

Laclau Tribute

Ernesto Laclau: Rethinking Political Antagonism

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I first met Ernesto Laclau in 1992, in Johannesburg. I was an MA student, studying politics, intent on changing the world not merely interpreting it. I struggled, though, with party lines, with party discipline, with Marxist theory, and with party hacks who refused even to ask, never mind address, the difficult questions. In the context of apartheid Marxism developed both a serious conceptualisation of the apartheid regime, and a political strategy for revolutionaries committed to equality. In practice, though, knowledge and power fused all too easily in the language of student activists who assumed that they spoke in the name of history. Those who posed awkward questions were re-educated against residual bourgeois prejudices. In 1989 I read *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. It made sense of my groping attempts to fuse a commitment to the left, with a language and a politics which acknowledged the contingencies and uncertainties of political engagement. Nothing else I read left me with the visceral excitement I experienced when reading Laclau and Mouffe. Their rigour, combined with their commitment, allowed me to rethink the organisation of political struggle, to reformulate the relationship between power and knowledge, to take seriously a thoroughgoing commitment to contingency and antagonism. They celebrated radical democratic politics and reframed Gramsci's account of hegemony in terms of a logic of equivalence. The text responded to two crises for the left. First, the emerging hegemony of a global neoliberal discourse. Many readers forget that the fourth chapter of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* both theorises about, and thinks against, the emergence of a triumphalist neo-liberalism, zealous in its quest to articulate everything in terms of financial value. Second, Laclau and Mouffe conceptualised a radical politics both with and against Marx, echoing the mood of the Eastern European revolts against the one-party dictators and the state capitalist compromise formations, which brandished the label 'communist' to justify the most abhorrent of practices.

I was absorbed in these debates when, in 1992, Ernesto Laclau visited the University. His seminar took place in a room attached to the Department of Anthropology, at Wits University. There were no external windows, so despite the fact that it was bright and sunny outside we gathered in what seemed like dusk to hear Ernesto talk. He spoke with almost no notes for going on an hour. When he was done we, keen MA students, interrogated him. In that context theoretical debates had everything to do with political struggle. I worried about the theoretical status of contingency – was it a quasi-transcendental, a universal, historically specific? Ernesto responded only that this was an excellent question, still to be properly worked out. Others challenged his reading of Marx, his critique of Althusser, asked about his conceptualisation of the

state and about his relationship to post-colonial scholarship. At every turn his responses were sharp, pertinent, yet open and without rancour even when there was violent disagreement. He was prepared to admit uncertainties, and did not assume that he had all of the answers. Later, I walked with Aletta Norval and Ernesto back to his hotel. They were, I am sure, desperate to be rid of this tall, gangly MA student, intent on questioning without respite, with no apparent concern for their need to eat, rest, have a drink. Yet as I left he said, 'Why don't you complete your PhD at Essex?'

The University of Essex in 1994 was a haven for critical scholarship. It was a concrete monstrosity, the worst designed of the 60s Universities, cold and grey with buildings and squares which channelled freezing North sea winds through its squares. In this unwelcome environment Ernesto Laclau and Aletta Norval coordinated the PhD and MA programme in Ideology and Discourse Analysis. With Noreen Harburt and Simon Critchley they managed the Centre for Theoretical Studies, hosting weekly seminars, conferences and annual lectures with among others Jacques Derrida, Giorgio Agamben, Linda Zerrili, Jane Bennet and William Connolly. On Wednesday afternoons students from South Africa, Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, the US, Switzerland, Austria, New Zealand, Greece, Canada, and China met to present PhD chapters and to listen to Aletta and Ernesto present their own work, plan future activities or argue with guests such as Slavoj Žižek and Jelica Šumič Riha. In that seminar we were all equally engaged in working through uncertainties, pushing arguments to the point at which they broke, taking on board the criticism of others, but offering criticism in like manner. The conditions were reminiscent of what Habermas once termed an ideal speech situation, except that all of us recognised the contingency of whatever claim we deemed valid in one week, and never assumed that there was a regulative ideal coordinating our actions. We were there because of our engagement with Ernesto Laclau's work. We challenged his arguments knowing full well that he would take on board and integrate such challenges if pertinent. At the same time he was making space for a new generation of scholars, most obviously in the person of Aletta Norval who had established her own distinctive reputation as a political theorist. Many of those students now populate Humanities and Politics departments around the world. All are marked by their time in those seminars. Yannis Stavrakakis, Anthony Clohesy, Jason Glynos, Benjamin Ardit, Oliver Marchart, Urs Staheli, Julia Chryssostalis, Sebastian Barros ... the list goes on ...

