

Rhetorics of populism

Ernesto Laclau, 1935–2014

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The publication of Ernesto Laclau's *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society*, only weeks after his death in April 2014, confirms his status as one of the foremost contemporary political theorists of the Left.* Since the 1980s, his influence has been extraordinary, particularly in the UK and Latin America: rethinking democratic leftist politics during and after the Thatcher era, in the former, and providing theoretical legitimacy to the recent neo-populist 'pink tide', in the latter. On the occasion of his death, the Argentine president Cristina Kirchner insisted that Laclau 'had three virtues: he thought, did so with great intelligence, and in open conflict with the paradigms issuing from the centres of world power'. The late president of Venezuela, Hugo Chávez, also reportedly consulted *On Populist Reason* (2005), and perhaps even discovered a discreet outline of his portrait there.

In common with *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory* (1977), *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (1990) and *Emancipation(s)* (1996), *The Rhetorical Foundations* is an in-between work of conceptual labour; a collection of essays announcing a more 'finished' monograph to come, of the kind represented by *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (1985), co-written with Chantal Mouffe, and the more recent *On Populist Reason*, in which Laclau systematically set out his now paradigmatic versions of the concepts of 'hegemony' and 'populism'. Most of these essays have been included in collections already published in Argentina: *Misticismo, retórica y política* (2002) and *Debates y combates: por un nuevo horizonte de la política* (2008); whilst all but one of them have been published in English before. The exception, 'Antagonism, Subjectivity and Politics' (2012), is the

most recent. It was published originally in Spanish in the Buenos Aires-based journal *Debates y Combate*, created and directed by Laclau himself in 2011. After his retirement, Laclau spent a considerable amount of time in the city commenting on and participating in the politics of the region. It is one of four essays in the book written after the publication of *On Populist Reason*. The others are: 'Why Constructing a "People" is the Main Task of Radical Politics' (a response to Slavoj Žižek's 'unearthly' criticisms of *On Populist Reason*; Laclau refers to his 'Martianization' of politics, in which their different Lacans – Gramscian and Hegelian, respectively – are fought out); 'Bare Life or Social Indeterminacy' (a critical engagement with the work of Giorgio Agamben in which the latter's constitutive but unilateral notion of the 'sovereign ban' is transformed, via the idea of a two-sided 'mutual' ban, into constitutive 'radical antagonism' – Laclau is thinking through revolution here); and 'Articulation and the Limits of Metaphor', to which I return in some detail below.

Rhetorical Foundations thus looks back to the making of *On Populist Reason* as well as forward to the making of something new. Indeed, its essays experiment with ideas either already fairly well unpacked in *On Populist Reason* or, like the importance for politics of rhetorical figuration, only suggested there. The four most recent essays are Laclau's now-final contributions to an ongoing project, announced in the 'Introduction' to *Rhetorical Foundations*, of producing a rhetoricized political ontology of the social out of his previous account of political reason *qua* populism; that is, as grounded in the kind of political antagonism and hegemonic articulation emerging from rejected political demands (populist

* Ernesto Laclau, *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society*, Verso, London and New York, 2014. 256 pp., £60.00 hb., £16.99 pb., 978 1 78168 171 8 hb., 978 1 78168 170 1 pb. Page references to this edition appear in brackets within the main text.

antagonism) that institute new, democratized, social formations (hegemony); as most radically, perhaps – in different ways – with the recent Chávez and Evo Morales governments of Venezuela and Bolivia; best conceived, here, as national-democratic revolutions. In so far as Laclau’s final book seeks to ‘rhetoricize’ such antagonisms and hegemonic articulations further (further than, for example, the psycho-semiotic idea of an ‘empty signifier’ already developed by Laclau requires), from the point of view of his now sadly truncated philosophical project to produce an ontology, it is these essays – especially ‘Antagonism’ and ‘Articulation’ – that constitute the volume’s most important contributions.¹

In ‘Antagonism, Subjectivity and Politics’ Laclau returns to arguments he has rehearsed previously in which he opposes Lucio Colletti’s Kantian notion of ‘real opposition’ to Hegelian-Marxist ‘dialectical contradiction’ so as to produce a version of antagonism, developed in his account of populism, consonant with the version of non-dialectizable hegemonic articulation developed in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.² He does so now, though, through a brief reflection on Heidegger’s notion of ‘ontological difference’, seeking – so as to fold it back into his version of hegemony – to think through how the gap between Being and beings may be bridged as an anti-foundational foundation. The latter is a new departure for Laclau, but since it remains only slightly developed as a feature of a possible political ontology (and since Laclau repeatedly displays a real ability at producing versions that fit quite neatly into his own developing conceptual schemas), in what follows I concentrate on the politics of rhetorical figuration. This has the additional advantage of facilitating a general review of his political theory as it stands today.

