

ERNESTO LACLAU RECONSIDERED: re-reading On the Populist Reason

First and foremost, although the aging of this book is older than 2 years, as it is recommendable by the standardized editorial norms, no less true is that interesting discussions and outcome can be obtained when book review reconsiders aspects that has been left behind of classics. The editorial customs to review only hot-press books sometimes obscures more than it clarifies. This is the reason why we launch to revisit Laclau's argument in a re-approaching of *On the Populist Reason*. Even if this text was widely cited and discussed, it rests on shaky foundations.

One of the founders of Essex School, UK Ernesto Laclau triggered a hot-debate on populism which today is accompanied by many voices within social sciences and philosophy. Far from being a pejorative term or a social pathology, populism seems to be encored into the core of politics. It exhibits a way of addressing demands to construct a shared-argument that leads to a common identity. Of course, albeit Laclau does not need presentation due to his contribution, we found that whole of his argument rests on shaky foundations. Despite his prolific and rich legacy, *on Populist Reason* remains as the bulwarks of post-Marxism. This is the reason why a new recent review this book is still needed.

As the previous backdrop, let's remind that Laclau was strongly interested in revisiting the already-existent social paradigms, which to his ends, does not fit to understand the postmodern ethos. Those paradigms that conform social sciences seem not to be enough to captivate the great variety of voices and interpretations which are embedded with "constructions". One of the main aspects of politics relates to the handling of claims and demands. The well smooth functioning of system will depend in how demands are articulated or neglected. Starting from discussing the concept of libidinal needs proposed by Freud and imitation in Gabriel Tarde, Laclau offers a new complex model that combines the chain of equivalence, the meaning of difference and floating and emptied signifier. At some extent, he was widely criticized by some colleagues not only by the lack of readability but for the complex jargons used for a limited audience. Even some post Marxist scholars have agreed that his definitions have no sense in practical fields. While Laclau, likely this is the main limitation, poses his efforts in expanding the current understanding on populism, he is producing guidelines towards hegemony.

Why populism and why Laclau?. The term is not new, it comes from the struggle of Ancient Rome between "imperialist" and "aristocrats" and can be applied to many cases. However the professor of Essex writes in a time where democracy shows serious problems to explain why the prosperity of few ones is based on wars, poverty, and getthoization to the whole system. Capitalism, as he noted, is an asymmetrical system of production where the glory of ones implies the ruin of the rest. Most likely, one of the main paradoxes of capitalism, as his wife Chantal Mouffe put is, consists in the fact that a decisionism as well as Carl Schmitt was the only fertile ground to understand the difficult world where we live.

In retrospect, Laclau constructed a philosophical diagnosis that helps scrutinizing the hegemonic discourse of elite. In sharp contrast of some reviewers of populism, he is interested in evidencing populism is not a cultural trait of Latin Americans but a conditions of politics, used by right or left wind parties elsewhere. American imaginary is alarmed by the rise of populist policies in third world countries, arguing its roots is related to cultural background, leaving behind the real roots of populism. Therefore, the concept should be redefined as an instrument to conform political ethos revitalizing the frustrations provoked by the alienatory forces of capitalism. Focusing on populism as something beyond the deviance, or the psychological pathology but the ways citizens reach reality by means of politics. But this connotation of reality is not the real-world it is limited to what the system produces. Here an interesting question emerges, why elite needs shrugging off populism?.

At the time it is posed as an anti-elitist reaction one might speculate that the same conceptual model can be applied to all possible cases. The populist archetype that serves to explain some settings may be very well used to explain others. A second problem of current literature suggests that it is denigrated to the extent that populist leaders are portrayed, marked and stigmatized as irrational, dictatorships and demagogue. Since elite monopolizes the symbolic resources to weave the nets of understanding, no less true is that any attempts of social upward, by relegated or peripheral classes, is marked as a sign of populism. Social scientist should break this alienatory dimension of language that classifies our hopes and behaviors according to a much wider net of cultural values. If LeBon and Tarde have taught something to next generations, it was that social groups are formed by a sense of imitation (suggestion) which represents a touchstone of populism. The already existent influence of signifiers associates the meaning towards an individual position. For example, words as socialism, democracy or dictatorship are understood in different

ways depending on culture and time. These terms are not real objects that one can explain objectively no matter than social agent. Rather, they are represented by the inner logic each subject has, which was fulfilled by the system and the signifier. The concept of reality does not come from the Environment, but from the inner-needs. We see what we need to see, we understand what we need to understand and so forth. As Schmitt, Laclau`s argument has serious limitation to explain the configuration of ethics. Indeed, he suggests that we allude to linguistic bridges that serve as mediators to apprehend reality. Departing from Freud but ignoring his observations on the principle of reality, Laclau acknowledges the meaning of terms is impossible for peoples. In this vein, we are unable to differentiate the real meaning of things, we are deaf and blind to the truth without mention of the images associated symbolically to them. The networks of meaning, which are based on the circulation of images and meanings exhibits the partial truth that citizens are limited to understand. Undoubtedly, LeBon alarmed that this reasoning is ushered into a psychological perversion given by distortions of language. In view of that, Laclau should depart towards Moscovici & Schmitt to close the conceptual circle. While the former worked hard to present a rigorist project of social representativity, the latter signaled to explore politics from the decision that separates ethics from power. No matter than how cruel an act of government is, the exercise of power subordinates the empire of law (decisionism), what is good or bad is previously determined by rulers.

Nonetheless, Laclau argues convincingly that social order centers on the influence of identification that forges identity. The "US" is pitted against "THEM" in the political dialectics where equivalence means difference. In view of that, the spirit of equality alludes to a symbolic rupture with hierarchy because the asymmetry is nullified. This is the conceptual explanation why the advent on a populist regime, in any country, paves the ways for the advent of conflict and hostility among classes. The allegory of peoples facilitates a process of demarcation, of those marks imposed by elite, in which case, the introduction of a new discourse means a counter reaction.

To here we have offered a guiding reading of Laclau which is simplified in order for gaining clarity. Two are the main problems in his argument, as earlier discussed. At a closer look, Laclau`s development explores the dichotomies of capitalism but tergiversating the original works of LeBon and Freud. In doing so, Laclau neglects not only the principle of reality but also the real object where our perception is going to. The real world is out there though limited to our perception. As Richard Rorty puts it, one of the negative effects of pragmatism was validated by the idea that social order can be organized by the combination of means and ends. The demand for instrumentalism in the circles of philosophy explains how a bunch of scholars (pragmatists) draws a concept of reality, which served to individual aims. For pragmatism, the external world was nothing without the language that can contain it. We are unable to figure what cannot be said. This argument is like admitting objects are molded by our perception or by our internal desires. Social perception fulfills a need, in the same way market offers product to consumers. Therefore, pragmatism consisted in a platform towards instrumentality validated by capitalist system (Rorty 1982).

Secondly, if we start from the premise that system (social system) works by the combination of demands which are fulfilled by the system, logic of instrumentalism surfaces. Laclau, in this vein, puts the cart before the horse questioning what ultimately he legitimates. As Slavoj Zizek & Jean Baudrillard the legitimacy of capitalism is not necessarily centered on the means of production, but in the reason that legitimizes the instrumentality. Last but not least, to what extent Laclau ignores ethics as a main element in his model, suggests a much deeper influence of decisionism. Although, more interesting in expanding a new sense of post-Marxism than in revealing the core of populism, it is unfortunate that Laclau not only does not say anything news if we review the literature of Donoso Cortes or Carl Schmitt, but starts from a biased diagnosis of society and politics.

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