

Laclau's Theory of Populism

Some normative considerations

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Laclau's Theory of Populism – some normative considerations

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Ernesto Laclau, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Universidad de Buenos Aires**

The purpose of the presentation is to engage with certain of the criticisms, which have been voiced from liberals against Laclau's theory of populism. On the one hand, I believe most of them can be refuted. On the other hand, I also think the intuition behind the worries should be taken seriously, because they do point to at least potentially normative problems in populism.

Point of departures

Before going into the argument itself, I would like to state certain point of departures for it.

Normatively, I do not think populism is inherently undemocratic, as most liberals claims. Quite the opposite, populism shares many features with democracy. It is only to the extent we reduce democracy to being only – and simply – procedures or specific institutions, populism can appear inherently undemocratic. However, democracy is also and primarily a) the invocation of popular sovereignty: 'the rule of the people'. b) it is exactly popular, in the sense of being to the advantage of the many, not the elite; and c) involves a certain activism or participation. All this fits the logic of populism quite well. However, democracy *is* in need of some form of institutionalisation, in order for different forces to fight within democratic frames. Democracy involves some form of mutual acceptance between opposed identities, agonism rather than antagonism, as Mouffe puts it. (Mouffe 2000, 2005)

Theoretically, I do believe there are certain theoretical problems in Laclau and his theory of populism. First I will mention his *formalism*. Often, he points to something, which cannot be present in any pure form, but then he treats it as if such a pure form was possible. E.g. the empty signifier, but also representation (as we will return to in the argument below.) B) I do not believe in the ontological primacy of the political, and therefore not in the ontological primacy of populism. Populism is not ontological, it is one form of doing

politics – besides others, not least what he referred to as institutional or 'differential' – it reveals certain ontological aspects of our social world, it is not the manifestation, the presence, of them.

Outline of the argument

I want to present considerations on three related dimensions of populism:

First: Representation and incarnation (the problem of the King's two bodies) i.e. populism is a claim of representing the people's interests, the will of the people, and the empty signifier (sometimes the leader) comes to incarnate the absent fullness of the people. The worry from the liberals is that turning the arrow of representation the other way around, so that the identity of the represented is constituted by the representative, is authoritarian. A strong leader forces through his will, rather than democratically representing what the people (or rather different segments of the people) want/s.

Second, pluralism. Here the worry from the liberals is threefold. Relating to the problems with representation, they first fear the construction of THE people (vs the elite) since the people should not be unitary – the 'People as One' as Lefort puts it (Lefort 1988). Second, they worry about individual rights of freedom, and thirdly they worry about separation of powers in the institutional set up.

Thirdly, and related to the question of pluralism, **the antagonistic dimension.** The liberal worry is when populism constructs its antagonistic relationship to the non-popular. In the cases of right wing populism often it is not only 'the elite', but also immigrants etc. that this 'extraction of the (true) people from within the people' is anti-democratic because it excludes what should be included as legitimate positions in the demos.

FIRST: Representation and incarnation

The basic point in Laclau's theory is *the people does not exist*, so it is brought into being by being represented. It is only through the contingent articulation of moments a people is constructed. The moment of representation is necessary, because the represented identity is not full, it is incomplete. There are two aspects of this argument we should take into account.

First, Laclau sometimes writes as if the representative moment could be 'pure', total, that the represented identity could be constructed solely through the representation. This is not the case, it cannot be the case. Representation is articulation, and so by definition working on something which was already there. No matter how scattered, how failed or lacking, there is always some identity to be represented.

Representation is necessary, i.e. constitutive, but still a *supplement* – not a creation out of nothing. In a

sense, this is already an answer to the worries from liberals, because ontologically speaking a complete turning round of representation it is impossible. No leader can construct the people as s/he pleases. However, the fact that it is ontologically impossible is not a guarantee it could not be attempted. Normatively it follows that some kind of relationship of accountability or control must be institutionalised between the represented and the representative. Behind this argument of the necessity of a relationship of control/ accountability lies the claim that representation is not democratically *as such*. There is a danger in the populist logic of totally subsuming the horizontal moments (demands) under the vertical axis of representation/ leadership. This is not a movement from one phenomenon – populism – to another – totalitarianism – but a matter of degree within the same populist/ democratic logic.

