

Laclau Tribute

The Philosopher and Political Activist

Paula Biglieri

Ernesto Laclau was the philosopher whose theoretical intervention made a difference: it opened a whole path to a new kind of emancipationist thought that reoriented the political leftist position. His most famous text - *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* first published in English in 1985 and co-authored with Chantal Mouffe - gave birth to what has been referred to as 'post-Marxism'. *Hegemony...* was crucial for the Left because it challenged the overwhelming conservative current which delighted in celebrating the failure of the socialist project and with it the unsuccessfulness of Marxist theory. (For instance, let us remember for a brief moment the paroxysm of Francis Fukuyama after the fall of the Berlin wall with his thesis about the end of history and the concomitant triumph of liberal democracy and the market economy over any other social and political order.) In an enormous gesture - that could be interpreted as a working over of their Marxist heritage - Laclau and Mouffe deconstructed Marxist theory in such a way that they ended up disintegrating its foundations. They persisted in the idea of social change and antagonism but this time without any possibility of reaching a dialectical resolution. Once they recognised that antagonism inhabits the heart of the subject, the assertion that there could be a final, complete and coherent resolution without any remainder became absurd. Thus, they affirmed that enigmatic phrase, "society is impossible", a metaphor to say that society lacks ultimate foundations from where the totality of partial processes could be established. The inevitable conclusion was that it is no longer possible to hold onto the view that the subject of history (the proletariat) could be determined *a priori* and that it has a pre-established destiny (the reconciled society of communism). Nevertheless, Laclau and Mouffe never surrendered their revolutionary spirit, but insisted on the idea of an emancipatory project, which was now to be understood plurally: emancipation(s), as effects of different struggles carried out by different subjects depending on diverse contexts.

In a sense, this theoretical intervention was bad news for both academics and political activists who were still concerned with emancipation (in the singular). For them, there were no more certainties left to hold on to. However, at the same time this bad news was a breath of fresh air as it opened a new field for a leftist position, namely post-Marxism. *Hegemony...* obliged us to rethink what is to "be on the Left" as we were encouraged to debate this subject. Laclau and Mouffe gained recognition and prestige within the academic world of humanities and social sciences. But for us, for all those who were lucky enough to be able to participate in one of Laclau's educational spaces, it provided a chance to enjoy a place where he would generously offer his ideas up for debate, while he would always encourage critical and autonomous reflection as well as creative thought - and always with his marvelous sense of humour. Everyone who has studied

with Laclau knows that he was not just a philosopher or a professor, but he was also a true teacher.

Laclau kept on developing his theory, usually known as the Theory of Hegemony. Gramsci, Althusser, Foucault, and Derrida served as Laclau's antecedents, as sources of theoretical nourishment. Nonetheless from my perspective Laclau's theory is more than a Theory of Hegemony; it is also a Theory of Antagonism. Furthermore, it is the centrality of that concept of antagonism that led him to go deeper in the discipline of psychoanalysis – in particular in its Lacanian stream—and to take and “make use” of certain fundamental categories from this field of knowledge, which ended up having a special place in his postulates. For him, not everything contributed to a deconstruction of Marxist Theory. Instead, he constructed his own theory, which took into account some key elements from psychoanalysis. Laclau liked stating that he was not “Lacanian”, but a “Laclausian”. Nevertheless, if we lose sight of how deep psychoanalysis incarnates in Laclau's theory, we run the risk of flattening his concepts and nullifying their explanatory power.

