

**EDICIÓN ESPECIAL
OBRA E HISTORIA INTELECTUAL DE ERNESTO LACLAU**

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Laclau, Ernesto (2014) Los fundamentos retóricos de la sociedad, Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 169 pp.

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INTERVENCIONES SPACE, POLITICS AND DIFFERENCE*

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One of the most significant implications of the arguments of Ernesto, and of Chantal Mouffe, from *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* onwards, is that we need to acknowledge the specificity of place and of time: of geography and history. If we reject essentialism and economic determinism then concrete situations must be investigated in their particularity. If class is not only not deterministic in its political implications, but not necessarily the central axis in the construction of political frontiers either, then we need concrete political analyses of particular places and times, and the elaboration of political strategies appropriate to those places and times.

In his book *On populist reason* Ernesto exemplifies this general argument by establishing, and insisting on, the integral relation – the necessary relation – between the possibility of populism and the recognition of geographical specificity. He explores the political strategies of Togliatti, Mao, Tito and their challenges to the central communist (Comintern) tradition which advocated that the same strategy must be applied everywhere. (It was in its day a kind of left-wing equivalent of today's slogan that 'There is no Alternative'.) Ernesto writes that this subordination of all national specificities means that the constitution of a people is impossible; that there

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is no possibility of populism. (The movement he writes of, from concept to name, is thus precisely an immersion in the analysis of specificity.)

Ernesto's examples are of differences between countries, nations – and occasionally regions – in other words they are examples of geographical differences. And I, as a geographer, delighted in all this – the understanding of geographical (spatial) specificity is central to geography as a discipline. And yet, at every point in his discussion Ernesto calls it, not *geographical* specificity, but *historical*!

Probably my longest debate with Ernesto – over 25 years – was about the questions of space and geography. (I have written-up some of the conceptual aspects of this debate in the issue of *Debates y Combates* which is published on the occasion of this Homenaje.

Here, I just want to begin by saying that historical and geographical specificity are different, and that this difference matters. They each pose distinct questions, and they each open up distinct political possibilities.

The kinds of difference that Ernesto was considering were between national articulations of strategies of the Left – the kind of thing we see today in the different political emphases between countries in Latin America, Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain. Each of these place-based experiments has emerged in a distinct concrete situation. Their strategies learn from each other (a lot – the European experiments have learned much from Latin America), they share and exchange ideas. But they are not copies of each other. There are differences.

All of them, however, both individually and collectively, are also set in a bigger context: that of global neoliberal hegemony. And here a more radical heterogeneity is at stake. These are places that challenge that hegemony. And it is this more radical specificity that I want to address here.

A knowledge of radical *historical* specificity enables us to imagine that things can change. If they have been different before, they could be so again. A recognition of historical changes holds out the possibility *in principle* that the future could be different from the present.

In the first decade of this century, in the UK – to give just one example – this possibility, so simple and apparently so obvious, was largely unavailable to a whole generation of young people. Growing up during the last three decades or so, they have often experienced nothing other than the dominant neoliberal common sense and way of being. They lived it as though it was eternal, natural. (That is how hegemonic common sense operates – though I would argue that neoliberalism has been peculiarly successful in this regard – the explicit insistence on the notion that 'There is no Alternative', and the anchoring of that in a notion of a neutral science of economics, has done its work in cementing the hegemonic common sense.)

Anyway, the point is that in this way any sense of the possibility of radical historical transformation is lost. 'Change' becomes reduced to small

change, within the system. The very notion of temporality is reduced. It has been called 'the cancellation of the future'. It has produced what others have called 'the age of acquiescence'.

It was in this atmosphere that I discovered one of the benefits of advanced years (in other words, being quite old!). Merely saying in political meetings that what is today 'obvious', 'natural', 'self-evident' – things like individualism, competition, the dominance of the private over the public – was not at all obvious 'when I was young' could come to younger generations as a revelation. In other words, a knowledge of (radical) historical change (the acknowledgement of the specificity of today) can itself be politically awakening.

However, radical *geographical* specificity has other effects as well. For what we have here is coexisting differences. Radical places present us with actual, working, experiments and alternatives. For many of us in Europe the existence of progressive changes in Latin America kept us going in bad times. Latin America has been the place to which we look for hope, for ideas. It has functioned as what has been called 'a shared resource'. Likewise, it has been the rise of Syriza and Podemos which has really woken up younger generations across Europe to the fact that there really might be alternatives to neoliberalism. Here – in contrast to historical specificity – there are things going on *now*, and things that can be done – networks to build, contacts and friends to be made. Things that can be acted on.

Importantly, I think, the existence of these radical places can help to bring down to earth, to make real, that cry of 'another world is possible' – which can all too often, without any examples to point to, seem deracinated, sometimes just wishful thinking.

Or again, a recent homage to Ernesto, reflecting on such issues, wrote that "a specific geographical location" can "become the name of a frontier through which our own political identities are constituted". In other words, radical places can help us think, help us define our political identities.

All these are potential effects of the contemporaneous multiplicity that is an essential characteristic of space.

In other words, and at a more conceptual level, these potentially energising effects of geographical heterogeneity open up the possibility of real *historical* change. Geographical heterogeneity is a potential motor of historical change.

However, for this to be the case (for spatial heterogeneity to wake up temporality) there needs to be a clear political frontier between the project of the radical place (Greece, say) and the wider global hegemony. This too is a contrast between history and geography: the fact that geographical differences co-exist, in the same moment, means that we have to consider the relations between them – in this case, between radical places and the surrounding

hegemon. (It is part of what I have explored elsewhere as a 'politics of place beyond place'.) In other words, the nature of the heterogeneity from the wider global hegemony has itself to be part of the project.

