

## **The Politics of Antagonism**

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(published in *Contemporary Political Theory* (2016) **15**, 304–335. doi:10.1057/cpt.2016.8)

In perhaps the last piece completed before his sudden death in April 2014 Ernesto Laclau returned to the concept of antagonism (Laclau, 2015, pp. 101-125). Its conceptual origins lie in his immanent critique of, and break with, Marxism in the 1970s. Laclau concluded that antagonism points to the limits of social objectivity and linked this to an original political ontology (see Marchart 2016 and Hansen 2016). The development of this concept is, in effect, the story of Laclau's theoretical journey. In tracking this conceptual history I demonstrate its continued pertinence to contemporary political theory and link it to the rethinking of representation, to idealisation in political theory, and to the understanding of anti-austerity politics.

### **ANTAGONISM AND THE LIMITS OF MARXISM**

Laclau first considered the notion of antagonism in a 1970 article 'Argentina: Imperialist Strategy and the May Crisis' (Laclau, 1970) analysing the Argentinian crisis of May 1969, which began with a joint student-trade union demonstration in Córdoba, and culminated in a nation-wide protest. It was pivotal to the end of the 1973 military dictatorship. Laclau poses an innocuous question: why did middle class students unite with trade unionists to oppose the dictatorship of Onganía? Since the anti-Peronist coup of 1955 the military had exercised indirect power through control over economic policy, and exclusion of the Peronists from government. Laclau argued that the military propped up agricultural capital and secured ideological hegemony by incorporating the middle classes, trade unions, and key officials of the socialist and communist parties. However, liberalisation of the economy had unexpected consequences. International capital increased profit through the development of constant capital and through economies of scale. These policies impoverished the middle classes and alienated them from the military. As Laclau writes 'history was creating the conditions for a new pole of popular regrouping which was eventually to allow the antagonism between the middle class and the proletariat to be bypassed.' (Laclau, 1970, p.13)

This article anticipates Laclau's later theoretical development. First, antagonism between the middle and the working classes is contingent. Second, a populist alliance is articulated between different sectors of a polity unified in antagonistic opposition to military elite. Antagonism is not drawn in the sand along class lines. Third, political ideology is not pre-

determined by class position. Last articulation of antagonistic opposition requires the intervention of (weighty) ideological signifiers such as Peronism. Despite this, Laclau concludes, optimistically, that the working class will smash the bourgeois state, and replace it with popular institutions of mass power.

If Laclau here relies on Marxist categories, his first major text Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory (1977) stretches these to breaking point. On the one hand classes are defined as antagonistic because of their position in a mode of production. Thus ‘surplus-value...constitutes simultaneously the relation between capitalists and workers and the antagonism between them; or rather, it constitutes that relation as an antagonistic one’ (Laclau, 1979: 104). On this account classes do not become antagonistic in a process of struggle. Populists, by contrast, recognise that in any social formation antagonism is framed in terms of dominated sectors, not classes. In fact Laclau contends that classes are constituted in struggle. Nonetheless, he remains a Marxist insisting *a la* Althusser that ‘every contradiction is overdetermined by class struggle’ (Laclau, 1977, p.106) and that the relations of production are determinate in the last instance. How are these contradictory impulses resolved? The people, Laclau contends, are articulated at the political and ideological level, while the aim of class struggle is to ‘articulate popular democratic interpellations in the ideological discourse of antagonistic classes...Every class struggles at the ideological level simultaneously as a class and as the people... [it] gives coherence to its ideological discourse by presenting its class objectives as the consummation of popular objectives’ (Laclau, 1977, p. 109). Classes are inherently antagonistic, yet populist struggles are not inherently class based. Rather popular struggles are the terrain on which classes operate to win their objectives.

The force of Laclau and Mouffes’ working through of 1970s Marxist theory was realised in Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. The authors argue that political antagonism is not determined by class position. Instead they reconceptualise radical democracy as the hegemonic articulation of different emancipatory demands against the emergent neo-liberal hegemony. This argument was supported by a novel political ontology: antagonism is indicative of the limit of social objectivity. Antagonism, they note, has been conceptualised in one of two ways: as real or as logical opposition. Real oppositions occur in the natural world. In a physical collision for example one or both objects may be destroyed. However, such collisions are not antagonistic. In the authors’ example class struggle is not antagonistic because a policeman hits a worker (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p.124). Logical contradictions, by contrast, are conceptual. In this case the relation of the terms to each other exhausts their reality - logic presupposes the identity of its constituent units, and deductively determines what must be the case given these presumptions. However, logic is inadequate when describing political antagonisms. Political struggles are not the workings out of the rational choice theorists’ game theoretic fantasies.