New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time (1990), the collections of essays in *Emancipation(s)* (1996) and the one published post-mortem in *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society* (2014) – which includes one of the greatest essays in contemporary philosophy as it is, namely *On the Names of God* – are part of his major work. However, *On Populist Reason* (2005) is the text that needs to be considered separately because of the impact it had, especially in Latin America. That was the book that made Laclau gain public recognition even outside the academic cloisters. In that text he presented arguments that went beyond the deconstruction of the subject's metaphysics of full presence. He aimed at creating a political thought that would not just replace an explanatory principle with a better one, but one that could withstand the lack of foundationalist principles and enable a “know-how” with it. In this way, he constructed a more effective theory to interpret current realities – such as populisms - and to avoid discarding them as political abominations. Moreover, *On Populist Reason* implies the most promising attempt at retaining the idea of a non-privileged political subject, right there where many other thinkers ended up either with an open or veiled return to Marxism or with a dilution of the possibility of any organized political action. For Laclau it is the people – when it is able to articulate itself as such - capable of enforcing modifications to the *status quo*. That is to say, only the people - as an effect of an equivalential chain that gets formed with diverse demands, that crystallizes from the libidinal attachment to a leader - is capable of pushing emancipatory struggles. That is populism. However, Laclau also warned us that a populist articulation is merely a form, while the different modalities it might take depend on the correlation of political forces. The general political content of a populist articulation will depend on the result of political struggles existing in the context within which it was formed. Therefore, it is possible to find leftist populisms as well as rightist populisms.

This is the moment when Laclau, the philosopher and the professor, allows the militant political activist to arise. This is where decision acquires its critical dimension, since we are aware that we are standing on an undecidable ground without reinsurance of the

political orientation that the figure of the people might take. It is this lack of guaranty which evokes a call to become active in political struggles. Since nothing is guaranteed; since antagonism is inextricable and we do not know what its incessant irruption may generate in the Symbolic and Imaginary orders; since we do not know in advance how things are going to turn out; since nothing ensures that the rights that we have today will still be there tomorrow; since the figure of the people does not have an emancipatory pre-established destiny: it is because of all these things that we have to become political activists. In other words, it is a matter of becoming responsible. In any case, the best we can reach with a populist articulation are some political practices that will imply at the same time the experience of the possibility and the impossibility of emancipation, because the ultimate reconciliation of society with itself is impossible.

This ethic of a militant commitment was always practiced by Laclau because for him there was no possibility of thinking a political theory without a political position. He practiced this commitment when he was a young student at the Faculty of Philosophy and Arts at the University of Buenos Aires, Argentina. Accordingly, *New Reflections...* is dedicated to “*Viamonte 430*, where everything began”, the old address of the Faculty in downtown Buenos Aires. There, he combined political activism with his studies. In 1956 – only one year after a military coup had overthrown the populist government of Juan Domingo Perón - he became the President of the Students’ Union, representing the “national left wing”, that was the left involved with the Latin American popular movements (not the other one, the so called and popularly known as the “Sepoy left”, that expected that the workers struggles of Latin American should evolve in the same path as the European ones). Later he also became the editor of the National Left Party’s newspaper which was called *Lucha Obrera* (Workers Struggle). In those early writings of Laclau the student political activist, we can find a lot of papers that show how he was - in a way - thinking about the same topics from the very beginning: the non-correspondence of social class identity with a particular pre-determined dialectical task as it was postulated by classical Marxism. At the time all these problems concerning the political subject already lead him to the lectures of Antonio Gramsci, a direction that would later emerge in his own notions of hegemony and antagonism.

During the last years, while many academics - particularly from Latin America - preferred the safety of indifferent distance, Laclau reaffirmed his ethic of political militant commitment by strongly supporting the new left-wing populisms of Latin America. Although he obviously knew that his position would not be an easy one, he decided to take the risk and defended the governments of Néstor Kirchner and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner in Argentina, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, Evo Morales in Bolivia, Luiz Inácio “Lula” Da Silva and Dilma Rousseff in Brazil, José “Pepe” Mujica in Uruguay and Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, in their attempt to resist neoliberalism from a popular-democratic frame by promoting an egalitarian ethos. I remember, in February of the year of 2010 at New York University during the celebration of the 25th anniversary of the publication of *Hegemony...*, how shocked some panelists of the event were when they heard him defending Hugo Chávez. That is the reason why I would like to finish by quoting some words of Jorge Gaitán, that populist leader of Colombia whose murder provoked the

Bogotazo in 1948. When giving a speech to the people, he said: "On your feet, you, those who know how to feel and have not got the iniquitous coldness of academics". Laclau's ethic of militant commitment was a feeling that never suffered from the iniquitous coldness of academics. Thank you Ernesto Laclau, the philosopher, the professor and the militant political activist.

Paula Biglieri - paulabiglieri@hotmail.com