Rhetoric

The performativity of language has been central to Laclau’s political theory since the 1970s: first, as ‘interpellation’, and more recently in *On Populist Reason* as what might be best described as a performative principle of ‘hegemonization’ – the affective process through which heterogeneous particulars (political demands) are gathered together (the ‘logic of equivalence’) under another (now become an ‘empty signifier’), and quasi-universalized as collective will: ‘no populism without affective investment in partial objects’.³ The key shift in the understanding of this semiotic process of political signification from interpellation to performative

hegemonization is not linguistic as such, however, but psychoanalytic – or, rather, it is a question of the psycho-affective dimensions of verbal communication: ‘[a]ffect is not something which exists on its own, independently of language; it constitutes itself only through the differential cathexes of a signifying chain’.⁴ In this regard, *On Populist Reason* presents its account of the making of the populist political subject as a bottom-up investment of enthusiasm in an affective particularity (cathexis), rather than a top-down ‘summons’ into being by the symbolic order, as it was in Laclau’s earlier work on fascism and populism in *Politics and Ideology*. In this sense, it suggests a democratization of the process, written from the perspective of ‘brothers’ and ‘mothers’ rather than ‘fathers’, the ‘little other’ rather than the ‘big Other’. The work of Jacques Lacan is, of course, central to both processes of subject production, the shift in its deployment by Laclau away from Althusser’s well-known concept of ‘interpellation’ producing, in his view, an identification between the partial logics of the *objet petit a* (that little bit of the Real – or ‘maternal’ other – that makes its presence felt within the symbolic order), on the one hand, and Gramsci’s notion of hegemony (also grounded, according to Laclau, in a logics of particularities), on the other.⁵ In Laclau’s words:

The logic of the *objet petit a* and the hegemonic logic are not just similar: they are simply identical... The only possible totalizing horizon is given by a partiality (the hegemonic force) which assumes the representation of a mythic totality [an impossible, utopian reconciliation that is evoked by the now embodied ‘empty signifier’ conceived as a *singularity* rather than a *universality* – JK]. In Lacanian terms: an object is elevated to the dignity of the Thing.⁶

This means, translated back into Laclau’s Gramscian, that a particular interest becomes a general one, that is, hegemonic: its productive (and affective) ideological mechanics are now formalized and explained.

For its part, language itself as ‘signifying chain’ is not merely a neutral medium of communication either; it rather bends and is bent by ideology in enunciation. As the place in which politics and the drives meet in the affective production of subjects – however constitutively unstable (subject of enunciation/subject of enunciated) – language has a crucial role to play in Laclau’s proposed rhetoricized ontology. Rhetoric is both pedagogy into the practical art of persuasion, as well as knowledge of language’s figures and tropes, its shaping power. This is Laclau’s

new object of analysis. Indeed, his evocation in *Rhetorical Foundations* of Gérard Genette's structuralist analysis of Marcel Proust's narrative suggests an important overlap of the political and the literary in the idea of rhetoric, which Roland Barthes referred to as the 'empire of signs'.⁷ Laclau's main point is that from the point of view of the making of collective will they are all – politics, affect, rhetoric – made out of and/or deploy the same matter: discourse, words.

As with Lacan's version of psychoanalysis, Laclau, also following in the footsteps of Roman Jakobson's linguistic studies of aphasia, centres his reflections on the rhetorical figures of *metonymy* – verbal displacements along a syntagmatic axis of contiguous combination – and *metaphor* – verbal displacements along a paradigmatic axis of substitution – that structure speech, and the ways in which one interrupts and disturbs the other as in aphasic disturbances (58). Folding this structure into his analysis, hegemony, according to Laclau, is produced through a logic of equivalence in which distinct but coexisting struggles – for example, anti-racism and wage demands – are recombined and identified with the same political actor – for example, a trade union – such that 'the relation of *contiguity* will start to shade into one of *analogy*, the *metonymy* into a *metaphor*' and substituted.⁸

In this 'rhetorical displacement' of one axis (the syntagmatic) into another (the paradigmatic), heterogeneous corporate demands – anti-racism, on the one hand; improved wages, on the other – become partially de-particularized as they are both increasingly linked with trade union activism, which, on taking on both demands, is itself also transformed politically into more than just a representative of labour or class interests. A new 'people' thus begins to emerge, according to Laclau, articulating more than corporate demands (the contiguous differences he associates with the figure of metonymy), as they fuse (through metaphoric substitution) into hegemonic ones. In this way the 'empty signifier' of such equivalence – the names of 'Hugo Chávez' or 'General Perón', for example⁹ – becomes the locus of populist political attachment: a surface of affective inscription become the subject of political change. The relation of language (understood rhetorically) and politics (understood as hegemonic) thus becomes one of identity in Laclau's account, in so far as each also shares in the partial affective logics of the *objet petit a*: 'rhetorical mechanisms', he concludes, 'constitute the anatomy of the social world'.¹⁰ The desire called politics is structured like a language.

