

The Contemporary Politics of Antagonism

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In perhaps the last piece completed before his sudden death in April 2014 Ernesto Laclau returned to the concept of antagonism, a theme central to all his published work (Laclau 2015, pp. 101-125). The chapter titled 'Antagonism, Subjectivity and Politics' extends arguments first developed with Chantal Mouffe in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985, pp. 122-127). Here I trace the conceptual origins of antagonism to Laclau's immanent critique and radical break with Marxism in the 1970s. I defend the claim that antagonism indicates the limits of objectivity, and link this to Laclau's political ontology (see Marchart 2016 and Hansen 2016). I then demonstrate its continued pertinence to contemporary political theory thinking its pertinence to conceptualising to representation, to idealisation in political theory, and to the understanding of populist and anti-austerity politics today. While broadly in agreement with Laclau and Mouffe's approach I argue that their work fails to properly account for contemporary protest, and that to do so would require a more considered analysis of so called neoliberal hegemony, and the radical forms of financial and calculative equivalence characteristic of contemporary liberal democracies.

ANTAGONISM AND THE LIMITS OF MARXISM

Laclau first considered the notion of antagonism in Marxist theory in a 1970 article 'Argentina: Imperialist Strategy and the May Crisis' (Laclau, 1970). The article addressed the Argentinian crisis of May 1969, which began with a joint student-trade union demonstration in Córdoba. It culminated in calls for a nation-wide protest, in retrospect a moment pivotal to the end of the military dictatorship in 1973. Laclau poses a seemingly innocuous question: why did middle class students unite with trade unionists in opposition to the military dictatorship of Juan Carlos Onganía? He analyses the gradual dissolution of the military and oligarchic hegemony in the decade following the anti-Peronist military coup of 1955. The military exercised power indirectly through control of economic policy. Sympathetic political parties could run for office, while Peronists were excluded. In effect the military ruled in the interest of agricultural capital but secured ideological hegemony through incorporation of the middle classes, trade unions, and key officials in the socialist and communist parties. The junta's liberalisation of the economy though had unexpected consequences. International capital, particularly American capital, took advantage of the liberalised trade regime and secured profit through technological development of constant capital and economies of scale. Over time these policies impoverished the middle classes and alienated them from the military. Laclau concludes that 'history was slowly 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) Key elements of Laclau’s theoretical trajectory are already present. First, antagonism between the middle and the working classes cannot be assumed. It depends on an overdetermined conjuncture notably the position of Argentina in the international economy. Second, a populist alliance is articulated between different sectors of a polity in antagonistic opposition to a dominant elite. Antagonism is not drawn in the sand along class lines. Third, political ideology is not determined by class position. Fourth, the articulation of antagonistic opposition requires the intervention of ideological signifiers such as Peronism. Laclau concludes, over optimistically, that further action by the working class will break the bourgeois state machine, and replace it with popular institutions of power, run by the masses.

In his first major text Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory (1977) Laclau’s attempt to understand antagonism within the confines of Marxist thought reaches 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). Classes do not become antagonistic in a process of struggle. Populists, by contrast, recognise that in any social formation antagonism is rarely constituted along class lines, but is framed in terms of dominated sectors. Antagonism on this account is only intelligible in concrete social formations with complex articulations of different sectors irreducible to class position. Laclau insists that classes are constituted in struggle not independently thereof. Nonetheless, despite his unease, Laclau remains a Marxist insisting *a la* Althusser that ‘every contradiction is overdetermined by class struggle’ (1977, 106) and the relations of production are determinate in the last instance, in any social formation. If the people are articulated at the political and ideological level, then 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, or rather tries to give coherence to its ideological discourse by presenting its class objectives as the consummation of popular objectives’ (Laclau, 1977, 109). For contemporary readers of Laclau recollection of decades old debates may seem arcane. I want though to emphasise two points. First, his theoretical concerns arose from direct consideration of political struggle. The theoretical stringency of his later work is always concerned to think through political logics and their relation to a radical politics. Second, his work develops through an immanent critique of debates in Marxist theory and was marked by that engagement throughout his life. This legacy is reflected in his insistence that politics is always antagonistic, and in an enduring commitment to a radical politics committed to equal liberty.

