

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

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## INTERVENCIONES

### ERNESTO THE TENSION DWELLER: ON PARADOX, POLITICAL DISCOURSE, AND AFFECT\*

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Very many thanks to Adrià and Samuele for their hard work, enthusiasm, and determination in organizing this very timely event – and for inviting me to be part of it.

Actually, this event today marks the 1st public occasion for me to comment on Ernesto's work with his death as an explicit backdrop; and I confess that I am still very much in the process of 'processing' my own personal investment in him as friend and, chiefly, as my ex-supervisor and colleague.

Adrià and Samuele invited us to reflect on Ernesto's legacy. Many of my fellow panelists will focus on how his thought has informed concrete political struggles. Though clearly not unrelated I focus here more on the academic or research side of his legacy, and in this I have not hesitated to

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include a few references to my own personal experiences of him as a scholar and teacher.

Of course when you pause and think about such a request (to reflect on Ernesto's legacy) you then think: wow, where can one possibly begin!?

One of Ernesto's favourite expressions comes to mind in this context, namely, that there are certain objects – in this case, tasks – that are indeed impossible, but – aha! - this does not prevent them from also being necessary.

Ernesto was fond of expressions like this that had inscribed within them more than a whiff of paradox; and in this sense one could describe him as a veritable 'tension-dweller'. He relished dwelling in the tension between logics that are simultaneously incompatible and inseparable. Society, he says, is both impossible and necessary. It is impossible as an object that can be grasped in its totality; but it is simultaneously necessary to find a way to represent it.

To get a sense of the scale of a task that seeks to capture in one sweep his contribution, it is sufficient to list some key terms associated with his work: discourse, rhetoric, hegemony, articulation, contingency, the political, antagonism, dislocation, ideology, populism, radical democracy, empty signifier, floating signifier, logics of equivalence and difference... I could go on...

Ernesto has succeeded in re-working and re-inventing these terms in a way that clearly bears the stamp of his influence. But how?

In part, we could say, by performing this task in the role of a great synthesizer, drawing and articulating together a wide range of disciplines and traditions of thought, ranging from Marxism, continental philosophy, linguistics, and psychoanalysis to name a few.

Some might say that Ernesto has re-read and re-worked the Marxist tradition through a deconstructively-inflected linguistic prism, not unlike the way Lacan re-read and re-worked the Freudian tradition through a linguistic prism.

Either way, given the influence his language already exercises across an impressively wide range of disciplines, one is tempted to consider Ernesto as a kind of 'founder of discursivity'.

## I

So I start this process with a remark on Ernesto's style.

Not many would deny that there is a tendency toward a particular style of theorizing in Ernesto. For some his style appears rather dense and difficult to penetrate. This can be frustrating. For others, however, his oral interventions and his written work embody the ultimate in razor sharp

clarity and logic. For yet others, his style can provoke both these reactions simultaneously.

I want to start by focusing on one particularly important feature of his style of theorizing. For want of a better term this may be described as a tendency to highlight the formal characteristics of a phenomenon or practice. He tended to push to the limits this process of formalization, but he did this to great effect, at least from a theoretical point of view.

The most obvious example one could refer to here concerns the concept of discourse itself. We tend to think of discourse in terms of speech or text. But Ernesto argues that placing the accent on form and pattern allows us to see clearly how meaning can be transmitted in ways other than through the natural language of speech and text. This is an idea he derived from the Danish linguist Hjelmslev in his critique of Saussurian linguistics.

Objects, practices, and acts – a wave or a smile or the physical extraction and appropriation of surplus labour, for example – can also convey meaning and significance that is constitutive of the act or practice itself.

So, the non-linguistic aspects of a practice appear just as important as text and speech for the analysis of discourse, including their political and ideological significance. This is a view that Ernesto shares with many others, of course.

