

The People Has Its Political Reason, of Which Political Theory Knows Nothing

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Ernesto Laclau. *On Populist Reason*. Verso. London, 2005. 276 pp.
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Ernesto Laclau has written a timely book on populism, a subject which has been making headlines. Hugo Chavez, the president of Venezuela, is often referred to as a populist and as the leader of the leftward turn in South America. The Republican Party's success in the United States is also attributed to right-wing populism. On January 9, 2007, seven far-right European parties created a coalition at the European Union's Parliament in order to further their conservative cause. This new group, "Identity, Tradition and Sovereignty," brings together twenty EU parliamentarians who despise Europe. Each party is committed to undermining Europe and is openly antagonistic to foreign interests and foreigners at home, catering to what many refer to as populist sentiments. Even more interesting is the composition of these parties' constituency, usually made up of the poor, the working class, and even immigrants! The very people who would be harmed by the new coalition's policies vote them into office.

Indeed, we find ourselves disarmed, faced with either a left- or right-wing populist movement. Both seem irrational, sentimentalist and beyond the understanding of the political establishment. This bewilderment was very well captured in America by Thomas Frank in his book *What's the Matter with Kansas?* (2004). The rise of populism seems like a backlash, an outburst with no rhyme or reason. But as Laclau's book suggests, there is a "populist reason," but we have failed to understand it.

This is not Laclau's first treatment of the subject. In his 1977 book, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*, he already devoted a chapter to populism. But the crux of Laclau's work should be traced back to his 1985 work, co-authored with Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist*

Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics (2nd ed. 2001). In that work, they argued that Orthodox Marxism is plagued by a real philosophical knot. Briefly put, a puzzle confronted Orthodox Marxism in the twentieth century. The October Revolution had taken place; capitalism had met significant resistance and was, during the depression era, on the brink of a monumental collapse; but the promised international revolution wasn't happening. To the contrary, the proletariat was divided; the workers of the world were not about to unite. It seems as though the proletariat was unable to recognize its own true economic interest. For Laclau and Mouffe, this was not a coincidence, or a mere phase. It was the result of the Marxist reductionism and the "ontological privileging" of the working class. Though Laclau and Mouffe have never denied the importance of the economic terrain and its struggles, they nonetheless criticized traditional Marxism for its neglect of other struggles, such as feminism, environmentalism, anti-racism, and anti-colonialism, all of which played key roles on the political stage of the twentieth century. In short, by reducing everything to economics, Marxism failed to appreciate the true nature of the political.

Instead, in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Laclau and Mouffe turned their attention to Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony, which was a political construct and not a natural, *a priori* given site of struggle. To rid Gramsci of all remnants of essentialism, they used the best of the post-structuralist theories to argue for a notion of politics that is at home with contingency and anti-foundationalism. Anti-foundationalism has been an important current in theoretical humanities over the past forty years or so. But its impact on political thought has been fairly limited. It is one thing to admit that there *is* no such a thing as a race; it is another to know how to assess racism. It is one thing to de-naturalize human rights; it is another to find a way to reject oppression without falling back on modern essentialist categories. Anti-foundationalism has opened up the field of possibilities; it has allowed for a proliferation of complex identities, differences and narratives. Its translation into politics—a common ground—has been lacking. In *On Populist Reason*, Laclau provides us his solution for the way forward.

"The main issue addressed in this book," writes Laclau, "is the na-

ture and logics of the formation of collective identities” (ix). He also tells us that his “whole approach has grown out of a basic dissatisfaction with sociological perspectives which either considered the group as the basic unit of social analysis, or tried to transcend that unit by locating it within wider functionalist or structuralist paradigms.” His dissatisfaction is readily appreciable. Quantitative or rational-choice theorists fail because they assume the “people” as a category, or see it as an aggregation of rational individuals (in the best case scenario). But the “qualitative” theorists have little to offer as well. For Laclau, “the impasse that Political Theory experiences in relation to populism is far from accidental, for it is rooted in the limitation of the ontological tools currently available to political analysis” (4). Before putting forth his own new ontology—and this book is indeed a new political ontology—Laclau retraces the history of this failure in the first three chapters of the book.

