

# Ernesto Laclau on radical democracy

On a rainy, mid-August afternoon, Excalibur's David Byrnes and Elliott Shiff rendezvoused with Professor Ernesto Laclau at the Sticky Wicket pub on Spadina Avenue. Visiting from the University of Essex, Laclau taught a graduate course at York over the summer. The course, "Language, Politics and Hegemony" was cross-listed in the departments of Sociology, Political Science, and the Program in Social and Political Thought. The course explored some of the key issues facing political theory, especially the role of democracy in radical social movements. Laclau is perhaps best known for his two books. *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory* (1977) is a collection of essays critically focussing on questions of fascism and populism. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1984), co-authored with Chantal Mouffe, is a complex set of arguments which re-establish the relationship between Marxist theory and democracy. In both books, Laclau is unique in creatively developing the practical consequences of European theory (Althusserian in the first book, post-structuralist in the second). Laclau's writings and ideas have also been highly influential in Third World studies. (Special thanks to Stephen Katz for his assistance.)

**Q:** One of your students told us that you enjoy teaching at York. Why is that?

**A:** At York University I have found a quality among graduate students which is rather difficult to find elsewhere. Over the last few years I have taught in a number of universities—in England, in continental Europe, in the United States, in Latin America—and I must say that the graduate students that I have found at York are among the best I have found anywhere.

**Q:** York's Departments of Sociology, Political Science, and its Programme in Social and Political Thought are well known across Canada. Are they well known in England too?

**A:** Oh yes, very much so. Some of the people who teach at York obviously have an international reputation, so I have come across their names many times before getting to know them personally here.

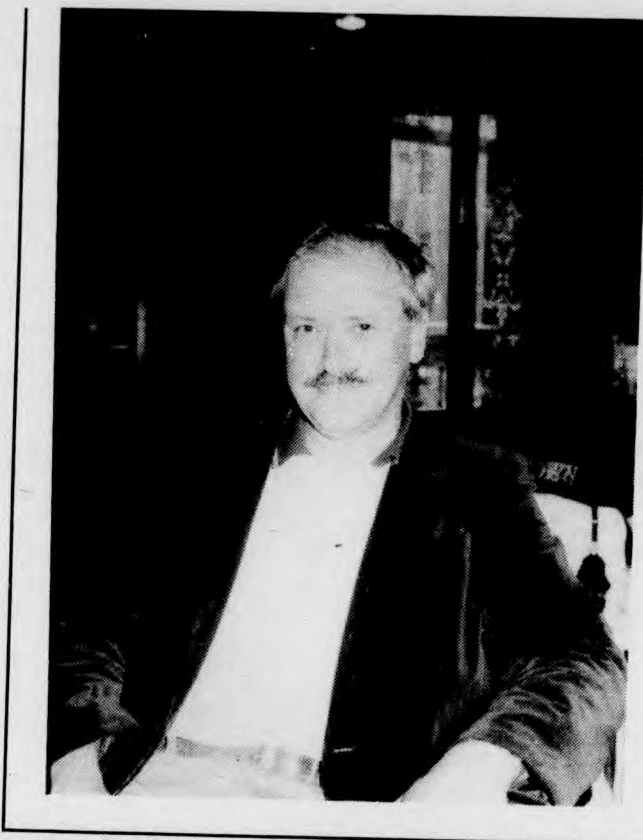
**Q:** Can you tell us briefly about where you were educated and where you teach?

**A:** Well, I'm an Argentinean national. I was born in Buenos Aires in a year I prefer to forget, and there I had my undergraduate education—I got my B.A. from the University of Buenos Aires. Later I went to England to do graduate studies at Oxford. In 1973 I got an appointment in the Department of Government at the University of Essex, and I have been teaching there ever since. But during that period I have left England many times. I have been a visiting professor in the Department of History at the University of Chicago and in the fall of 1978 at the Department of Political Economy at the University of Toronto. I have also been giving courses at the Sorbonne in Paris, in Amsterdam and in various Latin American universities.

**Q:** Could you explain some of your intellectual background, which led to the arguments presented in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*?