Roland Barthes was another one of his key references. Significantly, drawing out these implications of a formal approach to language and meaning has been instrumental in Ernesto's defence against those who saw in his turn to discourse a necessary turn also to idealism and a corresponding neglect of concrete material practices, especially economic practices, although of course this could not be further from the truth.

But this formal and expansive understanding of discourse is checked by his simultaneous affirmation of its limits. These limits, however, were understood not in terms of something outside discourse. These limits were understood as internal to discourse, forming the locus of contingency. To put it in slightly paradoxical terms: Contingency is here understood to be a product of discourse not meeting up with itself, opening up the space of the new to emerge and the contingent to be experienced.

As you can see I have beaten a path to contingency. I have done so because contingency is central to his understanding of another key concept, the moment of the political.

I will leave it to my fellow panelists to say something about the category of populism itself in more detail, but I want to say something about the moment of the political here since this not only forms an essential backdrop to populism and emancipation – it is also central in appreciating the multiple pathways that comprise his legacy.

The moment of the political is linked to contingency in Ernesto's work because this marks the moment in which it becomes apparent that a norm or practice can be contested and transformed.

The burden of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*<sup>1</sup> was to advance precisely that argument, also recognizable as an argument about the primacy of the political. The primacy of the political means that the logic of the institution of the social is not dictated by laws or pre-specified agents of history. It is in this sense that we could say that *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* was really about de-economizing the political. The political is de-economized in the sense that the logic of political practices was no longer seen as bearing a necessary relation to economic mechanisms and agents. Laclau and Mouffe saw this process of de-economizing the political as absolutely essential from the point of view of strategy; and they saw their intervention as a deepening of the insights and worries expressed by Gramsci, but also by the likes of Stuart Hall in relation to the UK case, about the defeat of the left and the rise of the right.

Still, many have pointed to the need to supplement this moment of de-economizing the political with something else. The effort to de-economize the political, it is thought, should be supplemented with an effort to re-politicize the economy. And here, perhaps, we can ask whether the rise of the left populisms in Greece and Spain embody precisely such an effort to politicize the economy – or at least an important and pressing aspect of the economy.

Coupled with this need to politicize the economy, however, is another supplementary need, it is claimed, namely, to account for resistance to politicization. For example, why and how is it that particular norms associated with austerity that invite contestation and demand transformation appear not to budge? And here we could mention the role that ideology can and should play in offering a fuller account of this resistance. Many might also ask whether the right-wing populisms in Europe function to pre-empt any deep politicization of the economy? Does the classic targeting of immigrants operate as just such a potent logic of pre-emption?

We could say that these supplementary needs to politicize the economy and to account for resistance to such efforts have served as a key motivation for some scholars associated with the work of Laclau and Mouffe and the 'Essex School in Political Discourse Theory'.

I would characterize much of my own work, including work published with David and Yannis, as aiming to develop precisely an understanding of such logics of politicization and resistance, but to show how many of the resources with which to meet these challenges can be found in Ernesto's work.

If I had to name one field of thought that both summarizes and underpins my own intellectual engagement with Ernesto's work, this would have to

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1 LACLAU, Ernesto y Chantal MOUFFE. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. Towards a Radical Democracy* (Londres: Verso, 2001)

be psychoanalysis, and Lacanian psychoanalysis in particular. This formed the key rationale for wanting to study with Ernesto as a PhD student in the first place. I was at the time studying in Canada, and had recently read *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* and Žižek's *The Sublime Object of Ideology*<sup>2</sup>. I was in effect interviewed by Chantal Mouffe while she was on a North American lecture tour, and she encouraged me to apply for a PhD at Essex with Ernesto. This was in the mid 1990s, but the field of psychoanalysis has remained a central point of reference for me in my engagement with his work ever since.

This passion to engage with Ernesto's own explorations of psychoanalysis was shared by my friend and fellow PhD student at the time, Yannis Stavrakakis; but it is also something that informs my work with David Howarth, especially our work in developing what we call a logics approach to critical explanation.