In this interesting survey of the literature on populism, Laclau shows that no one has managed to capture what populism really is. In fact, theorists are often frustrated and prefer not to address the topic because it lacks precision; it leads to an impasse. The few willing theorists usually end up describing the phenomenon of a particular populist movement, refusing to do more with what presents itself as an irrational outburst. Despite their best efforts, classical theorists of populism seem bound to “separating what is rational and conceptually apprehensible in political action from its dichotomic opposite: a populism conceived as irrational and undefinable” (16). Most importantly, this conclusion speaks volumes to the assumptions of most political theorists. For most political theorists, populism “simplifies the political space, replacing a complex set of differences and determinations by a stark dichotomy whose two poles are necessarily imprecise” (18). This is where we can begin to appreciate Laclau’s originality within the current spectrum of post-structuralist theory. He is content neither with the rationalist approach, nor with the postmodern advocacy of proliferation of pluralities. Against the rationalists, Laclau argues that populism is in fact a challenge to the political establishment which is bound to see it as irrational; against postmoderns (as well as traditional political theorists),

Laclau argues that simplification of the terrain, the coming together of odd political bed-fellows is the very “nature and logic” of the political. In other words, if we were to better understand populism, we would understand the way politics in general works.

Early “crowd” psychologists, whose work Laclau meticulously analyzes, came to this appreciation, though often unintentionally or unsystematically. Nineteenth-century psychologists came to the question of the people through a clear interest in its pathology—the crowd’s ability to pressure otherwise “normal” individuals to behave irrationally. To them a crowd was a “group in decline” (34). But this “pathological” approach didn’t pan out.

Whatever the novelties—even the dangers—that the transition to a mass society involved, it became increasingly clear that they could be addressed with the pathological approach...Mass society required a positive characterization (39).

Later theorists, in search of a positive approach to crowds—one that would understand them but also master them—paid close attention to the role of a leader. The figure of the leader is very important in populist movements. Chavez currently occupies such a position. But few have managed to understand the political and ontological role that the leader plays. That the masses begin to follow the leader is often seen—in a way that is reminiscent of Nietzsche, who was a contemporary of these crowd psychologists—as a weakness, or a lack of selfhood. But for Laclau, there is more to the role of the leader. It is true that by following a leader, of any kind, plurality and differences among the followers disappear to a great extent—though never fully—but this is because the nature of creating a collective identity requires this moment of simplification, or what Laclau calls the “logic of equivalence.” In the work of Freud, Laclau finds the best support for this theory of identification with the leader. Unlike other theorists, Freud saw that the relationship of a community cannot be captured rationally, but is only understandable libidinally.

By Chapter Four, Laclau is ready to provide us with his own theory, while again emphasizing the fact that “populism is the royal road to understanding something about the ontological constitution of the

political as such" (67). How is that the case? Laclau begins with the category of demand, which he points out

is ambiguous in English: it can mean a request, but it can also mean a claim (as in 'demanding an explanation'). This ambiguity of meaning, however, is useful for our purposes, because it is in the transition from request to claim that we are going to find one of the first defining features of populism (73).

For Laclau, there is no such a thing as a pre-defined society. The very act of this definition—who is "in" and who is "out" or what is meant by "we" is the very work of the political. Initially, a segment of the population has a request; it *lacks* something. Given its particular position in the world, this group has a particular concern, say anti-racism. But this group is not the only one with a demand. All given fragments of the citizenry have their own requests. If such requests are satisfied, if there is a concession by the powers, the demand plays no political role. When the demand is not satisfied, then it becomes a claim, something of a real concern. Or as Laclau puts it:

People can start to perceive that their neighbours have other, equally unsatisfied demands—problems with water, health, schooling and so on. If the situation remains unchanged for some time, there is an accumulation of unfulfilled demands and an increasing inability of the institutional system to absorb them in a differential way (each in isolation from the others), and an equivalential relation is established between them. (73)

This is the beginning of populism and the beginning of a political movement in general. One particular sector's demands—even when they go unfulfilled—cannot amount to a political gesture. It requires the moment of equivalence whereby a multiplicity of demands are integrated into a single front. Here, we can begin to see why populism usually seems incoherent and unpredictable. It is indeed its very nature to incorporate heterogeneous interests; but that, according to Laclau, is the nature of politics in the first place.