Laclau evokes Genette's analysis of metonymy and metaphor in Proust in order to consolidate his quasi-literary 'rhetorical turn' in a poststructuralist direction. Rather than constituting a binary opposition, their distinct axes are considered as continuous and co-present (as suggested by Jakobson's analysis of aphasic disturbances, which, however, Laclau transforms back into the norm and, indeed, a condition of meaning).¹¹ In this sense, Laclau's poststructuralist version of rhetorical signification, however anchored in the founding tropes of metonymy and metaphor, may be more akin to Barthes's and Jacques Derrida's notions of 'text' and 'writing' than to, for example, structuralism's 'utterance'; standing to the latter as an example of 'its philosophical comprehension and the elaboration of its consequences',¹² in the form of something like a tropological translational grammar. This translational rhetorical relay of affects into politics through language, and back, is what appears to be new in *The Rhetorical Foundations*, although its *telos* – hegemony – remains the same as in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* and *On Populist Reason*. According to Genette, 'only the mutual crossing of a metonymic net and a metaphoric chain ensures the coherence, the necessary cohesion of *text*'. More,

[w]ithout metaphor Proust... says, there are no true memories ... without metonymy, there is no chaining of memories, no *history*, no novel. For it is metaphor that retrieves lost Time, but it is metonymy that reanimates it, that puts it back in movement.... So here, only here – through metaphor but *within* metonymy – it is here that the Narrative (*Récit*) begins. (54–5)

Here too, then, with the figural production of narrative – and the writerly undoing of the opposition between metonymy and metaphor – Laclau's own political rhetoric of the social also begins.¹³

It is the figure of catachresis, however, that specifically grounds the translational textual mechanics of Laclau's rhetorical turn and his desire to produce a rhetorical ontology of the social that is inherently political. Catachresis describes the action of the 'empty signifier', the point of convergence and translation of metonymic difference in equivalence and its metaphoric projection – as narrative in Proust, according to Genette, but as hegemony in Gramsci, according to Laclau. As he proceeds to build his rhetorical ontology, however, the figure of catachresis is made to bear a considerable conceptual burden, for it equally grounds signification as such. The linchpin of Laclau's theoretical invention, catachresis is its master trope: like metaphor, it too is a figure

Marzo
Castro?
Vinas?
XX

Lucha Obrera

Año 7 - Nº 3 (Segunda Época) 28 DE OCTUBRE DE 1964 Precio \$ 10
Director: ERNESTO LACLAU - Dirección y Administración: CONDOSA 1234 - CAPITAL
PERIODICO SEMANAL / APARECE TODOS LOS MIERCOLES

A

que se distinguen entre sí por la forma de su estructura... (text continues)

que se distinguen entre sí por la forma de su estructura... (text continues)

La revolución obrera del pueblo... (text continues)

Para el gobierno... (text continues)

Para el gobierno... (text continues)

Para el gobierno... (text continues)

Los Nubarrones de Marzo

El problema es que la actividad... (text continues)

Marzo y la U.C.R.P.

La U.C.R.P. es una fuerza... (text continues)

Marzo y las Fuerzas Populares

Las fuerzas populares, en cambio... (text continues)



al pionero dinamizador y las celebraciones de la colonización judía.

Inmigración y destino agrícola son evidentemente las bases de la construcción histórica argentina que un gobierno retardatario, antipopular y nostálgico pueden tener en

del diputado Pedrini que lo haría aparecer como desautorizado por una guarnición local.

El 15 de septiembre los secretarios de las tres armas dieron un comunicado ratificando la política "libertadora" del 55; en esa oportunidad el Secretario político del Ejército, general Onganía, no se pronunció; ahora lo hace contestando al diputado Pedrini sobre la cuestión planteada en el Chaco que analizamos en otra parte de este periódico. Recuerda entonces Onganía al pueblo argentino la verticalidad de la institución castrense, su unidad en los objetivos y decisiones, y, sobre todo, demuestra que la unidad castrense pasa en este momento por su odio a Perón y a los movimientos populares.

al cierre

ta, mientras el movimiento obrero está en pie de guerra y la crisis industrial a límites inenarrables.

O la nota básicamente interesante la da el Comandante en Jefe del Ejército por supuesto no es pero es la respuesta dada a las declaraciones

IGNORAMOS si el general Onganía —cristiano y excelente padre de familia— halla o no relación entre su prepotencia autoritaria y estas estadísticas difundidas por el intendente de Matanza: "De nada 180 chicos en edad escolar, 3 son enfermos del pulmón". Podrá argumentar que en ese partido grandilocuente, le

índice de mortandad infantil saltó del 26 por mil al 100 por mil. ¿Desde cuándo? ¡Pues, desde que los sucesivos Ongánias suplantaron la guerra por la remoción de símbolos populares, que es su guerra! En números (que no mientan): desde 1955.

Mientras Onganía contribuye a matar a los hijos (ajenos) su prócerul chaqueño quiere matar a los padres. Y aunque por dios no hay duelo, sugerimos las armas; la alibondija envenenada. Los duelistas se sientan a la mesa, ponen un plato con una alibondija rociada en cianuro, revolean la monedita, y el que pierde se la come. Arriaríamos que este procedimiento es el único que por nuestra parte aceptaríamos si algún damnificado quiere llevarnos al campo del honor.

Y ya que de muertes habla mos, mucho nos congratulamos de que el intercambio de balas en el Canal de Beagle sólo haya victimado a uno que otro pingüino. Al parecer, por un "error" los de la armada se timoraron entre ellos. Por suerte, la puntería era tan mala como la visibilidad.

