its essential features are six in number. First, there is the leader with clean hands and the common touch who generally adopts a simple, almost ascetic lifestyle. Second is the creation of an amorphous 'people' or nation, with a purportedly common interest and purpose. Once this popular unity is in place, traditional political parties based on pragmatic alliances can be denounced as divisive, while the new ones that take their place become ephemeral electoral instruments of a leader who increasingly circumvents the legislature and suborns the judiciary, ruling by delegative legislation or decree. Fourth, there is the attack on elites and experts – the Establishment – call them what you will. Fifth comes xenophobia; it's the multinationals that are the source of all ills; global capitalism is the invisible enemy and national elites are hand in glove – vendepatrias! Last of all – though first in public perception – are the promises – almost religious in character – of economic salvation and national apotheosis.

The worst of it is not that bouts of this fever always end in disillusion, often accompanied by fiscal and monetary collapse. No! – It is that far, from acting as a cure – once bitten twice shy! – each bout of this particular fever leaves the patient more vulnerable to the next. It is never the populist regime or its leader that's at fault when the project crashes; it's always the enemies within and outwith the state. Populism is like malaria or denghi; once it enters the system it stays there.

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For proof of this look only at the Peronist experience in Argentina, the Fujimoro years in Peru, or the condition to which Chavismo has reduced Venezuela. Those who regard these comparisons as fanciful should imagine themselves in 1913, and ask whether they could have anticipated the dismal processes by which Argentina would decline from its position in the world's top ten countries (by per capita income) or the catastrophic pace at which European constitutionalism was to collapse over the next twenty years.

Europe suffered its first bout of populism in the second quarter of the twentieth century, and seemed to have made a complete recovery. Not so. The virus lingered in dark pockets of social deprivation and neglect and in the wild aspirations of marginal politicians. Now it's back with a vengeance, and this time recovery may be less complete and long lasting. So this is a moment to stay calm, recognize the mature and tangible achievements of the European Union and the value of the major parties within each European state, stop being shy about the Union's substantial if imperfect systems of democratic representation and accountability, and start taking seriously the cautionary political history of too many of Latin America's republics over the past century.

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