Given Laclau's post-structuralist sympathies we must remember that for him the logic of equivalence and the logic of difference are always already at work, at the same time, in the same place. Politics needs

both. A purely equivalential society—one in which all differences have been eliminated—is not only ethically and politically undesirable, but it is, as post-structuralism and psychoanalysis have argued, impossible. Perfect coincidence is a dream, one that is in fact grounded in the frustration of unfulfilled demands and the need for equivalential struggle. This is indeed the danger of populism, as it is commonly understood. Populism may pretend to create a permanent unity where there is only one united people, but that is impossible to achieve. Not the least, for Laclau, because oneness and unity require a frontier of separation, of difference, which is achieved through the contingent construction of an antagonistic front through the chain of equivalence. To concretely illustrate this matter, let me quote at length a brilliant passage from Laclau:

A society which postulates the welfare state as its ultimate horizon is one in which only the differential logic would be accepted as a legitimate way of constructing the social. In this society, conceived as a continuously expanding system, any social need should be met differentially; and there would be no basis for creating an internal frontier. Since it would be unable to differentiate itself from anything else, that society could not totalize itself, could not create 'a people.' What actually happens is that the obstacles identified during the establishment of that society—private entrepreneurial greed, entrenched interests, and so on—force their very proponents to identify enemies and to reintroduce a discourse of social division grounded in equivalential logic. In that way, collective subjects constituted around the defense or the welfare state can emerge. The same can be said about neo-liberalism: it also presents itself as a panacea for a fissureless society—with the difference that in this case, the trick is performed by the market and not by the state. The result is the same: at some point Margaret Thatcher's sound 'obstacles' started denouncing the parasites of social security and others, and ended up with one of the most aggressive discourses of social division in contemporary British history. (78–79)

This passage illustrates Laclau's ability to navigate through concrete examples, while providing us with a genuine theory that cuts across differences that we take for granted—the opposition between the welfare state and neo-liberalism, in this instance. This is indeed the job of

an ontology. Having established the duality of equivalence and difference, Laclau moves to the second tenet of populism: the establishment of antagonistic frontiers between two incommensurable camps.

How are these camps established? How are they defined? A simplistic approach would define them negatively, i.e., a common enemy would become the common identity. This is a typical analysis of populist movements. For Laclau, there is indeed an external frontier, separating the two sides. But establishing the frontier is itself the great political moment *par excellence*. Pointing to a common enemy is not enough. In a detailed analysis that uses a concept he has developed throughout his career, Laclau argues that when a chain of equivalence is established among similar struggles (and here the commonality among the oppressed is made visible; or better yet, a common lack is felt), then one particular agent or only one sector becomes the representative of the entire movement. This is the construction of a hegemonic front (85). A genuine, powerful populist movement is born when a new dividing line is put in place:

The meaning of such [initially isolated] demands is determined largely by their differential positions within the symbolic framework of society, and it is their frustration that presents them in a new light. But if there is a very extensive series of social demands which are not met, it is that very symbolic framework which starts to disintegrate. In that case, however, the popular demands are less and less sustained by a pre-existing differential framework: they have, to a large extent, to construct a new one. (86)

Laclau correctly shows us that right-wing populism, particularly in America, is best understood through this framework. As the left-wing discourse failed to meet the demands of the people, they turned toward another movement, equally outside of the establishment: the extreme right. This phenomenon is easily observable in Europe as well. As each country is clearly governed through a centrist policy that de facto excludes the majority of the people and their demands, a growing number of disillusioned sectors of the population—including immigrants—turn to the Right. In these cases, “the ontological need to express social division,” the fact that most people find themselves ex-

cluded from the political process, is “stronger than its ontic attachment to a left-wing discourse” (88).

Here, we can begin to better understand the frustrations of typical analyses of populism. Political theory, we must recall, is often speechless before populism; it finds itself at an impasse since the multiplicity of the demands, the “irrationality” of the alliances and of the leader puzzle theorists. But, for Laclau, the irrationality and the “vagueness” of populism are no surprise. The one segment of the population, that actor or that group that becomes representative of the entire movement indeed embodies a multiplicity of demands. There is no *a priori* coherence; solidity and solidarity must be built (99).