Second, the non-fullness of the represented identity is what turns a relation of representation into one of incarnation/ embodiment as well. To Lefort (and to Arato (2013)) the logic of incarnation is necessarily anti-democratic. It stems from absolutism where God gave the King the authority and give rise to the figure of the King's two bodies: one earthly, his biological body, and one divine, a transcendental body, at the same time legitimising his sovereign power, and giving a symbolic vision of the society as a body, a unity.

According to the critics, there are two anti-democratic aspects of the figure of the two bodies: a) it founds power beyond the reach of us mortals, and b) it gives society a unitarian image. Opposed to this image, democracy is the non-coincidence of power with any particular social force – no one can claim privileged right to hold the place of power / to incarnate a transhistorical right to power. For the same reason society loses its unitarian image, and is separated out into a set of different and conflicting spheres, identities and forces. Lefort identifies the totalitarian logic (in fascism and communism) exactly in incarnation, namely these two ideologies' claims to incarnate the true interest of the people – the image of the people as One, whose (objective) interest one force, one instance, the Party, claims to incarnate.

The question can also be posed as one of transcendentalism. To Lefort, and to most liberals, (but also to the Deleuze strands of political thought) any reference to transcendentalism is a return to divinely legitimised absolutism and therefore totalitarian. But this is based on a positivist ontology. If one instead starts from a negative ontology, and see negativity as constitutive, what we have is not a world of 'small' independent atomic identities, but rather a world of ultimately failed, incomplete, identities. Such incomplete, failed identities are in need of representation to be (temporarily) healed. In this sense, the representing moment is transcendental in relation to the represented. It is because of this Laclau, rightly, points out, that incarnation does not disappear with the modern world. Therefore, to the worried liberals we can point out that the line between democracy and totalitarianism does not follow the line of incarnation or

transcendentality. Claiming to incarnate the will of the people is unavoidable and not in itself undemocratic.

To liberals such as Arato, this involves attributing to “the people” or “the leader” “supernatural traits”, which then leads to authoritarian suppression. (Arato 2013, 167). I think Arato is correct in pointing out the authoritarian danger inherent in claiming to act in the name of the will of the people. This is, however, not only a danger in populism, it is inscribed in the logic of democracy itself. Incarnation and transcendentality are unavoidable. Since ‘the people’ as well as any political principle we might endorse, e.g. ‘All free and equal’ can only exist in articulated or represented form, we will always be faced with particularities claiming to be (i.e. incarnate) universals. But the authoritarian danger is still something which should be taken seriously.

I think the theory could get a little further and present more developed answer to the charge. It could be argued there is a difference between pre-modern divine transcendentality/ two-bodies and the modern form. The modern form owes its existence to an experience of lack or dislocation (in general, negativity) and therefore the (quasi-) transcendental ‘elevating’ the empty signifier/ representation of the chain is ‘contaminated’, in a way the pre-modern religious was not. Pre-modern incarnation was entirely ‘positive’, even if inaccessible to us mortal humans. It is the modern experience of contamination, this passage through an experience of the negative, which makes it articulable with democracy, potentially, if not necessarily.

The question is, then, what makes incarnation, the ‘two body figure’ democratic? Laclau states

“What has changed in democracy ... is that ... the revival [of the immortal body] today transmigrates through a variety of bodies” (Laclau 2005: 170)

I agree with his point, but I want to underline, that normatively, democratically, it is important ‘transmigration’ should be understood not only in terms of succession, but also in simultaneity. The transmigration of the incarnation of the will of the people – which is unavoidable under modern conditions – is only given a democratic form to the extent it is pluralised. Any claim to incarnate the will of people, must in order to be democratic, be self-limiting, in the sense it accepts as legitimate other, simultaneous claims to do the same.

With this we have entered the question of pluralism.

SECOND: Pluralism

Obviously, liberals worry about pluralism and for good reasons. The worry regards not only traditional individual liberties, democratic liberals also want to defend a pluralistic democracy (as I do). The place of power should be kept empty, so a plurality of forces can struggle to occupy it. However, populism (and democracy itself) is a logic of the realisation of *the* will of *the* people (in the singular), which is potentially anti-pluralist. The liberal concerns are warranted.

When we look closer into the matter, we face a paradox: Liberals normatively/ politically focus on and defend pluralism, but limit it ontologically. Laclau's theory focuses it ontologically, but tends to neglect it normatively/ politically. I will take my point of departure in J. W. Muller (2016). His main critique of populism, and the reason he deems it inherently undemocratic and dangerous, is it threatens pluralism. Yet there are at least two places in which his theoretical limitations regarding pluralism is shown.