PRESUPUESTO UNIVERSITARIO Y LUCHAS NACIONALES

la crítica al monopolio del comercio de las carnes en el interior, las conquistas laborales del metalismo, no cuestionaban la estructura agropecuaria de la Argentina, ligada esencialmente al comercio exterior y que en razón de la renta diferencial acumulada revela una riqueza que le permite expandir al consumo de su clase dominante y aún sustentar a amplios sectores de clases medias.

De ahí que todas estas movilizaciones y campañas del pasado midieran, en muchos casos, alcanzar éxitos sin implicar un paso hacia adelante en el desarrollo de las fuerzas productivas del país. En esta medida, todos los sectores, ya fueran representantes de la oligarquía dominante, ya de sus socios nuevos —uno de los cuales era la intelectualidad "progresista"—, estuvieron hermanos por intereses básicos comunes, como lo revelaron en la Unión Democrática forjada en oposición a una nueva Argentina industrial y orientada hacia el mercado interno.

Ahora bien, en los últimos años el deterioro en los términos del intercambio, unido al desmantelamiento de los organismos defensivos de nuestra economía y, en consecuencia, a la progresiva crisis industrial, hace que las reivindicaciones reivindicadas de los sectores medios sean cada vez más difícilmente alcanzables dentro de la estructura misma del sistema. Las movilizaciones estudiantiles, por tanto, que antes realizaban un camino circular que comenzaba y terminaba dentro del sistema oligárquico, que se realizaban por empujones de espaldas y en oposición al pueblo, tienden a cambiar de signo.

Pedir mayor presupuesto para las Universidades equivale, en las condiciones de la Argentina de 1964, a pedir un cambio de estructuras en el país, no para adelante en el desarrollo de las fuerzas productivas nacionales, puesto que las anteriores fuentes de riqueza ya no existen y nueva que, como la Juventud Universitaria de Trujillo, Nacional la señaló en una reciente declaración, es una utopía imaginar una Universidad floreciente en un país en ruinas. Así, una vez más, las banderas y reivindicaciones democráticas, en un país atrasado, tienden a transformarse en el curso de la lucha en banderas revolucionarias.

Para pedir un cambio de estructuras se tienden a mirar, a la larga, a todos los sectores interesados en el mismo, es comenzar a pensar el propio destino al de los movimientos estudiantiles, es reiniciar la revisión crítica a sus estos objetivos. Es, por primera vez y desde hace décadas, trazar un puente hacia la unidad entre el movimiento estudiantil y el movimiento obrero. La C.G.T. ha reconocido el significado implícito de estas reivindicaciones al añadir a las suyas un más alto presupuesto nacional.

En duda que buena parte de las actuales direcciones estudiantiles no son conscientes de las implicancias de sus movilizaciones y que las han limitado en el más bajo nivel político imaginable. Para reformistas gordos, estalinistas y humanistas de derecha, se trata de una movilización liberal más que problema a un Gobierno al que, en definitiva, apoyan. Pero según el significado de una movilización hecha por la interacción de sus direcciones, es hacer el juego a la oligarquía y al imperialismo. El curso mismo de la lucha se estructurará de ir mostrando las potencialidades internas de la misma y de ir comiendo las bases para un reagrupamiento de la Reforma Universitaria, unida esta vez, como en sus comienzos en 1958, a las fuerzas revolucionarias del pueblo argentino.

of substitution, a misnaming that nevertheless names ‘an empty place’, the unnameable limits of signification (as well as the Real in psychoanalytic terms). In this sense, the ‘empty signifier’ marks the moment of signification’s necessary closure (essential for meaning to take place at all), in which ‘the meaningless condition of meaning’ – what might here be referred to as the logic of *différance* – is stalled and represented. For this reason, according to Laclau, catachresis ‘is inherent to the figural as such’, describing the way in which the ‘empty signifier’, metonymically a particular among differing-and-deferring particulars, is ‘split’ at the same moment it metaphorically (mis)represents the whole: ‘it is this double role’, Laclau adds, ‘that is at the root of all tropological displacement’ (64–5). Having previously set out the populist conditions of the political *qua* hegemonic articulation and institution of the social in *On Populist Reason*, now, as such conditions are folded into an account of catachrestical signification, a politicized ‘rhetoricity’ becomes for Laclau ‘coterminous with the very structure of objectivity ... equivalent to the social production of meaning – that is, to the very fabric of social life’ (65). Rhetoric, in other words, becomes all-encompassing (subjectivizing) affective performance and (objectivizing) action, reconfiguring the social.¹⁴ Laclau does not, quite, conceptually produce a semiotic idealism so much as a rhetorical materialism of the subject grounded in the tropological – that is, figural – dynamics of language: centred on the futural ‘now’ of political action, in so far as it is also a theory of collective will, it resembles a voluntarism of sorts. This is mainly because of its scant attention to the critique of political economy: to the equivalential logic (and digitalized rhetorics?) of capital, for example, as it informs discourse via new technologies of communication and representation. This has not always been the case.

