

*Recensione*

## **Ernesto Laclau, *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society***

Verso 2014

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The Argentinian political theorist Ernesto Laclau passed away in April 2014, only few weeks before the publication of his *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society*. Born in Buenos Aires in 1935, Laclau has been one of the most significant contemporary political theorists, and his intellectual influence over the left has been widely recognized, contributing greatly to the articulation of the concepts of hegemony, populism and radical democracy. As a «post-Marxist» political theorist, he is generally associated with a turn to language within the social sciences, mainly due to the influence of Gramsci on his definition of the political in relation to discourse. Accordingly, Laclau has focused on «hegemonization» as an affective process in which heterogeneous objects are aggregated by a discursive logics of equivalence. This sets the conditions for an alliance among rejected political demands under a common «empty signifier» and contributes to transforming the «plebs» into the «people». Rejecting deterministic Marxism and focusing on politics as the main driver of radical social change, Laclau's work on hegemony and populism contributed to some of the most fertile theoretical debates in contemporary social sciences.

The centrality of discourse for political change resonates in *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society*, which edits together a number of essays that had already been included in previous collections over the past fifteen years. In the intentions of the author, the volume was not supposed to offer a summarizing overview of his political theory to date, but rather to anticipate a new philosophical work, looking towards a systematized ontology of the political in terms of rhetoric. As announced in the Introduction of the volume, the essays not only engage with the main ideas articulated in previous works such as *On Populist Reason* (published in 2005) and *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (co-authored with Chantal Mouffe in 1985), but also offer initial insights on the main concepts and elements that the author planned to use in a more complete rhetoricized theory of the social. Therefore, the perspectives advanced in the volume follow three main theoretical lines for the interpretation of the relationship between social actors: the first builds up on *Hegemony and*

*Socialist Strategy* and explores the question of social antagonisms and the nature of increasingly heterogeneous antagonistic relations and conflict; the second focuses on the social functions of rhetorical tropes – in particular the metaphor and metonymy – for political change, investigating the discursive construction of group relationships and group identity; and the third explores new ontological terrains, beyond the Marxist tradition, for the understanding of increasingly heterogeneous conflicts in a globalized world, and for the interpretation of the logics of articulation of new collective identities and demands.

Hence, *Rhetorical Foundations* approaches the political primarily in terms of Laclau's notion of antagonism, which represents simultaneously the founding moment of society and its ultimate boundary. In the opening essay of the volume, «Death and resurrection of a theory of ideology», Laclau reflects on the reasons of the progressive abandonment of the concept of ideology and discusses the conditions for its possible re-emergence, which are explored in connection with the logic of equivalence in the production of social meaning. This post-structuralist theory of political identity returns in «Antagonism, Subjectivity and Politics» (originally published in 2012), where Laclau unpacks to the notion of antagonism he developed in his work on populism, with the stated goal of identifying the type of relation between social forces that it presupposes. In so doing, the analysis first focuses on the Kantian notion of real opposition in the work of Lucio Colletti, and then on the one of dialectical contradiction of the Hegelian and Marxist traditions, in order to demonstrate that social antagonism cannot be reduced to either of the two, since neither is «sufficiently radical to avoid reducing the antagonistic relation to something different from itself» (p. 111).

Instead, in line with Heidegger's notion of *Abgrund*, Lacan's *objet à*, and Gramsci's *hegemonic class*, social heterogeneity requires a moment of constitutive construction, a radical investment that, whilst establishing «a bridge between the ontic and the ontological, reproduces their impossible convergence» (p. 121). The main aspect of this ontology that Laclau is interested in stressing (and which would have probably featured in the monograph he had envisaged to produce) is that representation will always be figural or rhetorical, since investment consists precisely in the transformation of the ontic dimensions of the object into something different from the object itself. This line of thought is taken up again in the essay that concludes the volume, «Bare Life or Social Indeterminacy», offering a broader critical reflection on Giorgio Agamben's approach to the genealogy of a term in *Homo Sacer*. Laclau challenges the completeness of the system of possibilities identified in Agamben's framework of differentiation, to which he nonetheless recognizes the crucial merit of identifying the political as a moment of «negativity» constructing relationships of inclusion and exclusion. Rather than conceiving the «sovereign ban» unilaterally, however, Laclau sketches the contours of a notion of constitutive mutual ban: only when the ban is mutual, in fact, there can be a political relation, «for it is only in that case that we have a radical opposition between social forces and, as a result, a constant

renegotiation and re-grounding of the social bond» (p. 212). The deconstruction of the logic of political institutions should not, as in Agamben, dismiss «all political options in our societies» (which can only entail political nihilism), but it should rather focus on those radically antagonistic areas in which «forms of struggle and resistance are possible» (p. 220).

