# OBITUARY

# ernesto laclau (1935–2014)

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doi:10.1057/eps.2015.30; published online 29 May 2015

Ernesto Laclau, who died on 14 April 2014, in Seville, Spain, was Emeritus Professor of Political Theory at the University of Essex. In today's increasingly managerialist academic environment he was a rare example of a first class scholar and a politically engaged public intellectual. Laclau was born in Buenos in 1935, and although he spent most of his professional career in England, he was very much the product of a city which, together with Mexico City, was the intellectual capital of Spanish speaking Latin America. In his youth he was part of the rich intellectual and political milieu of his home city that included some of the most influential Latin-American scholars of the time, such as the sociologist Gino Germani, the historian José Luis Romero and the political theorists Juan Carlos Portantiero and Emilio de Ipola. He was also heavily influenced by the politics of Argentina, most particularly by the phenomenon of Peronism, the political movement named after its founder, Juan Perón, that has dominated Argentinean politics for over 60 years. It was the grip that Peronism held over the popular sectors in Argentina that helped Laclau understand the politics of populism, perhaps his single most important contribution to the study of politics.

While he was best known as a theoretician of populism, Laclau's academic work had a much broader reach, covering questions of post-Marxism, radical democracy, emancipation, discourse, identity and, ultimately, of the meaning of politics itself. Three books particularly stand out from a prolific collection of works published and translated into several languages over more than 40 years.

The first one, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory: Capitalism, Fascism, Populism*, originally published in 1977, is a collection of four long essays that set up the theoretical foundations of his subsequent work. The first three essays critically engage the writings of some of the main Marxist and left-wing scholars of the time, such as Ralph Milliband and Nikos Poulantzas, and the dependentist theorist Andre Gunder Frank, on modes of production, the capitalist state and the nature of fascism. The common thread of Laclau's arguments is his critique of the economism and class-reductionism that still pervaded Marxist thinking of the time.

It is in the essay titled 'Towards a Theory of Populism' that he first outlined the building blocks of his theory of populism and of the discursive nature of politics. In the essay, Laclau developed his arguments against the understandings of populism of both modernisation theory and Marxism. Starting from very different theoretical assumptions both theories equally conceived populism as a political



(355–357) © 2015 European Consortium for Political Research. 1680-4333/15 www.palgrave-journals.com/eps
https://doi.org/10.1057/eps.2015.30 Published online by Cambridge University Press

phenomenon characteristic of economically underdeveloped societies, in which the social classes and political forces that were the key actors of advanced capitalist societies were substituted by amorphous social sectors controlled and manipulated by populist leaders. Against these views Laclau advanced the arguments that would define his theory of populism. For him populism is a politico-discursive logic for the constitution of popular identities through the construction of a political frontier between *the people* as the underdogs and their oppressors (the oligarchy, the political elite, the 'one per cent', the immigrants). Arguing against those who regard populist leaders as dangerous demagogues, he claimed that populist leaders become focal points for the identification of otherwise heterogeneous popular sectors and vindicated the role of leadership in processes of political change. And against those who regarded populism as a threat to democracy, he argued that, although not necessarily democratic or left-wing, populism is very much part of the democratic imaginary and that a populist rupture with the *status quo* is a necessary condition for the construction of more inclusive political orders in societies in which existing institutions are incapable of addressing popular demands or of representing the popular sectors.

His 1985 book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, co-written with his wife, the political theorist Chantal Mouffe, was one of the most influential books of the decade on progressive politics. Laclau and Mouffe drew on Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony to elaborate a sophisticated theory of radical democracy in a world in which traditional class alignments were increasingly unable to define political identities or lead political struggles. Laclau and Mouffe rejected traditional Marxist views of societies as closed totalities and the corresponding architectural metaphor of a dominant economic infrastructure and a subordinated politico-ideological superstructure. Instead, they conceived politics as an articulatory practice and society as constituted by permanently dislocated systems of differences that can never achieve full closure and are only held together by a constitutive outside. Very much inspired by the growing centrality of so-called new social movements, the book called for a re-thinking of the meaning of democracy and of democratic socialism and for a new progressive politics centred on the construction of a hegemonic project based on the articulation of a plurality democratic struggles carried out by actors with multiple, overlapping and unstable identities.

His 2005 book *On Populist Reason* brings together his life thoughts on populism, democracy and the political. While the core elements of his 1970s theory of populism are still recognisable in his latest work, the book draws on an impressive set of historical and philosophical sources to expand and elaborate his original views. Starting from a linguistically inspired theory of society as constituted by relations of equivalence and differences and of relations of antagonism as the defining feature of politics, he argues that all struggles are by definition political because the political is the moment of institution of the social. In a rather controversial leap he argues that since the construction of 'the people' is the political act *par excellence*, and the constitution of antagonistic frontiers *the sine qua non* requirement of the political, the political becomes synonymous with populism. This does not mean that for him all political projects are equally populist, but rather that there is no political intervention that is not to some extent populist.

Laclau was a brilliant teacher and a charismatic public speaker. He gave his classes without notes pacing himself in the classroom often shuffling a handful of coins from hand to hand while he spoke to an engrossed audience. He could present the most complex theoretical issues with extreme clarity and draw from his deep



https://doi.org/10.1057/eps.2015.30 Published online by Cambridge University Press

knowledge of history to illustrate his arguments. For many years, he taught at the Department of Government of the University of Essex where I had the privilege of being his student and doctoral supervisee. His institutional legacy is the graduate programme in Ideology and Discourse Analysis taught by some of his former students, such as David Howarth and Jason Glynos.

For many years, Laclau's intellectual influence was mainly over scholars of discourse analysis many of whom were former students of him working in universities all over the world. Politically, his main references in the 1980s was a circle of mainly London-based progressive British intellectuals that often met to discuss the new politics of the left. It included, among others, Robin Blackburn, Stuart Hall, Beatrix Campbell and Ros Coward.

In Latin America, the neoliberal turn of the 1990s made his writings on populism appear irrelevant for the new politics of the Washington Consensus that sought to marry liberal democracy and free market economics. However the emergence of a new brand of radical populist leaders in the 2000s gave his work on populism more academic and political visibility than ever. Nowhere more so than in Argentina, where he became closely associated with the governments of the late Néstor Kirchner and his wife Cristina Fernández de Kirchner. He was perceived as the main public intellectual of Kirchnerismo and as such celebrated by its supporters and attacked by the opponents of the Kirchners, including many non-Peronist scholars.

In recent years the emergence of radical left populist forces in Europe, such as Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain, brought a renewed interest in European academic and political circles to the works of Laclau. Some of the new generation of political activists in Greek and Spain have publicly acknowledged Laclau's influence in their politics, perhaps most evident in Podemos' division of Spain's political space between 'la casta' (the caste) and 'la gente' (the people).

## About the Author

**Francisco Panizza** is Associate Professor of Latin American Politics in the Department of Government at the London School of Economics. He is the author of, among others, *The Triumph of Politics: The Return of the Left in Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador* (with George Philip, Polity, 2011) and numerous articles and book chapters on Latin American politics as well as the editor of *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy* (Verso, 2005).



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