Populism

More often than not, Laclau builds his analyses through a critical engagement with Marxist traditions, the touchstone historically and theoretically of his work. Apart from presenting itself as a rhetorical development of Gramsci’s theory of hegemony, reflections on the work of Lenin, Trotsky and Sorel as symptomatic of problems to be overcome are crucial to Laclau’s thought, and they continue to pervade all of the essays in *The Rhetorical Foundations*, as they do his previous volumes, especially *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. All three of these thinkers are, in other words, anti-hegemonic thinkers, who nevertheless

symptomize the political and theoretical necessity of hegemony. Rhetorically, according to Laclau, Sorel’s reflections on the myth of the ‘general strike’ as revolutionary form are contentless, producing ‘one of the purest examples of ... an “empty signifier”’. This is because the particular contents of any specific struggle or strike are to all intents and purposes irrelevant to the myth of ‘the strike’ itself. ‘We are faced’, according to Laclau, ‘with a pure metaphorical reaggregation which is not interrupted by any metonymical plurality’ – it contains, in other words, no real demands; thus ‘the revolutionary break does not proceed through equivalence but through absolute identity’, leaving all particularity and each actual strike untouched (73).

In other words, Sorel’s ‘general strike’ is pure metaphor. Leninism, in contrast, inhibits metaphORIZATION in its insistence on metonymic particularity – that is, on class identities (bourgeois, peasant, but most importantly proletariat) and their supposedly particular historical tasks. Even with the clear recognition that a weak bourgeoisie in Russia could not carry these tasks through, and that they were therefore to be taken up by the working class (as theorized, for example, in Trotsky’s account of ‘permanent revolution’),

Leninist strategy was designed to prevent the exceptional task from becoming the site of the construction of a new subjectivity. The class nature of the proletariat had to remain unchanged.

The Leninist stress on the metonymics of class thus inhibits the possibility of the process of metaphorization associated with the production of the all-important empty signifier for Laclau. This is because it would involve the partial emptying out of proletarian identity – that is, its de-universalization – in favour of the emergence of a new hegemonic – possibly even working-class-led – version of a ‘people’. Despite Leninism’s recognition of the anomaly of Russian history with regard to conventional Marxist accounts, ‘the metonymic subversion of the differential space of Marxist teleology’ – the administrative zero-degree of rhetoricity characterizing Second International Marxism based, according to Laclau, on Marx’s explanation of the course of history through stages in the *1859 Preface* (that old chestnut!) – ‘has to remain visible, to the point of making impossible the movement towards its metaphorical *telos*’: evolutionary socialism (74–5).

It is this combination of uneven development in history, on the one hand, and its political effects

at the level of the identity of the subjects of social transformation, on the other, that constitutes the core of Laclau's critical concerns – arguably from its beginnings, and certainly at its end. In this context, Gramsci's concepts of hegemony and collective will provide the partial logics of equivalence that potentially transcend the political 'disturbances' of metonymy by over-metaphorization (Sorel) and metaphor by over-metonymization (Leninism) in the name ('empty signifier') of the popular democratic. Furthermore, it is this ability of Gramsci's, theoretically and politically to incorporate questions of uneven development (passive revolution, wars of position and manoeuvre, the Southern Question – which undo Marxism's traditional historicism and political teleology) into his conceptualization of politics that Laclau identifies with – that is, Gramsci's famous account of the Bolshevik Revolution as a 'revolution against *Capital*'. Such questions, associated with the historical experience of imperialism and dependency, are indeed the key to the continuity of Laclau's thought.

Lucha Obrera

To understand the development of Laclau's thought historically, it is important to return to *Politics and Ideology* – another Janus-faced, in-between work of conceptual labour, and perhaps his most important. For, unlike *Rhetorical Foundations*, it is quite visibly, in retrospect, a work of transition. It looks forward to the generalization of populism as the condition of, first, a hegemonized and, second, a rhetoricized conception of politics, as well as to his voyage, or writing, *out* of Marxism with his partner Chantal Mouffe. However, it also looks further back to Laclau's earlier writings as an economic historian and political militant in Argentina during the 1960s (before his move to the UK to complete his studies, encouraged by Eric Hobsbawm).

This uncollected work consists mainly of short newspaper editorials for the weekly newspaper *Lucha Obrera* (*Workers' Struggle*) of the more or less Trotskyist Partido Socialista de la Izquierda Nacional (PSIN – Socialist Party of the National Left), which he edited, along with a few short essays for the PSIN's theoretical journal *Izquierda Nacional*, and one or two articles in more academic journals. It reveals Laclau's early concern for the conceptualization of history, for the question of periodization from the perspective of uneven development, for history as an academic discipline, and for the conditions of proper political thought and strategy. In 'Historical

Consciousness and Petty-Bourgeois Leftism', for example, a short article written for *Izquierda Nacional*, he fulminates against the 'petite bourgeoisie' for its lack of a sense of time, both historical and political – an epistemological topic he would pursue in *Politics and Ideology* as an Althusserian concern for 'science' and the correct specification of regional concepts of the 'political' and 'economic' instances of the social – the pursuit, in other words, of class struggle at the level of theory.¹⁵