First, in Müller's notion of the 'empirical people', which to him exists as a factual entity; second, in his view of the constitution.

Müller claims populism is anti-democratic because of the antagonism between people and elite (and often immigrants etc.) which 'extracts' what is only a part of the people from the total, or entire people. Against this, he holds a liberal vision of the people as a set of conflicting groups, however bound together by common rules in a democratic constitution. The problem with this figure is the idea of the 'totality' of these groups. To discourse theory such a totality does not – and cannot – exist, and in order to be, it must be (contingently) articulated or represented. To Müller, and to most liberals, it exists in a so called empirical factuality (c.f. Rawls' fact of pluralism). To assert such an empirical totality is not only theoretically naïve, it is also to limit pluralism – at a very decisive point. Hence the paradox.

This also happens regarding the constitution. Again, not unwarranted, liberals fear constitutional changes by people like Orban in Hungary, Erdogan and PiS in Poland (and in Venezuela and Ecuador). Now, to Müller we only have proper liberal democratic representation of the plurality of groups and identities when this representation is shaped through the institutional set up of a liberal democratic constitution, securing regular elections, freedoms of organisation, expression etc. But in this sense the liberal democratic constitution comes to function as the non-plural moment which secures the pluralism within.

To discourse theory any such non-plural moment is naïve. Even the most democratic of constitutions will be an articulation, a representation, of something unachievable. The universal principles of 'All free and equal' cannot be realised in 'pure form' and so any codification in any constitution will necessarily exclude other possible articulations: Pluralism effects – haunts – at all levels, inclusive of the constitutional.

Even though Laclau's ontology does liberal pluralism 'one better' (by elevating it to an ontological status) there is a normative tendency to underestimate the threatening potentiality of anti-pluralism in his theory of populism. I have already pointed to the necessity of acceptance of the *simultaneity* of transmigration of incarnation, i.e. that many political forces should compete over the representation of the people.

Apart from that I will mention the internal pluralism of the popular movement. To the theory this is not really a problem. Since we are dealing with a chain of equivalences, the complete erasure of particularity is impossible. There cannot be a simple identity, and so – ontologically speaking – pluralism is secured. However, history teaches us that ontological impossibility does not prevent strong attempts to achieve it. Laclau seemed to equate populism with democracy, and stated

“It is true that the privileging of the vertical axis beyond a certain point leads to authoritarian politics – let us just think of Mugabe's Zimbabwe – but when this happens we can no longer speak of populism. The horizontal axis has been destroyed and it can no longer operate as the source of political legitimacy of a political regime – which, consequently, ceases to be democratic at all.” (Howarth 2014: 267)

I agree it ceases to be democratic, but contrary to Laclau I don't think one could so easily equate populism with democracy. Quite the opposite the anti-pluralist logic is inherent in populism and must be countered actively with logics securing plurality. Which also means, obviously, not any constitutional change is for the better. The fact that any constitution is a particular articulation, and it would be undemocratic to limit institutional set ups in advance, does not imply any change is preferable. In questions of constitutional changes one should pose normative questions, and sometimes keeping the old one might well be the best choice. Political rupture should not be endorsed for the sake of rupture itself.

The last point regarding pluralism regards the antagonistic split between the people and the elite. Ontologically speaking, this is pluralism. The people is precisely not One, it only exists through the active 'othering' of the non-popular. With Mouffe I also believe democracies are not non-exclusive, and any political order must draw boundaries for itself. The people does not exist as an empirical fact. However, antagonising an enemy is anti-democratic, and with this we have reached my final point.

THIRD: Antagonism

Ad 3) antagonism: I agree with Mouffe (and others) who emphasises democracy's agonistic character, the acceptance of the legitimacy of the opponent – in opposition to antagonism which implies excluding a non-legitimate Other.

Democracies too need to exclude their Others, antagonistically, but there is only democracy if there are antagonistic relations 'within' the democratic political community. This poses a decisive question to populism. Populism is precisely the antagonisation of the elite. Again, we should take the liberal worry serious, and consider the more precise relation – antagonistic or agonistic? – the people holds to the elite. Is the elite, the oligarchy as Mouffe terms it in her new book, an enemy to be destroyed, or is it an opponent to be fought, but also accepted as legitimate? Mouffe avoids the problem in her recent book (Mouffe 2018), but to me, the populist relationship to the elite, to the agents of neo-liberalism, must be agonistic, and it must be fought within the rules of the game of liberal democracy.

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