Focusing on this process brings Laclau to the very notions of representation and naming. What is involved when a particular actor is named a leader, or a particular cause embodies a much larger set of demands? To begin with, and this is a crucial point for Laclau, the moment of hegemony which allows one group to rise to the representational level necessarily means that this group loses part of its own particularity. To give a more concrete example: traditional Marxism, from Laclau’s perspective, never really understood this political hegemony. When it did, as in the case of Lenin, it was not a true hegemony. Lenin saw the proletariat as the revolutionary agent that represented all other oppressions—such as sexism or racism—which were brought forth by modern capitalism. But the revolutionary agent represented itself; its identity remained insular and did not incorporate other demands. It did not modify its own platform, but asked other causes to rally behind it. In other words, the process of naming is itself a political move. By breaking with the dominant, analytic model of linguistics, Laclau liberates the signifier from the signified. The relationship between a name and its content become contingent, historically and structurally unstable. In psychoanalysis, Laclau uses Lacan’s *objet petit a*, which for Lacan is the object of desire. What Lacan brings to the discussion is his emphasis on “the identity and unity of the object result from the very operation of naming” (104). A given signifier—say, freedom or equality—is not *a priori* defined, but through the process of hegemonization, the coming together of the chain of equivalences, the cause gets its

own conception. Laclau formerly referred to this phenomenon as the “empty signifier”; yet here, in *On Populist Reason*, he pushes his analysis further by replacing his own formula by a new one: “floating signifier.” Not only does emptiness suggest that there is a total void, which is untenable, it makes it seem as though there is already an “empty place” of power, to use Claude Lefort’s phrase. The floating signifier does justice to the instability of the social division, which itself moves through the process of naming. There is no place in the first place.

The last major theoretical movement in the book—in addition to the chain of equivalences and naming—is the importance of the heterogeneous. In a dense discussion, Laclau moves farther away from traditional Hegelian-Marxism by refusing to let the dialectic fully determine the scope of a struggle. In fact, when a struggle is dialectically comprehended, it is within the already established political framework and bears no revolutionary trait. By looking at Hegel’s notion of “peoples without history” and Marx’s own analysis of “lumpenproletariat,” Laclau shows that the presence of this political remainder—the ones that are not even part of the dialectical struggle—is key in breaking away from the status quo. A true populist movement is once again incomprehensible to traditional theory because it seeks to incorporate demands that are so far off the political radar that the claims seem absurd:

This is what happened with the aggregative model of democracy (Schumpeter, Downs) which reduced the “people” to a pluralism of interests and values; and with the deliberative model (Rawls, Habermas), which found in either justice as fairness or in dialogical procedures the basis for a rational consensus which eliminated all opacity from the representation process. Once that point has been reached, the only relevant question is how to respect the *will* of those represented, taking it for granted that such a will exists in the first place. (164)

This is why for Laclau there is “no political intervention which is not populist to some extent” (155). By now, it should be clear that the process is not automatic; it requires establishing equivalences, the rise of a representative agent that breaks the given social antagonisms by incorporating the heterogeneous elements of society that have been

excluded. In Chapter Eight, Laclau focuses on three examples where populism “misfired” (201). American populism has failed in its goals because it refused to expand the chain of equivalence; institutional segregation prevented the establishment of equivalences, by focusing on differences. Atatürk failed in his quest to change Turkey because he adopted a top-down approach; he tried to “construct” the people in the image that he had in mind. In the case of Peron, Laclau shows that there was a collapse of identification; all involved causes only identified themselves through the leader (221).

