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## *The Defender of Contingency: An Interview with Ernesto Laclau*

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**Abstract:** Ernesto Laclau, one of the most significant political scientists of the 20th century, talks about his theoretical work and expresses his views on current events. In the interview he enlightens us primarily on his theoretical 'armory', which includes the concepts of laicism, radical democracy, identity and competition. Nevertheless, he also discusses with us about contemporary issues, such as the present global economic crisis, the rise of extreme right wing political parties in Europe and the post-modernism in politics.

The name of the Argentinean theoretician Ernesto Laclau is widely known especially to those who are concerned with the international developments at the field of theory and ideas. Laclau has been a professor at the University of Essex in Great Britain for many years and has taught at several European and American universities as a visitor professor. His book "Hegemony and Socialist Strategy", which he co-wrote with his wife Chantal Mouffe, as well as the "New Reflection on the Revolution of our Time" rendered him one of the most significant figures in the field of political science. He belongs to the post-marxist tradition, is the main carrier of the so-called discourse theory and has been inspired by the theories of Gramsci, Althusser, Saussure, Lacan and Foucault. Two of his books- the "Politics and Ideology in Marxist theory" and the "New Reflection on the Revolution of our Time" have been luckily translated into Greek.

Ernesto Laclau visited our country on May 2008 in order to give a lecture after being invited by the School of Political Science at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki and particularly his friend and colleague, professor Yiannis Staurakakis. His presence constituted an outstanding event for the academic community in Greece and attracted a great number of students from various schools, professors and journalists.

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Professor Laclau accepted our invitation to give us an interview a few days later at Capsis Hotel where he resided. He responded with eagerness, friendly attitude to every question we posed despite his fame and scientific status.

- **In your probably most famous book “Hegemony and Socialist Strategy”, co written by Chantal Mouffe, you attempted to deconstruct both Marxist theory and liberal democratic thought in order to reinterpret them in such a way that they could contribute to a more sufficient understanding of contemporary politics. Which is the significance of the concept of identity for the comprehension of modern reality?**

Well I think that the concept of identity can be analyzed from different sides. One side would be to identify identity with a particularity. There are some difficulties obviously in this type of identification of the two categories, particularity and identity. But on the other hand there are some advantages of this identification because obviously the political problem which presents itself to politics is a problem of general articulation and general articulation has to rely on some kind of category of identity. So this is the way in which the question of identity emerges today. It can be related to a variety of intellectual context but I think that the essential point is that it has no obvious forms of universality which can replace the notion of identity.

- **In your first book “Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory” in 1977 you discussed the populist phenomenon. In 2005 you published the “On Populist Reason” which is also focused on populism. It seems that populism is at the center of your interest. Populism is a broader articulation than others because one the one hand, “the people” constitutes its nodal point and on the other**

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**hand it is opposed to anything anti-populist. In the case of a country which is governed by a populist party what can we assume for the political identity of that people? How is popular subjectivity constructed? In the case of populism can we put in question the de facto existence of a frontier separating two antagonistic equivalent chains?**

I think that we have to introduce a classical distinction: the distinction between *populus* and *plebs*. *Populus*, on the one hand, is the totality of the community. *Plebs* are those at the bottom of the social pyramid. A characteristic of the plebeian mobilization is that they are on the one hand a certain partiality within the community and on the other hand they try to present the totality of the community. So, this distinction is central in all this analysis. The people are, on the one hand, the totality of the community. On the other hand, the people are those at the bottom of the social pyramid who are putting into question the totality of the city that exists. The characteristic of populism is that you have always a plebe, those at the bottom, who however present themselves as incarnating the totality of the community.

- **In Greece, the socialist wing of the political arena in the 80's under the leadership of Andreas Papandreou addressed a populist policy in order to attract the majority of the Greek people. The same party, however, twenty years later, under the leadership of Kostas Simitis followed an institutionalism policy. How can one scientifically explain the reversal of opinions in the gulfs of the same political party?**

I do not know how to answer you about this special Greek case but I can answer the general issue of what you are addressing. Populism is something which works for a while as a way of seizing power from a traditional lead. But, on the other hand, you

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can not have a permanent populism based all the time in confrontation. At same point you are going to have to move to a more institutionalized policy. In Argentina, for instance, at the beginning of the process of Peronism, you have the figure of the *descamisados*, the “shirtless”, the “Sans-culottes” argentine. They were the vocation of this figure, the figure of total confrontation with oligarchic power. However, later on in the history of Peronism you have a transition to what it was called the organized community. And the organized community at the moment in which populism had to reach some forms of institutionalization. So, I do not think one has to oppose populism to institutionalism as two logics which are totally at odds with each other. They represent different moments in a political process. So, there would be no Andreas without Simitis. The two of them require each other. In some sense, at these two dimensions can be reflected the structure of a single party.