The construction of a radical place-based political strategy of course always involves the constitution of an *internal* political frontier within the place. That is, as we know, essential to the constitution of a people. And the nature of the frontier may vary between places.

However, what I want to emphasise here is that there will also be (or should be) a political frontier between the project of this place and the wider hegemony in which it is set, and to which it poses a challenge. This frontier too will be specific to each place.

The case of Greece within Europe and the Eurozone has been very interesting here. Syriza is not only trying to change Greece it is also very explicitly engaged in a struggle against the neoliberal rulers of the Eurozone. The most obvious face of this struggle has been over the Eurozone's insistence on imposing neoliberal austerity policies onto the Greek economy and society. This is what most people in Europe read about in newspapers or hear on the news. And it has been a fierce and desperate contest.

But there has been, at the same time, a quite different struggle going on. This is about the very terms of debate: a struggle over what the struggle is about. The Euro elite insists it is about Greece's economic misbehaviour (and failure). Syriza, in contrast, argues that what is at issue is a confrontation between different political projects – between the neoliberalism of elite Europe and its rejection by Syriza. In other words, this is not a case of economic delinquency but a political challenge. And the challenge is not just within Greece, but also to forces beyond it. It is an attempt at constructing an 'external' political frontier. A dislocation in European hegemony.

Further, this is not only a simple 'no' to neoliberalism. At a more detailed level it is also a destabilising challenge to the nature of neoliberal orthodoxy. Syriza's stance has made clear that matters of the economy are not technical (matters to be addressed by 'experts') but thoroughly political. Now, the establishment of the economic as a technical question (markets are natural, etc etc), beyond political contestation, is central to neoliberal common sense. It is absolutely crucial to the proposition that there is no alternative. Syriza's challenge therefore strikes at a central pillar of neoliberal hegemony, and opens the door to the possibility of unravelling its narrative. It is thus a radical challenge to basic principles.

Further still, Syriza's spokespeople in Greece and around Europe have insisted that this is a struggle not just about Greece but about the future direction of Europe as a whole.

Greece is a bit of a special case maybe, because of the clear context of the Eurozone. But it has nonetheless demonstrated the significance of this kind of external political frontier against the wider hegemon. Perhaps we could

give this kind of frontier more attention? Syriza has found this struggle over the terms of the debate to be very difficult. I guess most ordinary people around Europe still think the issue is Greece's bad economic behaviour. This is a crucial point.

For this is a struggle over the very nature of the confrontation. And that kind of struggle is made more difficult by the conceptual, discursive manoeuvres of the hegemonic powers.

Again, in thinking about this last point, I find help from Ernesto. In *On populist reason* Ernesto discusses how the lumpen proletariat, and the poor more generally, were seen at first as being outside of history. They did not fit into the historical logic as then understood. Ernesto then traces the journey by which they came to be conceived of fully as the proletariat (a concept which itself changed). In other words, these parts of society were brought into the understanding of the social logic, and thus brought into history, indeed as a protagonist.

Places (countries, cities, regions) that challenge the dominant capitalist neoliberal order are frequently similarly expelled from history by hegemonic discourses. They are seen as exceptions, or as delinquent. They are ignored or suppressed as *alternatives*. This has happened in most of Europe in relation to Latin America. Latin American projects of radically different ways forward are presented as simply deviant. They are dictatorships, against a free press, ... perhaps worst of all they are seen as 'populist' which is itself seen as deviant! The point is that they are presented as rogue elements. They are scandalous. The fact that they are alternatives (21st century socialism; buen vivir; new experiments in democracy) is entirely suppressed. Their relevance to 'our' history is rigorously erased from public discourse. The same has happened with Greece (as I have just said). It is discursively positioned as a scandalous exception (though with dire warnings for the rest of us) not as a political challenge. It is expelled from any potential history.

So, a crucial political task for the Left is to bring these place-based alternatives into history. To re-form common sense in this regard. To insist they are not exceptions, or delinquent, but potential protagonists in history; where 'history' is understood to be, not a single linear inexorability, but multiple, open to alternatives. In other words, as Ernesto says, this movement from 'outsider' to potential historical actor means that "social logics will have to be conceived in a fundamentally different way".

This is a promise of geographical heterogeneity - of place-based alternatives - challenges - to the hegemonic neoliberalism. The time-spaces of our implicit imaginations are thoroughly political.

The burden of what I have said so far is that radical places are of supreme importance to challenging wider hegemonies.

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We should not really need to emphasise this. But there is on the Left often a nervousness about any kind of attachment to place. This is obviously true at the national level where there is fear of being accused of reactionary nationalism. (Latin America has taught us in Europe a lot about resisting this fear, and about thinking through concepts such as 'the national popular'.) But there is the same kind of nervousness about place-based politics in general – of being accused of localism; of indulging in romantic, nostalgic, exclusivity. And so on. We must overcome these fears.

Contrary to some accounts, the world is not only flows. There are also stabilities, and enduring articulations. Places still matter.

Nor are places, of whatever kind, ever closed. They never have been. Their very specificities derive in part from their relations with elsewhere – with other parts of the world. And a politics of those external relations must be a part of the politics of place. This is a vision of place itself (nation, region, city) as a project, with political tasks both internally and towards the world beyond.

Moreover, for places that challenge the hegemonic powers, the constitutive outside (which is usually figured as hostility to some ethnic Other – which is why we can be frightened of engaging with it) is re-imagined as a radical *political* frontier against the dominant system (as well, of course, as relations of exchange with other radical places).

This refashioning of the imaginative geography provides a different basis for identification and belonging. Passion for place – which is often understood as nostalgia for a past – can thus be turned into passion for the political project (indeed part of the project may precisely be a reinterpretation of the past).

Above all, we need to dislocate the hegemonic geography, in order to open up history.