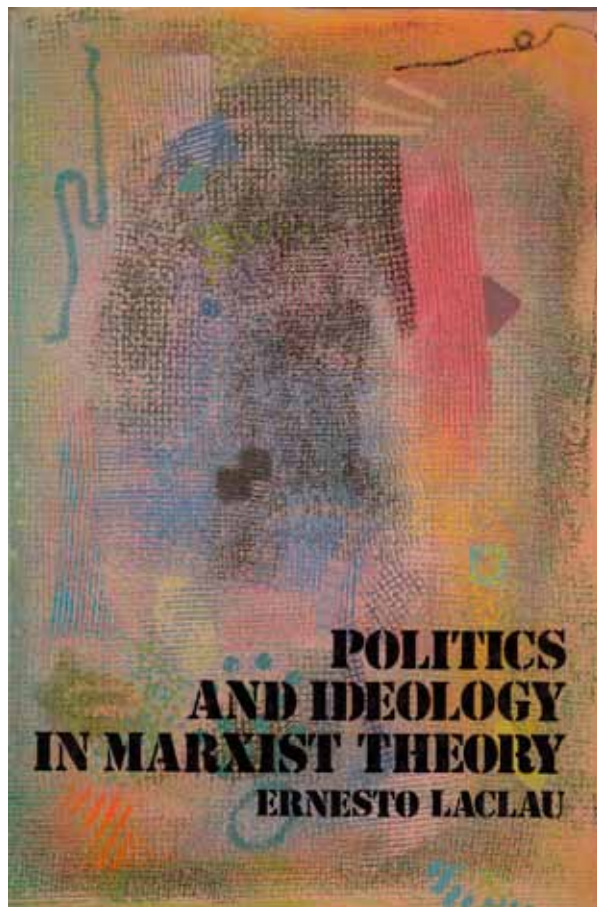
'Just as 1 May is the international day of the working class, 17 October is the defining date of the Argentine proletariat.' So writes Laclau in an editorial for *Lucha Obrera*, dated 15 October 1963.¹⁶ At the time of writing, he was making several important points at once. He reminds his readers, for example, that Peronism had been banned as a political movement since the overthrow of General Perón's democratic government in 1955, delegitimizing all governments in the years since.¹⁷ In the 1960s, Laclau was a – reportedly charismatic – student leader at the University of Buenos Aires, as well as a militant in the PSIN. The PSIN shared with an emerging New Left focused on national politics in the wake of the Cuban Revolution an interest in the particular configuration of Argentina as an agrarian capitalist nation *without a bourgeoisie* (that is, as configured by a passive 'bourgeois' revolution), or at least the absence of a modernizing one (uninterested, that is, in the development of the forces of production).

In other words, Argentina – and the rest of Latin America in this regard – was defined by a similar set of historical 'anomalies' as Russia had been.¹⁸ However, the Peronist movement, emerging out of a process of dependent (import-substitution) industrialization from the 1930s on, produced a real shift in this situation. This was another of the issues Laclau's editorials in *Lucha Obrera* sought to bring to its readers' attention: with Peronism an organized industrial working class makes its presence felt in the political sphere, urbanizing, democratizing and thus transforming it completely. (Eva Perón was fundamental in this regard – mobilizing plebeian affect, for example – although Laclau very rarely mentions her.¹⁹)

With the historic appearance of an industrial proletariat, in other words, the historically non-synchronous appeared to have been synchronized in PSIN's still developmentalist perspective, bringing socialism into Argentina's political horizon. From the point of view of the PSIN, all revolutionary politics was thus necessarily informed by the

experience of populism, and indeed their political platform and ‘immediate tasks’ consisted in an anti-nationalist and socialist *extension* (specifically, the demand for a ‘popular workers government’ throughout Latin America) of Peronism’s own populism: economic independence, political sovereignty and social justice.²⁰ Peronism thus feeds Marxist politics – an order that, over time, Laclau will reverse, maintaining a commitment to Marxism, but principally as a resource to theoretically negate, and to feed the generalization of populism to the political as such.

Such, nevertheless, is the historical experience of populism, and its relation to Marxism, that Laclau



starts from and develops in *Politics and Ideology*: beginning with a concern for ideological form and structural overdetermination within contexts of crisis (in the footsteps of Althusser), he gives the theory of permanent revolution a populist twist – incorporating democratic revolution or ‘popular democratic interpellation’ (state-and-people relations of domination) into class struggle (bourgeoisie-and-proletariat relations of production) – so as to construct a theory of *double articulation*. An attempt to overcome class reductionism whilst maintaining the relations of production as a social determination, it suggested

an important theoretical advance.²¹ Read from the perspective of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*’s much trumpeted ‘post-Marxism’, however, Laclau’s classical essay ‘Towards a Theory of Populism’, with which *Politics and Ideology* concludes, provides the theoretical space for its subsequent theoretical redevelopment through a ‘discursivist’ reconfiguration of the Gramscian concept of ‘hegemony’ in which ‘relations of domination’ – and democratic demands (politics and ideology) – definitively decentre and displace ‘relations of production’ and class struggle (economic structure).

