

<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article5110>



Populist Philosophy(

From the concept of the people to the materialization of a leader?

- Features -

Publication date: Thursday 17 August 2017

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

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 \(autumn 2015\)](#).

Ernesto Laclau's political and academic analyses, particularly in *On Populist Reason*, [1] 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, Álvaro 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. [2].

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". [3].

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 ". [4]

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". [5]

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

Affirming populism

From the concept of the people to the materialization of a leader?

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

[6]

Laclau's intention does not seem to be to provide explanations through relationships between cause and effect, nor, purposely, by "any dialectic."

His strategy is descriptive. His "optic" - he says - "starts from his basic dissatisfaction with regard to sociological perspectives". He would add that these perspectives are also anthropological and, needless to say, economic. Almost anything that could be meta-discursive. This is a legitimate perspective as long as we accept it as a discourse which is demanded for other points of view, not as a claim to totalization.

But perhaps, in view of the intellectual density of the text, Laclau's aspiration was more modest and he expressed it thus. In the face of those who denigrate populism, whom he suspects of having a certain contempt for the plebs, his strategy is to demonstrate that populism is another way of producing politics in the domain of relations with the established institution, that is to say, the state. He goes so far as to add that, in the end, every political construct has a populist aspect. Thus everything is also vague and indeterminate.

It is clear that he is partly right. It is from this that derives the logic of differences. And the reason is the irrelevance of the idea of homogeneity. The target of the critique is especially the idea of social class, which supposedly implies the homogeneity of its members. It is an interpretation of social class from a sociological or strictly economic point of view, of an empirical but not necessarily unique character.

It is certainly difficult to apprehend social relations in their immediacy: their determination requires a dimension of analytic abstraction. This is not an epistemological preoccupation that is expressed by Laclau. But it is more or less obvious that the forms of dissatisfaction which generate demands have some foundation in the social relations which determine the possibilities of access to resources. Whether or not someone has resources available may not perhaps determine their discourse, but at least it determines access to these resources. The differences are differences in social relationships. And we can define classes by various types of social relations, which are the usual source of

unsatisfied demands.

Laclau attributes the profusion of differences, the heterogeneity, to the fact that it is only through a political construct that the fragmentations that accompany the process of globalization can be articulated through rhetorical mechanisms.

But in admitting that "in the final analysis this determination" is a totalization, and furthermore that it is generic, indeterminate, there is nothing particularly different about "globalization".

In fact, the globalization of consumer goods seems to tend more towards homogeneity than towards differentiation and tends to generate feelings of belonging.

The creative people of the advertising industry are well aware of this question: it is precisely they who resort to rhetorical mechanisms that do not express demands but generate them. And the mode of production of politics is not, in our day, foreign to the advertising agencies, to which the representatives of the political establishment are accustomed to offer themselves as products.

What seems certain is that advertising addresses itself to the individual as a singular being, and resorts, as Laclau remarks, in the realm of politics, to emotion and affective attachments; constituting, if you like, a class, that of consumers. But for this to happen, discourse is not enough, because actual consumption presupposes having the resources needed to access it, resources that are not rhetorical. They are, precisely, economic.

Among these resources, consumer credit is prevalent; a resource of the system of financial capitalism, which is precisely the great globalizer.

It seems to me that if we reduce the production of politics to the resources of rhetoric, we find ourselves faced with a political autopoiesis, if not with a self-referential, and therefore tautological, description.

Representation

Once it is established that individual differences are inexplicable data, the consequence can only be the impossibility of community.

Laclau unquestioningly endorses the old question of the impossibility of direct democracy in large communities such as modern nation-states. With this he also assumes without criticism the established fact, the system of representative electoral democracy in which the capitalist mode of production operates.

But it is not certain, he says, that the representative can or must faithfully retransmit the will of those who are represented. Because the representative must always add, to give credibility to the will of the represented, that it is the will of a sectoral group, and furthermore demonstrate that this will is compatible with the interests of the whole community and not only of one group .

It follows that representation is a process or a movement of going back and forth; there are two dimensions in any representation.

Laclau infers from this that "the person represented depends on the representative for the constitution of their own identity". Thus, the level of integration of the represented group will be degraded.

Therefore, in the case of "marginal sectors with a low level of integration within the stable framework of a community (...) we are not speaking of a will to be represented but of the very constitution of this will through the process of representation itself. The task of the representative, however, is democratic, for without their intervention there would be no integration of these marginal sectors into the public sphere. (...) In this case their task would consist not so much of transmitting a will but rather of providing a point of identification which will make it possible to constitute the sectors that they lead as actors of history.

"Representation is transformed into a means of homogenizing what (...) we call a heterogeneous mass." He quotes Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, who in his opinion has best dealt with the notion of representation, and she has affirmed that "authentic representation is charisma". That is to say that the representation "that goes from the representative to those represented" is personified in the charismatic leader.

He asserts: "In a situation of radical disorder there is a need for a kind of order, whatever it may be". For this it is necessary to proceed to some identification and "represent the order as such".

"Identification will always proceed through this ontological investiture". The order is invested in the body of the leader.

To sum up, in the face of a situation of radical disorder, it is necessary to constrain the heterogeneous mass by means of a representative who does not represent but leads.

And this is democratic because, faced with the established institutions, all the excluded are equal; moreover, they have been constituted as a people thanks to the conductor who gives them identity.

Laclau's rejection of the slogan "kick them all out" is no longer surprising.

What is surprising is that its radical character, which has manifested itself more than once, is transformed into a necessity of order. Of a state order, the nation-states which are the "great communities", large communities built through the illusion of metaphors and metonymies that articulate a heterogeneous mass as if it were homogeneous. It is true that the state is only an illusion of community, a community which, Laclau says, is never fully built.