If we were driven by theoretical rigour we were also concerned to think through the politics of the left as neoliberal reform of the University began to take hold. The large number of students on the programme ensured that a space for intellectual freedom was preserved, even as institutional changes rendered such spaces improper, because their value was not measured in monetary terms. There were others at the University who protected this space, and who themselves generated spaces for engagement – Jay Bernstein, Simon Critchley who later became director of the Centre for Theoretical Studies, Elaine Jordan, Peter Dews and Alexander García Düttmann. Politics began where we were, in our departments, our offices, our seminars but it extended from the academy across the world to the various places we engaged with, and to the theoretical and critical programmes we were challenging. I sometimes

meet colleagues from those days. We hark back to those extraordinary years during which our political and academic identities were forged.

I learnt one enduring lesson, theoretical and political from Ernesto Laclau: politics is antagonistic. Laclau and Mouffe wrote in 1985: “This ‘experience’ of the limit of all objectivity does have a form of precise discursive presence, and this is *antagonism*.”¹ This claim cuts two ways: first, politics is riven by antagonistic differences, whose resolution is contingent, uncertain and never finally resolved. History privileges no particular political discourse and political victories are forged in contingent struggles which cannot be accounted for in advance; second, antagonism is ontological as well as ontic. Any claim to be, any claim to finally resolve difference in unity is riven by an uncertainty which cannot be resolved. However, Laclau did not simply affirm difference. Unlike that straw man post-modernism the authors insisted that all particular identities and struggles make claims which aspire towards universality, in the name of equality, liberty, or some other such signifier. A left wing politics committed to the deepening of equality required, Laclau would have argued, that one engage in battle, that one strategize, develops tactics, takes account of the field of possibilities rather than assume that history is on the side of good.

Over the past decades this claim about antagonism as the ‘experience’ of the limit of all objectivity has been the subject of some argument. Scholars inspired by the Lacanian inflected turn of Laclau’s work argue that antagonism is the political reformulation of a more fundamental dislocation, an impossibility that might be formulated in terms of Lacan’s thinking of the real. Such a claim has the apparent virtue of separating out the ontological from the political. It allows one to argue that the impossibility of being, a fundamental lack, becomes political when the limit of objectivity is experienced, when lack is articulated as political. In my view though the claim that dislocation is ‘more fundamental’, a claim which Laclau does make, in *New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time*, risks eliding the radicality of the argument that any claim to be is always already political. Laclau’s privileging of the concept of antagonism, over a fifty-year period, certainly has roots in Laclau’s engagements with Marx’s arguments about class as the fundamental antagonism in capitalist society. While rejecting Marx’s account of class Laclau remained committed to the view that society is riven by antagonisms which concern both the structuring of economic and political relations, and the ways in which political identities are forged in relation to these structural differences.

These arguments, as straightforward as they are, have nonetheless been the subject of vicious caricature and attack from Marxist theorists. Norman Geras spoke for most when writing in *New Left Review* that “... their social theory is all but vacuous: conceptually slippery at decisive points and unable to explain anything specific; and that it is also normatively indeterminate, fit to support virtually any kind of politics, progressive or reactionary.”² In fact this description is in in some respects accurate:

1 Ernesto Laclau & Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London & New York: Verso, 1985), 122.

2 Norman Geras, “Ex-Marxism Without Substance: Being A Real Reply to Laclau and Mouffe,” *New*

Laclau refused the luxury of claiming that his theory was either normatively privileged over others, or that it of necessity privileged one form of politics over others. He recognised for example that in a situation of extreme uncertainty a party committed to the introduction of order – whether left or right – would in all likelihood win out. Radical contingency does mean that virtually any kind of politics is possible, in the right circumstances. What Geras misses is that one's commitment to the values of equality and liberty is precisely a commitment – without epistemological or ontological privilege the left must take responsibility for these commitments. Geras and his comrades assume that the stake is already planted in the ground, and that this stake establishes in advance the terms on which one engages in politics. Refusal to recognise the stakes involved means that one has made an error, does not understand the conditions in which they find themselves. Laclau, by contrast, recognises men are born into conditions not of their own choosing, that the stakes are set in advance so to speak, but he insists that these are contingent conditions – not arbitrary, but contingent – and that taking account of these conditions is what determines the terms of political struggle.