‘Towards a Theory of Populism’ was primarily influential as the starting point for Stuart Hall’s account of Thatcherism as a form of ‘authoritarian populism’. Indeed, Laclau’s Althusserian approach to populism presented it as a contribution to the theory of ideology, conceived regionally, as a relatively autonomous instance of the social. This brings us to what is left behind in *Politics and Ideology*, as symptomized in its compositional structure: if its concluding chapter, ‘Towards a Theory of Populism’, looks forward to the idea’s formalization as a condition of the political and, now, rhetorical institution of the social, its first chapter looks back to Laclau’s interests in the history – and periodization – of economic structures as evident in the title of the volumes first chapter: ‘Feudalism and Capitalism in Latin America’. This is a critique of Andre Gunder Frank’s account of the history of capitalism in the region defined, however, as a system of *circulation*, rather than as a mode of *production* with its defining form of surplus appropriation.

For Frank, Latin America had, since its colonial inclusion within a world mercantile order, always been capitalist and never feudal as such. This is the conceptual site of their disagreement. Nevertheless Laclau agrees with Frank’s critique of post-Third International accounts of Latin America anchored in a ‘dualist thesis’, and whose political conclusion was Communist support for modernizing bourgeoisies ‘to complete their historical tasks’. For his part, Laclau rather looks to a more complex analysis of coexisting modes of production subordinated to an overarching capitalist ‘economic system’ producing the kind of historical ‘anomalies’ described above in both Russia and Argentina.

It is this insistence on the analysis of the specificities of distinct experiences of capital that wanes in Laclau’s final essays in *Politics and Ideology*, including ‘Towards a Theory of Populism’. This is a waning of the economic that arguably also informs

Hall's subsequent analysis of Thatcherism. 'Feudalism and Capitalism' has a sister essay written by Laclau, published in 1969: 'Modes of Production, Economic Systems and Surplus Population: An Historical Approximation to the Argentine and Chilean Cases'.²² It rehearses similar critical and theoretical issues and contains most of the criticisms of Gunder Frank made in 'Capitalism and Feudalism'. The difference lies in its detailed analysis and theoretical account of 'surplus population', a term Laclau counterposes to instrumentalist deployments of Marx's idea of a 'reserve army of labour' (a topic whose importance has been reiterated recently by Fredric Jameson in his *Representing Capital*).²³ The point is that Laclau produces his concept from a critical engagement with the historical 'anomalies' produced by the articulation of different modes of production within an overarching capitalist system. This other essay, however, is not included in *Politics and Ideology*. This is arguably because it had by then (1977) already begun, definitively, to belong to Laclau's intellectual past. Ironically, this waning of economic history in Laclau's work tends to erase the very historical conditions of his continuous critical concern for, and focus on, supposedly 'anomalous' forms such as populism.

Notes

1. Laclau's essay on Paul de Man, 'The Politics of Rhetoric', originally published in 2001, already rehearsed some of these new – rhetorical – ideas.
2. See Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, Verso, London and New York, 1999, pp. 122–7.
3. Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, Verso, London and New York, 2005, p. 116. As I have suggested in my review of *On Populist Reason*: 'Seen from the point of view of the present, this is Laclau's intellectual project: the translation of "populism" into "politics" via "hegemony".' See John Kraniauskas, 'Critique of Pure Politics', *Radical Philosophy* 136, March–April 2006, p. 48.
4. *On Populist Reason*, p. 111.
5. Here is registered Laclau's intellectual closeness to Žižek – as evidenced previously in *New Reflections* – as well as his subsequent distance.
6. *On Populist Reason*, p. 116. See also Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959–1960*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter, Routledge, London, 1999.
7. Roland Barthes, 'L'ancienne rhétorique', *Communications* 16, 1970, pp. 172–223.
8. *On Populist Reason*, p. 109.
9. Both are army men, suggesting a relation between populism and the military – and war – that is worth exploring. See, for example, León Rozitchner, *Perón: entre la sangre y el tiempo*, Centro Editor de América Latina, Buenos Aires, 1985.
10. *On Populist Reason*, p. 110.
11. Just as in *On Populist Reason* he transforms populism from being considered a political exception to its norm.
12. Peter Osborne, 'The Postconceptual Condition', *Radical Philosophy* 184, March/April 2014, p. 26.
13. This brings to mind Fredric Jameson's working out of structuralism attempting to dynamize Algirdas J. Greimas's *actants* and semiotic rectangles; one important difference being Jameson's insistence on post-Hegelian contradiction versus, as noted above, Laclau's insistence on a Kantian 'real antagonism'.
14. What remains to be done in his conceptualization of a rhetorical ontology beyond such a semiotics is, however – despite Laclau's brief allusions to Husserl and Heidegger – its specifically philosophical and metacritical production.
15. 'Conciencia Histórica e Izquierdismo Pequeñoburgués', *Izquierda Nacional* 6 (segunda época), April 1964, pp. 13–17 – Laclau was the director of the journal at his point in time. (All translations from the Spanish are my own.) See also 'Notas sobre la Historia de Mentalidades', *Desarrollo Económico*, vol. 3, nos 1–2, April–September 1963, pp. 303–12; and 'The Specificity of the Political', *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*, Verso, London, 1979, pp. 51–79. A good overview of Laclau's early work as a historian may be found in Martín Bergel, Mariana Canavese and Cecilia Tossounian, 'Práctica política e inserción académica en la historiografía del joven Laclau', *Políticas de la memoria* 5, Summer 2004–05, pp. 149–58.
16. 17 October 1945 is the day workers occupied the streets of the bourgeois centre of Buenos Aires to protest the imprisonment of Perón by the military junta through which he had come to power: through the creation of new trade unions and welfare reforms he had, in their eyes, become too powerful. Other topics tackled by Laclau in his editorials include: the new middle class, education, PSIN's 'immediate tasks', the possibility of another military coup (which indeed took place in 1966), the building of a revolutionary party in Argentina. I am referring to editorials written between 1963 and 1965.
17. Laclau briefly mentions the importance of Peronism for his thought in the 'Introduction' to *The Rhetorical Foundations*.
18. One might almost say, along with José Carlos Mariátegui's account of the development of capitalism in Peru, that 'el feudo hizo el burgo': bourgeois society was imposed by feudal landowners.
19. See John Kraniauskas, 'The Cinematic State: Eva Perón as the Image of Peronism', *Verksted* 9: 'ISMS: Recuperating Political Radicality in Contemporary Art II Populism and Genre', Office for Contemporary Art Norway, Oslo, 2008, pp. 27–46.
20. For example, the front page of *Lucha Obrera* of 14 January 1963 refers to the PSIN's 'four aims'.
21. In *Politics and Ideology* the notion of articulation refers to the moment of non-dialectical 'synthesis' or totalization – later, in *On Populist Reason* 'an equivalential articulation of demands' – emerging in the wake of popular conflict constituted as political 'antagonism' – later 'the foundation of an internal frontier separating the "people" from power'. *On Populist Reason*, p. 74.
22. 'Modos de producción, sistemas económicos y población excedente: aproximación histórica a los casos argentino y chileno', *Revista Latinoamericana de Sociología* 5, Asunción, 1969, pp. 276–315.
23. In the 'Introduction' to *Politics and Ideology*, Laclau makes an important allusion in this regard, which he does not subsequently conceptually develop in his work: 'the system of connotative articulations in which the provincial Eurocentrism of the Second and Third International had encapsulated Marxist theoretical concepts' (p. 12). This is an idea most obviously taken up recently by subalternist historians such as Dipesh Chakrabarty. It may even constitute a kind of political unconscious at work in Laclau's writing.