**A:** Well, my initial theoretical formulation was rooted in Marxist theory. While I was a student at the University of Buenos Aires Marxism was a main intellectual influence. But, from the fact that Argentina is a peculiar kind of third world country, from the beginning we found a real difficulty in simply identifying social identity and social agents with social classes, as is common in Marxism. For instance, you have a movement like Peronism, which mainly had its basis in the working class and the trade union movement, but which also cut across many other social sectors. There was also the whole problem of nationalism and nationalistic identities which had been presented in Marxist theory as expressing Bourgeois ideology, and there was clearly a popular nationalism in Argentina which could not be reduced to this. So, from the beginning, my approach to Marxism was of a radical, critical kind, and I tried to combine in some way this plurality which I found in my social and political experience with Marxist categories. This led me to an increasing questioning of the notion of social agent as exclusively centred in social classes. And from this I moved to considering a plurality of subject positions, a plurality of social identities which cannot be reduced to social classes. My first book, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*, in this sense, was a critique of what I call 'class reductionism,' a term I coined for the first time and which has been widely used since in Marxist and post-Marxist literature.

When I went to Europe there was another experience which reinforced this critical stance towards orthodox or dogmatic Marxism, which was seeing the proliferation of new social movements which in no sense could be reduced to class-based movements. I arrived in Europe shortly after the 1968 movement and I was in England when the feminist movement started in the early 1970s. Many other forms of social protest and antagonism were proliferating in Europe at that time, especially in Britain, which was evolving towards a sort of multiracial society of immigrants and minorities. Later mobilizations, such as the campaign for nuclear disarmament, were creating a richness of political life which was less and less understandable in terms of Marxist categories. For instance, it was clear to me from the beginning that even when capitalist relations of production were central in all of the society, the type of antagonisms these struggles were giving place to could not be simply located at the level of the relations of production. For example, let's suppose that we have a factory established by an international corporation in some area, which will lead to the pollution of the atmosphere. Where are the more radical protestors going



to come from? From the workers working in that factory, or from the population surrounding the factory whose atmosphere is being polluted?

Apart from this there was a problem of the increasing fractioning of the working class itself, and the fact that you have different working class markets, one privileged market, and markets in which immigrant women, for example, received differential treatment. All this has to be put together with the fact that the workers themselves have dispersed political identities. For instance, you have a worker who is very militant at a factory floor, and then later goes to the neighborhood where he lives and finds racial violence. What is his attitude towards racial violence going to be? And how is this going to be related to the fact that he is a worker? Obviously, here there is a problem of the construction of a political identity through very complex social and political practices. This led me to a deeper study of Gramsci within Marxist theory, and later of Sorel—the two thinkers in whose work a non-reductionist conception of social identity was formulated in its most radical form.

**Q:** In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, you and your co-author Chantal Mouffe argue that a new kind of political environment, a 'radical democracy,' is evolving. Would you explain your concept of radical democracy?

**A:** Let me tell you something before that in connection with strictly theoretical discourses that were important for me at that point. Within the Marxist tradition, the Althusserian emphasis on the notion of overdetermination was very important for me in shaping a non-reductionist conception of politics. The Althusserian influence, together with the Gramscian one within the strictly Marxist field, have been the strongest ones in my own development. Today I think that I could establish some link with a set of things which emerged within critical theory, within the whole tradition of the Frankfurt School, although at that point the Frankfurt School was not important for me and it was mainly through the exchange between elements from the Gramscian and Althusserian traditions that I organized my theoretical discourse.

From outside the field of Marxism, the main influences on me were, on the one hand, some forms of radicalized phenomenology, as the one we can find in the work of the later Heidegger, and the way in which he has influenced the work of Jacques Derrida, and on the other hand the Wittgensteinian tradition of *The Philosophical Investigations*, where there is also a break with essentialism.

In all these theoretical discourses, as in those coming from the Gramscian tradition, what I found was a way of thinking about any kind of social and political identity starting from what we would call a general field of indeterminacy where I think we have a theoretical field in which the question of radical democracy can really be formulated.

**Q:** What do you mean by a 'general field of indeterminacy'?

**A:** I mean by this the following: we can conceive of democratic theory in two ways. Firstly, in the sense of the postulation of some kind of human essence which has to be liberated from external obstacles. In this sense a critique of existing society goes hand-in-hand with the postulation of a human essence. Now, this has led democratic theory to a set of paradoxical situations. What if people in their feelings, will, actions et cetera reject this positive conception of human essence which is present in democratic theory? This paradox can be shown in its full operation in Rousseau's famous and chilling dictum, according to which men have to be obliged to be free. Now, I think the notion of indeterminacy introduced a radical pluralism in the conception of democracy, because you don't try to impose a pre-given essence on social agents; you try on the contrary to accompany the actual struggle of people without trying to move these people according to pre-conceived paradigms.