This also explains Laclau's politics. His political identity was forged in the Argentinian left in the 1960s. These political experiences are congruent with the course of his theoretical work. Leftist politics is populist. It entails the articulation of equivalential links between oppositional forces that may not, at least initially, seem to share anything in common other than their opposition to an oppressive or unpopular regime. It entails a political strategy of drawing links between disparate struggles, in opposition to the antagonistic other – the regime – that causes the particular ills we experience. It entails a shifting of perspective so that what seemed to be local is related to more general conditions of oppression. This does not mean that for Laclau, the activist, anything goes. Rather, it means that theory cannot guarantee that the limits we have are those that will be realised in the harsh reality of political struggle. It also means that politics is not all or nothing. Hegemonic articulation of radical alternatives to an existing order will mean that some demands are sacrificed, or reformulated. Take for example the politics of Syriza in Greece. A number of commentators on the left have decided in advance that the new government will fail. If one's commitment is to total revolution, immediately, regardless of circumstance, then this is of course true. The compromises Syriza makes should instead be evaluated in relation to what is possible in the extraordinary circumstances which they have inherited. One marker of success concerns the dominant narrative which frames European politics. The European Union, the troika, and the ruling elites in Greece have for almost a decade articulated the Greek nation state as a feckless community of non-tax paying citizens, unproductive and lazy. Value is reduced to a quantitative measure, on financial terms, and the values of equality and dignity are respected only in so far as they are compatible with the obligation to pay debts, debts which Greek citizens did not take on. On these terms any policy – cutting pensions, selling off state assets, reducing benefits for children, selling the future – may be presented

as necessary, and just, designed to ensure that the future is better for all. Syriza's success is not simply about the policies which it sees enacted. As important is the reformulation of the dominant terms of political debate so that questions of dignity, justice and equality dictate the terms on which political debate takes place. If the terms of equivalence are rearticulated thus, then the political imaginary framing European politics will have been radically redrawn.

If for Laclau there is no one revolutionary moment, no starting again from ground zero, this is no bad thing. Rather, it leads to the recognition that revolt is multiple, that it takes place in many arenas, on many fronts, that in some cases it may result in wholesale changes to a society – as for example in the case of Argentinian Kirchnerist politics - but that often change is won through compromise. Many will argue that this is simply reformism, that post-Marxists have given up their commitments, are capitalist neoliberals in disguise, purveyors of third way politics. In fact the reverse is the case. The revolution does last a long time. It will continue long after we have gone, but this does not mean that we should wait for the world to be made a better place. If it is the case that the left has to win through antagonistic struggle, if democracy is not simply given on a plate but has to be reforged anew in every generation, then we must evaluate the world we have inherited, and make it anew for future generations. We are antagonists in this struggle, a struggle which is ongoing, which transforms not only the world we inherit, but the subjects we become as we rearticulate the world and ourselves. This is Laclau's legacy – a commitment to antagonistic struggle, to equality, to activism without the comforting security of theoretical certainty and stupidity.

My most abiding memories of Ernesto are recent. In 2013 I organised a conference titled: 'Thinking the Political: The Work of Ernesto Laclau.' Ernesto opened the conference with a retrospective account of the development of his own theoretical work as a response to the crisis of the left in the last decades of the 20th century. He attended every session, and spoke to participants about the arguments, the disagreements and the claims that they made. Many of the friends I had made during the 1990s in Essex came to the conference – from Argentina, New Zealand, from Essex, Athens, Turkey, Finland, Slovenia – and I met many more scholars, some now friends, whom Ernesto had either taught or influenced. There were younger academics at the conference, PhD students inspired by his ideas, desperate to have a word with him, to push him, to challenge and to extend his arguments. Ernesto was as patient then as he had been with me 21 years ago. At the conference dinner Ernesto led everyone in a rendition of the Internationale, followed immediately by Italian revolutionary songs, the words of which only he knew. I had no sense that this would be the last academic event at which I would see Ernesto. I was due to meet him at a conference in Leuven, in June 2014. He was due to write replies to papers delivered at the conference, as part of a book project. That ultimate contingency, death, means that we will never speak to Ernesto again. We will never watch him draw that diagram demonstrating the logic of the empty signifier, or hear him tell stories about union meetings in Buenos Aires in the 1960s before the dictatorship disrupted his activism. We will never listen to his careful response to criticism, his clarification of an

argument wrongly presented, his inimitable description of his own project. His enduring legacy is to remind us that politics is antagonistic, contingent and strategic.

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