Las guerrillas peruanas
Eva Peron y los cipayos
Problemas del magisterio

Lucha Obrera

memoran

Emigración de técnicos
Ocupación de fabricas
Gub. Salteño

Lucha Obrera

ASO N.º 15 (Segunda época)

BUENOS AIRES, 15 de Octubre de 1954

ASO N.º 16 (Segunda época)

Calle 4 de Correo 223, Correo Central, Capital Federal

BUENOS AIRES, 15 de NOVIEMBRE de 1954

Nuestras tareas inmediatas

La izquierda revolucionaria en su momento histórico, se enfrenta a una tarea que es la de organizar a la fuerza de trabajo en un frente único, para la lucha por la liberación nacional y la liberación social. Esta tarea, como todas las demás, es una tarea que se realiza en el momento de la liberación nacional y social. En el momento de la liberación nacional y social, la izquierda revolucionaria se enfrenta a una tarea que es la de organizar a la fuerza de trabajo en un frente único, para la lucha por la liberación nacional y la liberación social.

En el momento de la liberación nacional y social, la izquierda revolucionaria se enfrenta a una tarea que es la de organizar a la fuerza de trabajo en un frente único, para la lucha por la liberación nacional y la liberación social. En el momento de la liberación nacional y social, la izquierda revolucionaria se enfrenta a una tarea que es la de organizar a la fuerza de trabajo en un frente único, para la lucha por la liberación nacional y la liberación social.

Para los revolucionarios, la liberación nacional y social es una tarea que se realiza en el momento de la liberación nacional y social. En el momento de la liberación nacional y social, la izquierda revolucionaria se enfrenta a una tarea que es la de organizar a la fuerza de trabajo en un frente único, para la lucha por la liberación nacional y la liberación social.

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Ernesto Laclau

Ernesto Laclau

¿Termina la pax radical?

El gobierno radical ha terminado su período de gobierno. En el momento de la liberación nacional y social, la izquierda revolucionaria se enfrenta a una tarea que es la de organizar a la fuerza de trabajo en un frente único, para la lucha por la liberación nacional y la liberación social.

Ernesto Laclau (h)

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Crisis Tucumana
Carta de Rauch
Guerrillas Peruanas
Defensa de la C. G. T.

Lucha Obrera

memoran

Emigración de técnicos
Ocupación de fabricas
Gub. Salteño

Lucha Obrera

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BUENOS AIRES, 15 de DICIEMBRE de 1954

Partido Revolucionario y Realidad Argentina

El partido revolucionario en su momento histórico, se enfrenta a una tarea que es la de organizar a la fuerza de trabajo en un frente único, para la lucha por la liberación nacional y la liberación social. En el momento de la liberación nacional y social, la izquierda revolucionaria se enfrenta a una tarea que es la de organizar a la fuerza de trabajo en un frente único, para la lucha por la liberación nacional y la liberación social.

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