Now, if you have a theory of society according to which society has a pre-given essence, in that case all you can do is adapt your political or social action to this previous notion. On the other hand, if you accept that society is ultimately an

unstructured field in which the very movements and struggles of people finally determine the social outcomes—then you cannot reduce these struggles to an ultimate reason. In that case society becomes indeterminate, but at the same time democracy becomes far more radical.

**Q:** In your book you identify the French Revolution and the Declaration of the Rights of Man as being the moment in history when the concept of equality came into existence, which created both socialism and democracy, and I guess you believe it is working towards, or potentially working towards, this radical democracy. Did the notion of equality come from nowhere or did it have some kind of antecedents?

**A:** Let's say the following. We had some radical breaks in the past—for example the English Revolution, the American Revolution—but in none of these breaks was there a proclamation of equality in general as the value which has to over-ride all kinds of social differences. Before the French Revolution we had fundamentally a conception of a hierarchical society, and in this hierarchical society what were considered just demands were demands about occupying a particular place in the hierarchy of social relations. The peasants demanded their rights as peasants. The protests were against violations of this particular location within society. With the French Revolution came the idea that men, without distinctions, are the bearers of some rights, and this has had an enormously corrosive effect on all forms of inequality. What we assert in the book is that socialist demands as they emerged in the 19th century, in Britain first and the rest of Europe later—were the result of a displacement of these equalitarian ideas from the field of citizenship, which was a field in which the French Revolution was formulated, to the field of economic relations. So I think we have a cycle of democratic revolution in which there is a proliferation of new antagonisms, and a progressive displacement of these equalitarian ideas to them. I think the key moments in this process began with 1789, when the citizen was considered the actual recipient of the discourse of equality. With 1848 and the crystallization of class struggle and socialism as a political force, there was a whole displacement of these ideas to the field of economic relations, and with 1968 there was a proliferation of new antagonisms and a consequent displacement of these equalitarian ideas to new areas. I think that in the future when people think about the history of industrial society, 1968 will present itself as just as important a point of rupture or turning point as 1848 was in the 19th century.

**Q:** How do these equalitarian ideas apply to or take into consideration the Third World countries that make up most of the population of the world? How can they affect countries under extremist rule, like Islamic countries, that don't have any conception of your nature of thinking?

**A:** Well, two considerations about that point. Firstly, I think that in Third World countries the spread of equalitarian ideas has played a very substantial role, considering that you have economies that are absolutely dislocated by their subordinated form of insertion in the world market by imperialist exploitation and the like. These societies are not able to consolidate the type of institutions which constituted the social achievements of the advanced industrial countries. Also, I think popular rebellion in these countries starts not from fully developed classes, or institutions, but on the contrary from the possibility of people to organize themselves as classes, to organize themselves in institutions. That is to say, in these situations of general deprivation these equalitarian ideas capture greater sections of the population.

Regarding the second consideration, what if these equalitarian ideas do not take hold among different social sectors in these countries? Well, I think what you are describing is in fact what is actually happening in many countries. After decolonization, many revolutionary movements experienced a process of involution simply because they did not have the necessary discursive tools, the tools at the level of equalitarian ideas which could allow them to confront the real situations of subordination and domination existing in their societies. I think that in many countries of the Third World, the process of change I have been describing at some point stopped. They have some basic barriers which permitted forms of political and social subordination to be reinstated. This, I think, is to a large extent because of the weakness of this element of equalitarian values as a positive transforming element. That is to say, in many countries the democratic revolution had found its limit.

**Q:** What do you make of the neo-conservative movement in the United States?

**A:** We have tried to treat this issue in our latest book. The hegemonic formation which has dominated industrial countries since the end of the Second World War, and which is identified with what is usually called the welfare state, has produced a set of antagonistic points. For instance, the commodification of society, the increasing bureaucratization of the ways in which the welfare state has been implemented and the contradictory effects of mass media in generating mass culture—all these are at the basis of a right-wing populism's attempt to associate a set of resentments and antagonisms with an anti-statist onslaught which is conceived along neo-conservative lines. For instance, projects like those of Reagan and Thatcher have a clear economic character, in that they try to associate a set of social antagonisms with a new redefinition of 'liberty' in terms which are incompatible with any deepening democratic aims. So, I think that neo-conservatism, even if it is defeated electorally at some point, in the long run is dangerous to us and has to be counteracted politically and ideologically at the same level at which it is posed, which means going beyond many discourses of the left which have cloistered themselves in a class-reductionist ghetto.