

From the concept of the people to the materialization of a leader – Brief notes on the populism of Ernesto Laclau

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The post-Marxist philosophy of Ernesto Laclau (1935-2014) and Chantal Mouffe seems to inspire some leaders and activists of Podemos (Spanish state) and La France Insoumise. In order to better understand the ins and outs of this new philosophy, we reproduce here a critique written in 2014 by an Argentine Marxist, Edgardo Logiudice, a member of the editorial board of the journal *Herramienta*. This article originally appeared in *Herramienta* n° 56 (autumn 2015) [1].

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Ernesto Laclau's political and academic analyses, particularly in *On Populist Reason*, [2] have had considerable success with many sectors of South American political cadres over the past decade. The term "populist" that accompanies the new politico-social processes is considered by some as a standard but is vituperated by others.

Images of Laclau

Upon the death of Laclau, Íñigo Errejón, a remarkable organizer of Podemos, the Spanish party that emerged from the Indignados movement, wrote that "he has left us at a decisive moment, in a period of uncertainty in which breaches have opened up for unprecedented possibilities. A moment when we must reflect on the challenges of the sedimentation of the plebeian irruption that emerged in the countries of Latin America and spread to the South of Europe and on the task that faces us, of translating the discontent and suffering of the greatest number into new hegemonies. [3].

This is a very strong image of someone who, in 2004, having already worked out his ideas, affirmed that "Spain took a huge step forward in the last elections by choosing Jose Luis Zapatero". [4].

The lawyer Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner (former President of Argentina) said of Laclau: "A

philosopher who really lends himself to controversy, a thinker who had three virtues, as a human being: first of all, thinking, which is not very usual these days; secondly, doing so with great intelligence; and thirdly, which is the most important, doing it in open contradiction with the paradigms that are imposed by the cultural industries of the great centres of power in the world, which is the most courageous thing for an intellectual. The best thing an intellectual can do if he wants to be published and applauded by the whole establishment is to say what pleases the dominant establishment. But what draws attention to those intellectuals who have distinguished themselves and generated their own ideas, is precisely that they develop these ideas from a critical point of view, in total contradiction with what interests the dominant sectors". [5]

It is the image of a figure in South American politics who argued that "when people feel very impacted by a process of social disintegration, in the end what is needed is some kind of order. The question of what order will prevail is a secondary consideration". [6]

These are images of a Laclau who confronts the question of domination.□□

Affirming populism

Laclau expressly proposed affirming the term populist, according to it the privilege of constituting the People as such, metaphorically and metonymically. We should not be surprised at the warm welcome he received among those who improvise speeches with sentences thrown out as arguments of authority, coming from nothing less than a post-Marxist professor of the faculty of Essex, a disciple of [Gino] Germani, pioneer of the use of this term. It is not surprising on the part of those who write speeches or those who need some rational support for their legitimate desire to create.

□Laclau made an inventory of the literature dealing with populism, which, in his opinion, is marked by a "denigration of the masses". A denigration that consists of accusations of marginality, fleetingness, a blurred view of things, manipulation, pure rhetoric and a prejudicial rejection of the undifferentiated milieu that makes up the multitude or the people, in the name of institutionalization and social structuring. These are inadequate approaches to "understanding something about the ontological constitution of politics as such".

The political scientist argues that in these postures, the populist discourse on social reality is based on two pejorative assumptions:

- a) The vague and indeterminate aspect of the discourse and of the public to whom it addresses itself in its political postulates;
- b) The fact that the discourse is pure rhetoric.

For Laclau these presumed "defects" or negative attributes are nothing but:

- a) The vagueness and indeterminacy that are inscribed in social reality itself;
- b) Rhetorical remedies are the only ones that can be invoked to give internal cohesion to some conceptual structure.

Populism has either been underestimated or despised as a political phenomenon, "never thought about in its specificity as a legitimate form among others, of building a political bond."

And if social reality is indeterminate and rhetoric is what can give cohesion to a conceptual structure, "populism is the royal road to understanding something about the ontological constitution

of politics as such."

In this vague and indeterminate reality, "the rhetorical mechanisms (...) constitute the anatomy of the social world".