Laclau's rhetoricized idea of hegemony is approached in detail in «Articulation and the Limits of Metaphor» (originally published in 2008), and in the earlier essay on Paul de Man «Politics of Rhetoric» (2001), also included in the volume. In explaining that political change results from the discursive construction of a people, Laclau takes up de Man's examination of three rhetorical devices (or tropes): the metaphor (verbal substitution with an unrelated object), metonymy (verbal substitution with an associated concept or attribute), and catachresis (semantic misuse). In «Articulation», these ideas are then elaborated within a comprehensive tropological discussion of Sorel's and Lenin's theory of the political as the articulation of heterogeneous objects and demands. Hegemony is therefore approached using the tools developed by Gérard Genette's analysis of the narrative of Proust, and interpreted as the result of a logic of equivalence enabling the reconciliation, and ultimately identification within the same political object, of distinct but coexisting struggles and demands. In this sense, metaphor and metonymy correspond to two axes of language: the paradigmatic and the syntagmatic, substitution and combination. Rather than considering contiguity and analogy as essentially different from each other, they represent the two poles of a continuum (p. 62). As a result, similar to the «natural tendency» of the metonymy to «shade into a metaphor» (p. 75) the relation of contiguity between political demands will have a tendency to become, through continuous association, one of analogy, so that the metonymy is ultimately substituted by the metaphor.

In this framework, Laclau's approach to hegemony focuses on the linguistic process of creation of a «people», or on the construction of a persuasive discourse addressing and gathering otherwise separate social groups. This idea is unpacked in «Why Constructing a "People" is the Main Task of Radical Politics», where the author returns to some of the key elements developed in *On Populist Reason*. Originally published in *Critical Inquiry* in 2006, the essay engages with the criticisms put forth by Slavoj Žižek's *Against the Populist Temptation* (2005, subsequently republished in a revised version as *Why Populism is (Sometimes) Good Enough in Practice, but Not in Theory* in 2008). Žižek's critique challenges the basic theoretical premises of Laclau, who is accused, ultimately, of preferring the notion of populism to that of class struggle, and of having developed a theory that does not account for the concreteness of the figure incarnating the enemy in populist movements. In developing a theory of social identities in terms of «empty signifiers», Laclau avoids the very Marxist problem of class struggle. Not only Laclau's theory would, for Žižek, be unable to account for the capitalist system, but it would also avoid confronting with the potentially

violent outcomes of populist politics, in which populism's «true» nature of quest for justice can only be fulfilled through the definitive destruction of its enemy.

Laclau's response to these criticisms starts by taking up the accusation of «meaninglessness» of populist movements and develops into a critique of what he had defined the ultra-leftist appeals to total exteriority in relation to the system. The starting point is that the notion of the «people» and the classical Marxist conception of «class struggle» are simply two different ways of conceiving the construction of social identities: «the people» do not emerge via historical necessity, but rather through logics of equivalence (and difference) with other demands, names and identities. Laclau concedes that there can't be totalization without exclusion, and that populism, like any identity formation process in social movements, needs an enemy to achieve hegemonic unity (i.e. to know what is *not*). Yet, he challenges the necessity of violent outcomes suggested by Žižek as well as the centrality of the working class in popular movements. On the contrary, the very «vagueness» of the populist label is integrated within Laclau's theory of the empty signifier to make such formality and lack of meaning an ontological fact. The content of populist movements are generally overdetermined and vague, so that consistency is only guaranteed by the very name of the movement and its rhetorical definition of an enemy. This empty character of signifiers responds to the vagueness and imprecision which is inscribed in the nature of the political: only a political construction of all social identity (which is necessarily popular) may account for the dispersion of antagonisms and social demands in a global capitalist society. A «people» can only emerge «if equivalential relations between heterogeneous elements are established, and if the hegemonic dimension of naming is highlighted» (p. 176). Instead, the ultra-leftist's, and most notably Žižek's, appeal to total exteriority is synonymous with the eradication of the political, since it is only oriented at consolidating the unity of the existing power bloc, whilst it completely misses the whole notion of rearticulating demands through Gramsci's war of position. Ultra-leftism, Laclau concludes, sacrifices the idea of trying to hegemonize demands in a new popular block since only a position of total exteriority would guarantee revolutionary purity.

To conclude, precisely since *Rhetorical Foundations* was originally thought of as an in-between work of conceptual elaboration, it offers a valuable overview of Laclau's political theory as it stands today, looking back at the main concepts of *On Populist Reason* and *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, and setting up some new theoretical perspectives that might be crucial for the continuity of his thought. Thus, although the book does not present the same conceptual completeness and theoretical accuracy of Laclau's monographs, it provides a fascinating vantage point to look at the main directions of Laclau's work over the past two decades, most notably the philosophical exploration of the performative and affective nature of discursive tropes, and the analysis, through exemplification, of the workings of populism and hegemony. As is often the case in the work of Laclau, the argumentative style of the essays included in this collection elegantly

combines theoretical analysis with the use of examples and empirical references, offering an original critical reading of classic Marxist literature through the lenses of the work of psychoanalysts, linguists, historians and authors from a variety of disciplines and contexts. There is no doubt that this volume is an extremely valuable contribution to political theory, and it is an essential reading for those interested in the performativity of language, and on the question of the emergence of popular identities as collective actors.