But there is probably no better way to express how Ernesto saw psychoanalysis in relation to his theory of hegemony other than in his own words. This quotation, as you will see, has the added bonus of summarizing what he took to be a key contribution of his to political theory.

Yannis and I conducted an interview with Ernesto, published a few years ago, in which we asked him to explain the appeal of a specifically Lacanian psychoanalytic orientation. Here is what he had to say:

“Why have I adopted in my work a Freudian/Lacanian approach rather than any of the other available alternatives? For a start, this is a decision clearly related to my attempt to break with essentialism, which, in the political field, conceives politics as an epiphenomenon or a superstructure, as the mere phenomenal expression of some underlying structure or laws – the latter being either the mode of production (in a traditional leftist discourse), globalization (in a neo-liberal discourse), or anything else capable of playing this role. In opposition to all such essentialisms, the core of my philosophical project consisted in asserting the centrality of the political moment in the constitution of the social... And this applies to the economic level of society as well as to any other level.”<sup>3</sup>

This claim is of course often taken to be one of his more provocative claims. What he claims, in other words, and now I return again to his own words, is that “the notion of ‘hegemonic formation’ tends, in my analysis, to take the central role previously occupied by the category of ‘mode of

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2 ŽIŽEK, Slavoj *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989)

3 GLYNOS, Jason y YANNIS Stavrakakis “Politics and the unconscious – An interview with Ernesto Laclau” *Subjectivity*, Vol. 3 N°3, (2011), 233

production'." He then goes on: "From this point of view, the Freudian approach, together with its Lacanian reformulation, provided crucial tools for the development of what I was trying to think at the political level, from an anti-essentialist perspective"<sup>4</sup>

So here Ernesto hints at the role psychoanalysis can play for him. The field of political and ideological theory must offer us the tools not just to describe political discourses and ideologies, or point to the contingent character of their formation, but also to account for their logics of formation and the ideological 'grip' they exercise over us.

Particularly exciting in his later work, though perhaps still rather underdeveloped, is one idea explored by Ernesto to tackle the question of ideological grip. This is the idea of 'affective investment', the libidinal energy invested in an object, without which, he argues, the whole hegemonic operation would not come off. The centrality of affect and passion has, of course, been highlighted by Chantal Mouffe too. In fact an important part of his legacy, I would say, finds itself expressed in a significant strand of scholarly efforts now devoted to an exploration of this aspect of their theory, particularly with reference to a range of categories drawn from Lacanian psychoanalysis, such as desire and fantasy.

## II

Of course Ernesto's legacy is not, and will not, remain at a merely theoretical or ontological level. Shortly we will hear something about how his legacy is also clearly a political legacy. His theory, in other words, extends in rather exciting and urgent ways to the level of concrete political practice, inspiring members of political movements and parties. But I want to conclude now with a very short comment on his legacy at a more personal level in an academic context. In particular I want to comment on a legacy connected to the practice of supervising university students.

I had one of those rather troubling and openended, though not untypical, questions to pose to Ernesto in one of my supervisory sessions with him. Ernesto,

I said, apart from reading Lacan's seminars and *Ecrits*, I feel I need to engage with topological theory and with debates in the philosophy of mathematics in trying to come to terms with Lacan's thought. I should also consider doing some advanced lessons in French. And then there is Ancient Greek thought. But I'm a bit worried I may trying to do too much. To which he replied in his inimitably diplomatic style. Well, now that you mention it, since you are looking at Lacan, I think you should also read the full works of Hegel, and Heidegger, for which of course you will then need

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4 *Ibidem*.

to learn German too. One could argue that his advice is simply a natural manifestation of his own prodigious intellectual appetite and capacity.

For those who are familiar with the professionalization trends of the PhD degree over the last decade one could safely say that the chances of survival of this particular legacy are not too great... for better or worse!

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