In antagonistic struggle, they contend, the being of the antagonists is at stake. This contrasts with both logical and real contradictions because in these cases it is what the objects already are – conceptual objects or real objects – which makes the relation intelligible. In an antagonistic struggle ‘I cannot be a full presence for myself. Nor is the force that antagonises me such a full presence, its objective being is a symbol of my non-being and is overflowed by a plurality of meanings. Antagonism constitutes the limits of every objectivity ... [it] is the failure of difference’. Societies are constituted they argue ‘as a repression of the consciousness of the impossibility that penetrates them’ (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p.127). Antagonism shows the failure of objectivity – of rationality, being, identity and language. The argument is reminiscent of Kant’s transcendental deduction but it side-steps the epistemological question. Antagonism is the condition of possibility of the being of any entity, subject or object. Kant precluded this form of transcendental investigation equating it with transcendental realism, seeking knowledge of the thing-in-itself (see Allison, 1983, Chapters 1 and 2). However for Laclau, the conditions of possibility of objectivity are at the same time its conditions of impossibility.

Let me return to the Argentinian crisis of May 1969. Laclau’s analysis, thirty years later, would be similar: consideration of the overdetermined socio-political circumstances, specification of the dominant forms of interpellation, and attention to the moments when a dominant hegemony begins to crack. However, there would be important differences. Antagonism would not be considered in terms of a dominant class. Laclau would reject the claim that in the last instance relations of production determine possible actions within a social formation. Instead, the political actors concerned would have to come to view themselves as antagonists. This contingent antagonistic identity must be articulated to struggles with other sectors. Last, the experience of antagonism as the limit of an existing social formation also points to the impossibility of any social order resolving all antagonisms. The resolution of particular antagonisms does not resolve antagonism *per se*. Political subjects will still experience a lack of objectivity. Even when peace seems to prevail this represents the sedimentation of social relations, which are always – at least potentially – open to reactivation. The revolution does indeed last a long time.

## **ANTAGONISM and CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL THEORY**

Laclau’s conceptualisation of antagonism is, I would argue, crucial to thinking contemporary politics and theory. Here I indicate four potential areas of inquiry.

*Partisanship and Political Parties:* Many critics contend that political parties are in crisis, noting low voter turnout, dwindling party membership, and mistrust of institutional politics. Mair (2013) suggests that this reflects a lack of partisan debate, the de-politicisation and professionalization of decision making, in attempts to quell the ‘dangerous passions’ of the masses. Laclau echoes these concerns: apparent consensus masks antagonisms which are

likely to be played upon through the right wing mobilisation of racist sentiment. In theoretical terms however Laclau offers an ontological defence of partisanship in politics. If antagonism can never finally be resolved and representation always requires the exercise of power, then not only is partisanship necessary, it is ever present. Political parties are one way of maintaining an agonistic battle over the terms of politics. Parties are by definition particular, parts within a nation state, claiming to represent the 'national interest'. Their partisanship is regulated by agreed procedures and constitutional principles which limit conflict that might otherwise ensue in civil war. Parties both transmit (Sartori) and shape (Disch) how the people exercise power. The people have no existence unless 'mobilised into conceiving themselves as and acting as a whole' (Disch, 2012, p. 208) and it is political parties that compete to represent and give sense to, the people. Parties present themselves as if they are not partisans, as if they embody freedom, equality or justice. With rare exception (De Leon et al 2007) this aspect of Laclau's work has not been deployed in the study of political parties. If parties compete to embody the universal, mobilising the passions of political subjects, then conflict which cannot be resolved by dialogue or deliberation is inevitable. In fact it is crucial to any representative democracy intent on vitalising and revitalising its political institutions. Sometimes these clashes require fundamental reformulations of the ground rules within which antagonists engage. To put this point plainly: antagonistic struggle between political parties entails both that the public sphere is not closed down by apparent consensus, and that the ground rules are at stake in the very game they claim to regulate. If the regulated sphere of party politics delegitimises antagonistic debate then it will emerge elsewhere, potentially in forms of violent resistance.

*Representation:* The notion of antagonism entails that politics extends beyond the system of political representation and power. Laclau builds on the work of Foucault, of feminist theorists, and indeed of Marx, to recognise that any area of social life is open to politicisation. The reactivation of previously sedimented relations may put in to question what once seemed objectively verifiable. This extension of the remit of politics goes hand in hand with an empirical pluralisation of political antagonisms, and the claim that representation itself constitutes the object it claims to represent. For Disch deliberative democrats cannot 'face up to the empirical reality of the ideological as a rhetorical process of representation' which entails that independence from partisanship in politics is not possible (Disch, 2011, p. 105). The rationalist ideal relies on an aristocratic account of knowledge which democrats should reject. Even if elected to represent a particular constituency the representative takes these demands into another context where they have to be re-presented, reiterated, and reformulated. Democratic theory assumes that it is the people who govern. This norm allows for governments to be judged insofar as they represent the needs of their constituents. If, however, the people are constructed through complex processes of representation, if imaginative identification with political ideals makes rational assessment of political commitments impossible, if the universal is an empty place open to hegemonic articulation, then the democratic ideal itself is open to hegemonic struggle (Disch, 2011, p.111). I would not demur from this account. I would add that for Laclau political representation is always caught up in an antagonistic battle which seeks to delimit the accepted terms for political contestation, to determine what is proper to the political, and who may legitimately claim to act politically. On this account we can begin to reconceptualise democratic struggles as a demand for equality in excess of the accepted terms of representation.