- **You somehow equate populism with radical democracy. To which degree these two fields coincide?**

I think that they coincide entirely because by radical democracy I do not understand a political system. By radical democracy I understand that the expansion of the equivalencial chain beyond the limits which are admitted by a certain political system. So you can radicalize democracy in same sense through equivalencies but this is exactly the same thing as creating a popular identity because the popular identity is created through the equivalencial chain. For instance, you have an interpretation which I think is totally wrong, I mean the interpretation of Zizek in which he is saying “Well I agree with populism but not with radical democracy”. That is simply not understanding what the notion of radical democracy involves. He thinks that radical democracy is some kind of left-wing institutionalized liberal democracy

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but there are many more forms of radical democracy which do not pass through the liberal scene.

- **The concept of ‘antagonism’ which is involved in the context of ‘radical democracy’ constitutes a key concept. Would you like to clarify the meaning of antagonism by setting us an example?**

Yes. I will pose the Sicilian example. The case of the landowner trying to expel the peasant from the land and the case of the peasant resisting this expulsion from the land. The basic argument there is that in this type of confrontation you do not have an objective relation between the two poles. The two poles are not the expression of a deeper process which would embrace both but the clash is something which is irretrievable from the point of view of objectivity. And you can think of many antagonisms to be seen exactly in this way. Now, there are forms of relation between the adversarial forces in which the space of representation is there, operating and being something deeper than the antagonism between the two opposite forces. But there are other situations in which the antagonism prevails over a reform of objective representation.

- **You argue that ‘antagonism’ is constitutive of human society. In which way do you theorize ‘antagonism’ through the notion of the limit of the social?**

O.k.. Let’s go step by step. Why antagonism is the limit of the constitution of objectivity? For instance, if you have the peasant and you have the landowner, from the point of view of the landowner the discourse of the peasant is completely irrational. From the point of view of the peasant the discourse of the landowner is equally irrational. So, there is no common measure between the two discourses. So,

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the moment of the clash is constitutive in a transcendal sense. Now, what is the possibility that there is an objective discourse? It is only possible, if there is the discourse of a third man who says "Well, what the peasants and the landowners think is irrelevant because what is happening there is something which escapes the consciousness of the two opposing forces. An objective process, this is exactly what Hegel calls the Absolute Spirit. So, in that case if you have the absolute spirit, the discourse of the third man, in that case you are going to subsume antagonism into a deeper objectivity. But as a result of this, the form of consciousness that the peasants involve in the social antagonism is irrelevant because the antagonists think that the other is the evil. But from the point of view of the rolling of history there is a deeper mechanism which explains how the process operates. So, the whole thing is: if there is this third man, this third discourse which is the absolute spirit, in that case history can be reduced to a deeper objectivity. If there is not that man, the clashes which constitute history are going to be constitutive in the first place.

The problem of evil was at theological terms: if God is almighty in that case there is a reasonable history explaining everything, which is 'the will of God'. But in that case, because there is evil in the world, God can not be at the same time absolute goodness. If, on the other hand, God is not responsible for the existence of evil in the world in that case he could be absolute goodness but not almighty. So, at the moment of objectivity either is present there or not. The way of solving these problems, in theological sense, consists in saying that evil does not exist but evil is simply one of the ways in which God reaches his own perfection through certain process. This later on is the coming of the reason, for Hegel and Marx. So, there is where I think the problem lies.

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- **In the last few years most of the developed and developing countries affront the consequences of an economic depression. Do you believe that this phenomenon could lead to revolutionary action? In other words, could the worldwide economic depression stimulate people's revolutionary consciousness? If such a perspective seems utopian, what could inspire people in order to obtain a revolutionary consciousness?**

The revolutionary consciousness, at the first place is the will of eruption with the whole existing system of affairs. Revolutionary consciousness is not something which is inherent in the consciousness of any given nation. People see that at some point they can not stand the existing situation any longer and have an upheaval against the existing situation. Now, this is never the result of a single determination. It is always the result of a novel determination of many forces. For instance, if you study the Russian revolution, if you go back to the analysis of Althusser, he said that Russian revolution was the result of many things and suddenly all these forces crystallized around some basic motifs which were: land and peace. That is to say, always a revolutionary consciousness is a conjectural accumulation of things. It is not something inherent from the very beginning of the process in short of a teleological way. There are also many forms of revolutionary consciousness. We have a revolutionary consciousness that has to do with a total breakdown or with the necessity of a radical change.