So far, the political scientist has displaced the determinations of a concept whose "conceptual clarity (...) is visibly absent (...) replaced by the invocation of non-verbalized intuition" or "by descriptive enumerations" of social reality.

The determinations of an obscure concept, the result of intuitions or descriptive enumerations which, on the level of discourse, cannot specifically apprehend the phenomenon, constitute on the other hand the royal road to understanding, if we apply them to the materiality of social reality.

Conceptual obscurity, intuition and descriptive enumeration, work effectively if they are applied to social reality, constituting a manner of producing politics. A manner that has such a degree of legitimacy that "there is no political intervention that is not populist to a certain extent".

The critique of the concept is transformed into the assuming of a fuzzy and indeterminate social reality. In this vague social reality there does not seem to be any room for exploitation or domination, the key to the conflict seems to lie in unsatisfied demands. On the art of rhetoric in order to unify demands, so different that they go so far as to be able to be contradictory, depends success in articulating them in a chain which makes them equivalent in the face of the established institutions, constituting thus a collective identity, the People.□□

Exclusion

An unsatisfied demand is always a sign of exclusion. Therefore that will be the starting point. Exclusion is a presupposition on which the construction of Laclau is built. A presupposition so vague and indeterminate, like all social reality, that Laclau seems to refuse to analyze it in terms other than those of the mechanisms of rhetoric.□

"Metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, catachresis" which are "transformed into instruments of broader social rationality". Enlarged social rationality, which consists in the fact that the metaphor is "the anatomy of the social world". Rationality of the vague, the indeterminate, the incoherent.□

Reality is rational thanks to rhetoric in the same way as is discourse on social reality. Rhetoric occupies the place of critique of the established order.

The established order is not discussed because, as we shall see, there always exists the necessity of some kind of order.

We do not discuss governance but its effects. Domination is replaced by its effects, by exclusion; an exclusion that will lead to demands.

Demands that, although temporary and sectoral, can be articulated ("from above", "vertically") through the use of rhetoric. A demand for wages can be combined with any other by means of "justice", for social justice. This demonstrates the ambiguity that entails naming one thing by another.

Different demands, and for Laclau globalization makes them more and more different, are not equal, but they can be made to be equivalent, thanks to the use of rhetoric.

But furthermore, the demands are always democratic. They are so because of the very fact of the presupposition of exclusion. Laclau declares that his notion of democracy is "a little peculiar". It has nothing to do, he says, with any normative judgment about its legitimacy, nor with "anything that has any relationship to a democratic regime". Nor "with some nostalgic link to the Marxist tradition", but with one element of this tradition: "the notion of non-satisfaction of the demand, which confronts an existing status quo and makes possible the deployment of the logic of equivalence, which leads to the emergence of the "people".

The characteristics of the notion of democracy which are operative, according to Laclau, are:

"a) That these demands are formulated to the system by someone who has been excluded from this very system - that is, there is an implicit egalitarian dimension in them;"b) That this emergence presupposes a certain type of exclusion or deprivation..."

Exclusion is the presupposition of demands, and the emergence of demands presupposes exclusion. Laclau claims that this obvious tautology is not a simple description closed in on itself. The egalitarian dimension implicit in demands is that they are formulated by someone who is excluded from the exclusionary system. The established institutional system, a sort of common enemy, transforms equivalences into an egalitarian dimension that becomes involved in this confrontation.

All demands are democratic because they are derived from forms of exclusion: "they are not teleologically destined to be articulated in any particular political form. A fascist regime can absorb and formulate democratic demands just as well as a liberal regime."

Not only does exclusion make all political regimes equivalent, and thus renders their distinction non-operative, but also it does not explain the emergence of one or another kind of system. Order is constituted "from above". That is why the true bearers of the demands are nothing other than passive subjects, incapable of any immanent telos. They are incapable of projects that are not provided to them by the excluding system. As a result, any idea of democracy remains empty of content. It is condemned to heteronomy, to the domination that is the real foundation of any rebellion.

This seems to be the consequence of mistaking the effect (exclusion) for the cause. Which could really be a trope. A rhetorical discourse on political rhetoric.

Autopoiesis

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