*Idealisation:* Laclau argued that all forms of apparent positivity are metaphorical. If there is no positive ground to the social then any theory which posits grounds – no matter how

minimal these may be - is *a priori* rhetorical. Laclau seems then to reject idealisation – the assumption of possible rational consensus in deliberative theories; imagined original positions or social contracts; or a true general will. On Laclau's account these are all attempts to neutralise conflict. However, Laclau's critique of these positions does not conclude that ideals are antithetical to political conflict. Recognition that the ideals we defend are contingent is the moment at which an endless justification, the endless struggle to realise and achieve these ideals, is opened. More precisely, idealisation here touches upon ideology. Contrary to those who assume that the age of ideology has passed, that the notion of ideology presupposes a politics of superior knowledge, Laclau recasts idealisation as central to the ideological closure of the social. The most recent form of such ideological closure is 'the dream of the various versions of the 'end of ideology' generally associated with the ideal of pure, non-political, administrative practices' (Laclau, 2015, p.36). If this particular version of ideological closure is rejected by Laclau we should nonetheless recognise that ideals, as empty signifiers, operate to destabilise existing hegemonies, and to articulate opposition to a dominant order. Idealisation mobilises antagonism, and articulates antagonists, against dominant forms of power.

*Radical Politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century:* For Laclau antagonism indicates the end of the idea of privileged subjects of history. The articulation of a counter hegemonic politics depends on a radical investment on the part of subjects who are transformed in the process. Politics then is not simply about the rational evaluation of alternatives, but about political identifications which transform the subject – collective or individual – engaged in political action. Antagonism indicates that the subjectivity of the subject is at stake in any political struggle and that, as Freud noted almost a century ago, the individual is always already a composite of many identifications, rather than an essence unto itself. How is this relevant to thinking contemporary forms of resistance? Both Laclau and Mouffe are critical of the anarchist strands of contemporary protest. Mouffe rejects a politics of withdrawal – whether on anarchist or other grounds – because 'without institutional relays the[se movements] will not be able to bring about significant changes...and their protests against the neo-liberal order risk soon being forgotten' (Mouffe, 2015, p.77). Laclau also rejected the immanentist ontologies which lend support to these ideals, in particular that of Hardt and Negri. The radical negativity of antagonism requires engagement in a war of position aimed at radically transforming 'through an internal process of rearticulation' (Mouffe 2015, p.82) contemporary socio-economic orders. For Mouffe recent protest movements risk moralism and end up mimicking liberalism. They celebrate an ethic of diversity and tolerance while demonizing the state (Mouffe, 2014, 119). Mouffe contrasts this with the politics of Kirchnerism in Argentina where protest movements worked hand in hand with representative institutions to challenge the hegemony of neoliberalism. I am broadly sympathetic to this critique of immanentism in political theory. There is no multitude waiting to arise from its petrification. However, there is more to be said about the form that recent antagonistic protests have taken.

Antagonistic politics must first address how the hegemony of so called 'neo-liberalism' is secured through forms of equivalence which have little to do with the articulation of a popular will. This was precisely what Laclau's acute analysis of the crisis of 1969 in Argentina aimed to do. Note *inter alia* the abstract forms of property ownership and control, the various forms of measurement and quantification, the 'economisation' of political relations, and the proliferation of discourses of quality control all of which negate political participation in the name of value neutrality and accountability. The left must reframe these

apparently neutral infra-structural logics which recast worlds as calculable and manageable assets. Laclau's account of populism is a powerful account of how unity is engendered in the name of a democratic politics. However, populist opposition misses its target if it cannot account for the shift shaping technologies of financial and calculative equivalence. These technologies cement particular ways of acting, thinking and being. They enact forms of governmentality which radically alter perceptions of, and attitudes to, space, money, and the vocabulary of our democratic heritage: accountability, value and equality. Recent forms of protest reject institutional solutions only because the institutions already bypass the democratic imaginary. These are improper protests, protests which do not aim to transform the proper space of politics, but to establish new spaces where politics can once again take place. Thus far discourse theorists have failed to come to terms with these logics, both those of protest, and those of the financial and monetary equivalences which structure hegemony today.

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