- **The model of radical democracy maintains the idea of an expanded version of democracy in more aspects of social life and of an attempt for constitution and multiplication of new identities. So, someone could assume that you accept the existence of constituted inequality in democracy. But, yet, you did not**

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**develop a theory about justice. Could you tell us the reason why there is this absence in your work?**

The concept of justice is the typical concept of an empty signifier. Because what is justice or not in society is open to an infinite debate. So, if you have the notion of justice, justice is something which has no clear content. But in order to link some content under certain particular circumstances: for instance you can imagine a debate between a fascist and a socialist around what is a just society. They are going to discuss about many possible contents but what they are not going to discuss is whether justice is just or not. Because that has to be accepted as the very terrain of the argument but in order for justice semantically to play that role is something that should not have any particular content. And the content is going to be even to the dialogical effort.

- **So you think that justice is contingent.**

Well, the content of justice is contingent. The category of justice, however, has to be present there from the very beginning.

- **You have invented a new vocabulary (articulation, nodal point, elements etc). What led you to follow this verbal approach? Do you believe that this fact did contribute essentially to the substance or success of your work?**

I think we have provided a new vocabulary of politics which is the result of the radicalization of a set of other vocabulary innovations which mainly come from the gramscian tradition. My intellectual strategy for example has been the opposite of



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that of Slavok Zizek. Zizek has not introduced a single theoretical category into political analysis. He has simply taken the categories of lacanianism and has elaborated them. By expanding the vocabulary of the gramscian grammar, we are obviously introducing a set of new category to political analysis. Probably the effect of this innovation at the level of vocabulary is at root of what people find interesting or attractive in our analysis.

- **It is widely believed that your thought belongs to a post-modern frame. Do you accept this characterization? Do you believe that you are a post-modern intellectual?**

It depends on how one defines a category of post-modern. There is certain post-modernity one link to Baudrillard, which I don't identify myself in the least. On the other hand by post-modern it is understood not as a simply rejection of modernity but as diminution of the epistemological ambitions of the modern project. Yes, in substance you can say that we are post-modern. But, this distinction that I am trying to make I think it is quite crucial in order to understand something. We are not rejecting the whole project of modernity, but we are thinking that project of modernity is something which should be less than the original formulators of the 'enlightenment' were thinking that project to consist of.

- **Someone could argue that the turn to a discourse analysis is post-modern.** But what is understood by post-modern? You can understand post-modern through the rejection of modernity and this is a view with which I disagree. You can understand post-modern through the demerit of the ambitions of the modern project on the basis of contingency and this is a view I agree with.

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- **We would like to hear your views on another current issue. What is your opinion about the gradual rise of the extreme right wing parties across Europe?**

Well I think that rising is lastly the result of the fact that people in western Europe feel that they don't have political alternative. Clearly, in the past there was a right and a left, clearly differentiated from each other. And there was a vote, for instance, fall in France for the French communist party because there represent a vote of protest against existing system of affair. What people have the feeling today is that between the left and the right in a traditional sense the differences are minimal. But we have an over-powerful technocracy and this over-powerful technocracy present new answers, which are a bit more social-democratic and a bit more conservative but there is no real difference between them. So, when people don't fight that from the left come a system of clear alternative, the clear alternatives are going to come from the right. And for instance, many of the traditional voters of the communist party in France today, vote for Le Pen. Because he represents the radical alterative *vis a vis* the existing system. So, I think that political systems in Western Europe are profoundly in crisis. And the crisis is that people in elections don't feel that there are real alternatives. At some point there are important vote for the knowing friends, Dutch referendum was the vote, a vote to protest against existing system of affairs, but unless the left starts presenting a real system of alternative, probably the whole protest vote is going to go in the right-wing direction- in the populism of the right.

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- **Because you are interviewed by two women, we would like to ask you something quite personal. How significant do you believe is for a scientist and his evolution to have by his side-not as a friend but as a partner in life-a great theoretician such as Chantal Mouffe?**

Well I feel very well with Chantal Mouffe (laughs), obviously we have had an intellectual partnership for several years. I don't think that it has particularly mattered that the gender division between ourselves is too much a relation of equal, in order to speak about a gender division. But in other type of partnerships I can imagine that a gender division plays some kind of role. And how this kind of role can be negotiated is always a complicated matter, which passes through the singularity of the relationship.