The organization comes from "above". The People is a concept embodied in materiality, the body of the charismatic leader; a tutor and leader who embodies democracy.

The nation-state and the discourses

We have seen that Laclau lays down as a presupposition the modern nation-state as the established form of the institution. Strangely, in this construction there is no place for law.

It seems legitimate that his choice of the descriptive method excludes a normative appreciation of democracy or of politics in general - even if for him all political construction is democratic in its "particular" conception; what does not seem legitimate is that in his description he omits the normative dimension of politics, that is, law.

One can also accept the established rule of the game by expelling any meta-discursive dimension from the analysis; but law is precisely a discursive form of exchanges, the ontological ground of the organic unity of the nation-state.

It does not seem legitimate to lay down as a presupposition a state whose maximal manifestation is the norm, because it is the form in which are expressed state power (and the leader) as well as the demands (of those who are

ruled over) to an extent that they all become mixed up.

If, as Laclau's intention seems to be, it is a question of understanding what is called South American populism, it seems inevitable to refer to the role of these states after the neo-liberal attacks. Faced with these attacks, it was not the rulers, legitimized by the institutions of the form of representative electoral democracy, who put up resistance, but popular movements of various kinds.

Three successes for which various governments bear responsibility cannot be considered as a symptom of the situation of states in a "before" and an "after" in the transformation of the type of legitimacy. They show the role of the state in relation to external debt management, with at least some parallels with the role of international credit agencies.

In 2003, Lula paid \$50,000 million in interest to the IMF, and two years later he paid off his debt in anticipation. In the space of a few months, Kirchner paid in advance over \$9,000 million to the same organization. At the end of that year, which coincided with the triumph of Evo Morales, the IMF remitted the debt of Bolivia. Perhaps it was not possible to recover it.

This is indeed a reminder of the policy of uncontrolled indebtedness of the neoliberal governments legitimized by the ballot box. This also shows the process of impossibility of recovery that had already begun at the end of the last century with the restructuring of the Peruvian debt. But this is also a sign of the decline in the solvency of international organizations and an attack on non-institutional funds. The restructuring of the Argentine debt itself shows this.

States have to get out of debt, that is, to pay, because the institutional organisms have to cash in. The states that had to pay could not have the same governments or the same form of legitimacy that they had when they got into debt. They were paralyzed on this side, and also on the other by the popular movements which held them in check.

Deleveraging required other forms and other actors. And the non-institutional funds had found in natural resources the lever for negotiations on the future of financial speculation: raw materials.

Presiding over their production or their looting, governments were able to loosen the iron vice of the debt managers by paying. This did not prevent new indebtedness, but added to the extractivism that generated sufficient fiscal resources to create an increase in consumption that was also based on debt: consumer credit. As well as a so-called middle class with better incomes, of \$4 a day. This has resulted in a decline in poverty indices.

What appears clear is that the action of the new governments is, if not determined, at least conditioned by their function of debt management. This means that it is no longer from the modern nation-state that the fundamental decisions which constitute the materiality of political power are taken. This is why the very many forms of the generation of popular power, revealing the constitution of a people, in the sense of identity formulated by Laclau, are not reflected by normative forms. Among the notable exceptions are the constitutional norms of Venezuela and Bolivia.

This obliges us to question the operative scope of populist discourse, precisely in the context of globalization and the hegemony of financial capital. Not to mention the persistence of forms of exclusion, reflected in growing inequality. Unless by inclusion we understand the level of income recommended by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) and the obtaining of certain goods through increased debt. This is what seems to mean, for the excluded and marginalized of Latin America, the famous "development with inclusion".

The vulgate

From the concept of the people to the materialization of a leader?

I do not believe, and Laclau, who was an intelligent thinker, could not believe either, that his work inspired the political organizers, the South American leaders, in carrying out their task. Given that he rightly refused any transcendent teleology, the chronological coincidence of the new politico-social movements with his ideas was due to chance. It could not have been the work of historical necessity.

But if he did not inspire the leaders, the coincidence of his arguments - much earlier than the book mentioned here - did indeed inspire those who followed rulers who were quickly disqualified as populists by the propagandists of neoliberalism.

So much the better for him, although he is an acritical partisan of governments, particularly that of his country of origin, and although he considers it necessary that the term of office of the presidents should not be limited, in the name of democratic radicality. In reality, his theses might well suit anyone, because populism exists in any political construct.

In reality, Laclau cannot be blamed for anything: what he describes, he does very well. But from a scientific point of view, because of the object of his research, he was unable to present his theses to a non-academic audience, that is to say, to fulfil the functions of Lacan's synecdoche or object. For the journalist eager for interviews, he must disseminate his ideas in a way accessible to the general public.

Laclau had to generate his own vulgate. Not only for the general public but for many political cadres who had to fill their own significant emptiness with something. What could be better for them than someone who describes reality by arguing that everything that is real, even if it is vague and indeterminate, is rational? And they were (they are) reality. Laclau was right, they never all get kicked out.

It is from this vulgate that images have arisen that do not do justice to his works. Some of those who have not gone are those who have heard what they wanted to hear.

[1] Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, Verso, London 2005.

[2] Álvaro Errejón, "[Muere Ernesto Laclau, teórico de la hegemonía](#)".

[3] Interview with Ernesto Laclau, sociologist and historian, "Es el momento en que el juego rompe en el que la política empieza", [Revista Teina n.º 5 July-August-September, 2004](#).

[4] President of the Nation Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner, speaking at the inauguration of the [Salon of the Original People at the Casa Rosada](#).

[5] Ernesto Laclau, "La socialdemocracia europea es tan neoliberal como los conservadores", [El Mundo, 7 November, 2013](#).

[6] "The term "autopoiesis" refers to a system capable of reproducing and maintaining itself. [Wikipedia](#).