The full force of Laclau’s working through of the theoretical furnace of 1970s Marxist theory was realised in Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, written with Chantal Mouffe. Here the concept of antagonism is freed of its Marxist baggage. The authors persuasively argued that

political antagonism is not determined by class position and that in any social formation there are multiple antagonisms and demands. They reconceptualised radical democracy as the hegemonic articulation of different emancipatory demands, drawing upon the classical democratic ideals of equality and liberty, against the dominant neo-liberal hegemony. This argument was complemented by what in Laclau's subsequent work becomes a political ontology, an argument carefully developed by Marchart in his contribution. While particular antagonisms must be interpreted in relation to determinate social and political conditions, no hegemonic order can be established without antagonistic frontiers. What though is the conceptual status of antagonism? Laclau and Mouffes' rigorous deconstruction of this concept is exemplary, and begins with the claim that this concept was not adequately conceptualised in Marxist theory.

The authors note that antagonism has been conceptualised in one of two ways, either as real opposition or as logical opposition. They reject both alternatives. Real oppositions occur in the natural world. Two objects may clash (two rocks colliding let's say) but this is a physical collision, which may destroy one or both objects. However, such collisions are not the same as social antagonisms when the clash between opposing forces is never merely physical. In the authors' example class struggle is not antagonistic because a policeman hits a worker. Logical contradictions by contrast are conceptual. In this case the relation of the terms to each other exhausts their reality, but the identity of the terms is not in question. Logic presupposes the identity of its units, and then deductively determines what must be the case given these presumptions. However, logic is inadequate when describing socio-political antagonisms. Political struggles are not the workings out of the rational choice theorists' game theoretic fantasies.

How then to explain political antagonism? The author's conclusion is far reaching, and much of Laclau's subsequent writing consistently works through the implications of this conclusion. In antagonistic struggles there is a negation of the being of the antagonists. 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. (124). In antagonistic struggles '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 ... Antagonism is the failure of difference' (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, 127). Societies are constituted they argue 'as a repression of the consciousness of the impossibility that penetrates them' (127). Language cannot comprehend antagonism which is not an objective relation but the failure of objectivity – of rationality, being, identity and of language – as such. The argument here is reminiscent of Kant's transcendental deduction but it side-steps the epistemological question. Antagonism is the condition of possibility of meaning of any entity - subject or object and an investigation of the conditions of possibility of the being of objects. As Allison argues Kant precluded this form of transcendental investigation, and

would have equated it with transcendental realism: seeking knowledge of the thing-in-itself (Allison 1983: Chapters 1 and 2). However there is one crucial difference: for Laclau the conditions of possibility of being are at the same time its conditions of impossibility. Antagonism then, as a 'witness of the impossibility of a final suture, is the 'experience' of the limit of the social' (126). From this perspective antagonism is explicable neither in rational nor empirical terms. The experience of antagonism is inherently political pointing to the failure of what seem to be rationally or empirically verifiable claims, potentially reactivating sedimented forms of sociality. Let me conclude this brief discussion by returning to the crisis of May 1969 in Argentina. Laclau's analysis, thirty years later, would in many respects have remained the same: careful consideration of the overdetermined circumstances; specification of the dominant forms of interpellation; and attention to the moments when the objectivity of a dominant discursive formation begins to crack. However, there would also now be crucial differences. First, antagonism would not be considered in terms of a dominant class, and nor would be assumed that in the last instances relation of production determine what is possible in any social formation. Moreover, while antagonism may well take class form in the actual organisation of political struggle this is a contingent phenomenon and depends on at least two further conditions. First the political actors concerned would have to come to view themselves in class terms. This cannot be taken for granted and would depend upon a particular interpretation of the crisis being accepted as the objective description thereof. Second, this contingent class identity would have to articulate the struggle with other sectors, and forge a counter-hegemony by focusing on signifiers which can unify many sectors. Last, the experience of antagonism as the limit of an existing social formation, points to the impossibility of any social order resolving all antagonism. Once the struggle is won, once the regime is defeated, new political antagonisms will emerge, new frontiers will be drawn, and a triumphant discourse will over time lose its identity, its coherence and its signifiatory power. What this entails is that in any political struggle equivalential frontiers will be drawn, and maintained, in opposition to an antagonising enemy. There will be sound political reasons for this in particular contexts, reasons which require prudent scrutiny. However, the resolution of particular antagonisms – the regime is defeated let's say – 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