This tour of the world proves, for Laclau, that there is a way to analyze populism that does not reduce it to an irrational outburst. But not only do contemporary political theorists neglect the concept of the people (the Conclusion of the book is dedicated to showing how Laclau differs from his principal theoretical rivals: Žižek, Hardt and Negri, and Ranciere), the Left has equally given up on constructing a hegemonic front, even though capitalism provides the heterogeneous framework for such struggles. In his own words:

The politico-intellectual task as I see it today—and to which I have tried to make a modest contribution here—is to go beyond the horizon drawn by this faintheartedness, in its praises and in its condemnations. The return of the “people” as a political category can be seen as a contribution to this expansion of horizons, because it helps to present other categories—such as class—for what they are: contingent and particular forms of articulating demands, not an ultimate core from which the nature of the demands themselves could be explained. This widening of horizons is a precondition for thinking the forms of our political engagement in the era of what I have called globalized capitalism. The dislocations inherent to social relations in the world in which we live are deeper than in the past, so categories that synthesized past social experience are becoming increasingly obsolete. It is necessary to reconceptualize the autonomy of social demands, the logic of their articulation, and the nature of collective entities resulting from them. This effort—which is necessarily collective—is the real task ahead. Let us hope that we will be equal to it (250).

All in all, this is an extremely rich book. The argument put forth is novel, in so far as it sheds light on new and emergent forms of pop-

ulism, while explaining the very nature of modern social movements, which have puzzled political theorists for a long time. At the end, I find myself asking for even more. How about the dangers of populism? Laclau showed that right-wing populism has been extremely successful. Despite his descriptive and analytic tone, it is perfectly clear that Laclau deplors this development and assumes that left-wing populism is better, that it is more emancipatory. But since the goal is to oppose global capitalism, unless there is a genuine international movement, are populist movements, even those favoring the workers, not doomed to nationalism (and by extension racism)? Laclau would argue that we need to establish an equivalential chain between anti-racist and working-class demands. We would have to change the meaning of nationalism (227). I agree, but I remain concerned that right-wing populism would always have an easier appeal.

This brings me to my next point. Laclau convincingly argues that populism is not evil, and that it is the very nature of the political. He seems to vacillate a bit here. On the one hand, he insists that populism is the “royal road to understanding something about the ontological constitution of the political as such” (67); on the other, he tells us that populism, “for political analysis, is one of the privileged places of emergence of a new political articulation” (222). Is there a non-populist approach that we might adapt, faced with the rise of right-wing populism?

Finally, as I mentioned before, this is an ontological work. Despite its “applied” focus, it is a highly theoretical endeavor, bringing together many different trends in the humanities and social sciences. Historical examples throughout the book are immensely helpful but the reader is left in a void when it comes to the future. On the one hand, it is unfair to expect Laclau to make predictions, or to give us prescriptions. After all, his very theory is rejecting the full predictability of the political terrain. The contingency of the political forbid him from dialectically projecting far into the future. Nevertheless, he hints—especially by the end of the book, and in the last passage cited above—that we are in an era of global capitalism which is fragmenting the world into heterogeneous segments. The task, he tells us, is to reconceptualize our frame-

work; we must bring together the different demands and struggles; we must work toward a new solidarity, a Postmodern International. But is there a way to use “class” without using the old categories? Better yet, can class be used—*named* again—while it is so historically charged? Laclau certainly thinks so. His work rightly emphasizes the need for better understanding discourse, rhetoric and even imagination.

Is it necessary to mention how this polarization is projected today (June 2004) on the immediate American electoral alternatives? Either middle America deserts the populist right-wing camps because it no longer recognizes itself in the aggressive neo-conservative onslaught of the Bush regime, with the result that new equivalential chains are formed—that is, we move to a new hegemonic formation—or the Republicans will be re-elected. What is pure illusion is to think that their long-term defeat could take place without some kind of drastic rearticulation of the political imaginary (the situation is too polarized for small changes in one direction or the other to be able to make any material difference). Even if Bush marginally loses the election, his successor will find his movements limited by the straitjacket of a hegemonic formation whose parameters remain substantially unchanged. (138)

Though I fully admire Laclau’s work, and find myself sympathetic to his goal, I remain concerned that our political imaginary is too weak for this task. In a way, this cited passage best illustrates my concern (and the unfairness of my expectation from Laclau, to find the solution to the neo-conservative hegemony). In 2006, the Democrats won giving the U.S. the “small changes” that Laclau mentioned. We are caught up in the same logic, once more. What’s next? How can we persuade the electorate that is seduced by right-wing populism? There is no radical shift in the works in America. Worse yet, could middle America, middle Europe and the middle World establish a new identity? Could it be done without falling prey to the old essentialism of the Second International? Is there an upcoming radical break, “a *creatio ex nihilo*” (228)?

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