What are the implications of this rather abstract discussion for political theory and for a contemporary politics of the left? Here I address four areas of political theoretical work in light of Laclau's conceptualisation of antagonism.

Partisanship and Political Parties: The impact of Laclau's ideas have been considered only recently in relation to representation (discussed below) and political parties. Many critics hold that political parties are in crisis, noting that electoral democracy is increasingly characterised by low voter turnout, dwindling party membership, and mistrust of institutional politics. Mair (2013) for example argues that this reflects a lack of democratic choice, with the narrowing of the gap between left and right in terms of political representation, and with the de-politicisation and professionalization of decision making, aiming to quell the 'dangerous passions' of the masses. Laclau echoes these concerns: apparent consensus in all likelihood masks antagonisms which are likely to be played upon through the right wing mobilisation of racist sentiment. In theoretical terms Laclau also though offers an ontological defence of partisanship in politics. If antagonism can never finally be resolved, if any form of representation requires the exercise of power, then not only is partisanship necessary, it is ever present, and political parties are one way of maintaining an agonistic battle over the terms of politics. Laclau's work also contributes to understanding the party form. 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 (express) (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, 208) and it is political parties that compete to represent, and give sense to, the people. Parties, as particular, lay claim to the universal, as Laclau might have put it. They present their platform as the only feasible solution to the many woes which beset the democratic community. They unify a variety of demands, claims and protests against the party in power. They select, refine and generalise presenting a unified front which weaves together these differences. Parties present themselves as if they are not partisans, as if they represent the true interests of the community, as if they embody freedom, equality or justice. They articulate universal platforms, and are caught up in the dialectical interplay between particular and universal so carefully analysed by Laclau. In the extreme they may challenge constitutional procedures which limit their claim to embody the universal interest. With rare exception (De Leon et al 2007) this aspect of Laclau's work has not been deployed in the study of political parties. Nor has the importance of antagonism to understanding the conflict between parties. If parties compete to embody the universal, if they mobilise the passions of political subjects, then conflict which cannot be resolved by dialogue or deliberation is inevitable. Not only is it inevitable – 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.

Representation: Antagonism entails that politics is no longer congruent with the system of political representation and power. Laclau in effect builds on the work of Foucault, of feminist theorists, and indeed of Marx, recognising that any area of social and political life is open to politicisation. The reactivation of previously sedimented relations foregrounds the contingency of all social life, and puts 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. This aspect of representation has been emphasised by Disch. 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, 105) Disch contends that democratic politics is a field of contingent opinion formation. The rationalist ideal, in whatever form it is presented (contrast for example Badiou on Plato with Habermas’s reconstruction of communicative rationality) relies on an aristocratic account of knowledge which democrats should reject. Disch forcibly challenges the bedrock norm of representative democracy which assumes that the representative communicates in undistorted form the claims of those represented. 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 almost impossible, if the universal is an empty place open to hegemonic articulation, then the democratic ideal itself is open to hegemonic struggle. (Disch, 2011, 111) I would not demur from account.

However, as I have emphasised, for Laclau representation as the constitution of an equivalential chain is always antagonistic. Populist representations are antagonistic because they claim to represent that which is not the case, that which is in excess of an existing form of democracy. The democratic subject is never proper to itself and it challenges forms of representative propriety which define the bounds of the proper, the roles, the borders and the membership of a demos. This excessive element is of the essence of the democratic subject, the people. Who though are the democratic people? Aristotle was clear about this. In a democracy the poor, who are the majority, rule. He writes: ‘Wherever men rule by reason of their wealth...that is an oligarchy, and where the poor rule, that is a democracy.’ (Book 3, chapter 8) Aristotle precedes this definition of democracy with a long discussion of what principle one may use to define the citizen. He can find no satisfactory answer, other than a descriptive one, and settles for a definition based upon who happens to be a citizen. In fact who is deemed part of the demos is defined by legal fiat. On what grounds are foreigners, teenagers, prisoners or others excluded? Reasons may be given but these are never exhaustive, and they certainly do not admit of a principle. If this argument is right then representation is at the heart of any consideration of politics. It is a site of antagonistic confrontation in at least three respects: the clash between the parties who claim to represent the people; the attempt to demarcate and define the people; and the representation of those who threaten the people – the terrorist, the communist or the immigrant. But last, politics is antagonistic on Aristotle’s terms, because the poor who are the majority, demand equality. I cannot develop this argument further here, but would insist that the representative excess of the democratic people is intrinsically related to this notion of the ‘poor’. (Devenney 2011, 162-164)

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 - are *a priori* rhetorical. Laclau thus seems 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, and as such participate in the justification for particular forms of hegemonic politics. However, Laclau’s critique of these positions does not conclude that ideals are antithetical to political conflict. In fact the 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 various versions of the ‘end of ideology’, generally associated with the ideal of pure, non-political, administrative practices’ (Laclau, 2015, 36). If this particular version of ideological closure is rejected by Laclau we should nonetheless recognise that ideals, as empty signifiers, can 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 21st Century: For Laclau antagonism indicates the end of the idea of privileged political subjects of history. The articulation of a counter hegemonic politics requires a radical investment on the part of subjects who are transformed in the process. Politics is not simply about the rational evaluation of alternatives. Deliberative and liberal accounts bypass an essential dimension of any collective politics in contrast to radical versions of right wing politics which play on precisely these affective dimensions. Politics cannot presume a subject with predefined interests. Identification has the effect of transforming 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, 77) The authors are deeply critical of 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, 82) contemporary socio-economic orders and subjectivity. For Mouffe recent protests risk moralism, are often unaware of the range of antagonisms in contemporary society, do not develop a real political strategy and mimic liberalism in celebrating an ethic of diversity and tolerance, while demonizing the state. (Mouffe, 2014, 119) She notes that in

Argentina, for example, protest movements worked hand in hand with representative institutions to challenge the hegemony of neoliberalism. I am broadly sympathetic to Mouffe's critique of immanence in political theory. There is no multitude waiting to arise from its slumber, or its petrification, by institutional forms of politics. I agree too with her insistence that a counter-hegemonic politics requires the articulation of opposition from a range of organisations, including parts of the state apparatus. However, there is more to be said, first about what it is these movements protest against, and second about the form of antagonistic protest today.

Any antagonistic politics today must begin by rejecting the distinction between the economic and the political, in order to focus clearly on the enemy of a democratic politics. This is not only a difference of emphasis. 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. Note for example the proliferation of quality standards, the abstract forms of property ownership and control, the various forms of measurement and quantification all of which negate political participation in the name of value neutrality and accountability. Contemporary financialisation is distinguished by the 'economisation' of political relations, by the recasting of the state, of individuals and of all activity in terms of capitalisation. A project for the left must reframe these apparently neutral infra-structural logics which have recast worlds as calculable assets. Laclau's account of populism, of the articulation of counter-hegemonic equivalence, and of the logics of identification, subjectification and of ontology remain 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 because the institutions have already been articulated in terms of logics of equivalence which bypass the democratic imaginary. These are improper protests, protests which do not aim to transform the proper spaces 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 of protest, and of financial and monetary equivalence, which structure hegemony today.

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