



Interview with Ernesto Laclau

Author(s): Emiliano Acosta

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Emiliano Acosta: Reading the major European newspapers, one gets the impression that, today, the European crisis is essentially an economic or financial one and that other problems that politicians have to confront, like the *indignados* in Spain or the difficulties in establishing a government in Belgium, are only secondary or that their solution is not as urgent as a solution to the actual financial crisis. Do you think that all these problems have something in common, namely, that they are manifestations of one and the same crisis and that, therefore, the above-mentioned hierarchical classification of problems does not reflect the real crisis Europe is now experiencing?

Ernesto Laclau.: Well, I think that the two aspects you mention are related with each other. The crisis is the crisis of an economic and financial model, whose general lineaments were the neo-liberalism prevailing in the economic policies of the last twenty years. This model is manifestly in crisis and though the solutions offered for example in the case of Greece are measures that insist in the same kind of receipt that brought Greece to the crisis. So, the bad situation gets constantly worse and worse, i.e. there are no policies directed to economic growth. There is a policy of economic adjustment, which has only a financial character and all the principal politic forces of Europe share this policy today. It is not a merely conservative policy. The Labour Party in England, for example, applied during the Administration Blair a policy, which was very similar to the one exerted by the Thatcher Administration in the past. So, the problem is that this kind of crises of a model occurs without the existence of alternative political forces making their presence felt and pressing for a different model. The result is that the protest against the model tends to be a protest politically not structured. The case of the *indignados* is the most typical, but manifestations of the accumulation of social demands and the absence of institutional mechanisms to express and implement them become visible in these cases. What has still not been produced on the side of the alternative policies are politic-institutional formulas that give the social protest a political character. At present this protest is an inorganic protest.

E.A.: From your point of view: Which are the challenges and the tasks a project of rethinking Europe has to undertake in a short and in a long term?

E.L.: Well, this is a little bit difficult to answer in the way you put it. But, let us see. I think that firstly it is all about thinking an economic alternative project. The alternative economic projects do exist. There are a lot of non-orthodox economists formulating these

projects: Stiglitz and Krugman, for instance, are proposing measures that exactly go in a direction opposed to the one applied at this moment in Europe. So, on a certain way a model based on economic growth and expansion of the demand and that introduces a certain dose of Keynesianism, is the *sine qua non* of every reformulation of the European political model. So, what it has to happen is a change of the paradigm in the organization of the economy.

Secondly, we have the problem of which the political forces and the social forces are that can support this alternative project, because it is evident that a project of changing a paradigm requires individuals capable to assume and implement it. Und here is the place where we see with all clarity the situation we has just referred to. There is a ser of inorganic protests in very different places: not only in Europe, but also in the USA and in some countries in Latin America. And it seems to me that what it has to happen is a transit from the moment of no-organization [*inorganicidad*] of these forms of protests to some kind of political organization. Let us think for example in the question on democracy. A democratic regime needs to exist creating an articulation between two levels. On the one hand, there is the level of what we could call a democracy from below, i.e., the “rank and file”, the class root of social movements, have to arise in institutional forms relatively effective. On the other hand, the question of the reform of the state is not finished. I am against those ultra libertarian formulas that claim that the whole problem reduces to substitute a policy of transforming the state for a policy of a democracy from below. If a policy is exerted exclusively on the level of the state there is a deficit of the social basement, which could implement a different project of change. But if from this side we only have the protest, the class root level, these demands can very quickly disintegrate and after a certain period of anti-system mobilization they do not construct anything that may conduce to a transformation of the system. So, I think that both aspects are complementary. On the one side, a new and alternative economic model, on the other, a new way of political action that unifies the dimension of the democracy from below with the dimension of reform and transformation of the state.

E.A.: One of the main topics in today's discussions on the conditions of possibility for a real (radical) democracy and on its limitations is the question about the legacy of the democratic discourse of the European Enlightenment. Which of the categories and modes of conceiving the complexity of social life that we can find in the Enlightenment's political thought do you think should be recovered and which ones should be abandoned in order to enrich the discussion on the future of Europe?

E.L.: Firstly, we have to say that the Enlightenment represents a very complex historical tradition. There are many dimensions of the Enlightenment. Forms of radical democracy like the Jacobinism came from the Enlightenment, but also forms of elite politics like the one represented by positivism. Therefore when we analyse the Enlightenment tradition, I think, we have to necessarily introduce some substantial

modifications. In many of my books and papers I have insisted in remembering a phrase, actually an analysis rather than a phrase. It belongs to C. b. Macpherson. He said that the liberal-democratic tradition, which normally is presented as a unified and homogeneous whole, actually has two components, which only very lately reached a certain balance. Because at the beginning of the 19th Century liberalism, which is an essential product of the Enlightenment, was a political formula absolutely respectable, but on the other hand democracy was a pejorative term in the same terms like populism today, because democracy was identified with the government of the mob and the Jacobinism. So, it has taken a long while, all the 19th Century with its revolutions and reactions, until Europe reached a balance, which never has been perfect, between the democratic and the liberal component. In some way, now a day we have to pass to a different kind of model, in which the democratic component should have a much more relevant role than in the past. If we think in the liberal component without democracy, we are actually thinking of a technocratic government. And what in the last years has been applied in Europe has been an essentially technocratic policy, which has its roots in the 19th Century. In the 19th Century Saint-Simon said that societies must transit from the government of men to the administration of things. He was proposing the substitution of politics by the administration. Democracy, on the contrary, presupposes a confronting moment, presupposes to question the people before the power and so extend the civic participation to sectors that until now did not have take part in the consensus and formation of politics. I think that this democratic component will have to be absolutely vital in any form of alternative economic model.

E.A.: The question about European Identity (either as a neglected reality, as something absent in our present, but real in the past, or, finally, as an ideal or as a project) is undoubtedly present in the contemporary political philosophical debate on Europe. In your studies on hegemony and populism the tension between both universality and particularity and between identity and difference occupy a central place. Which political status do you give to the question about the European Identity? Which problems do you think that such a question makes or could make visible and which others does this question keep from arising as problems?

E.L.: I think that the question of the European Identity is vital because of some reasons I will expose in a minute. But what we have to see is that the European identity like the popular identity is not a reality in Europe today. The European identity is today something that becomes real through bureaucratic mechanisms, Brussels and everything related to the actions of the European Commission, which has never represented a moment of politic activism or creation of popular identities. The result is that what exists under the label of “European identity” is today an abstract pact and has less connections with a political action with democratic character. Precisely the opposite: when there have been popular reactions, they have taken in most of the cases an anti-European position. In the referenda about the European Constitution, some years ago, the “no” that in the

Netherlands and in France prevailed, was a manifestation of a popular reaction against the bureaucratization of the unification of Europe. On the other side, I think that without a European identity, which has to be in this sense popular identity, we will not go very much forward in the configuration of a European presence in the international forums. Our present shows that the project of mono-polar order that at the end of the 80's seemed to prevail after the dissolution of the Soviet Empire, has not become real. The world is going forward to a multi-polar order, which is more and more visible. New actors are now entering the international scene like China, India and Brazil, and all these new actors are going to dispute the centrality that the USA have had in the configuration of the social and economic international policies. In twenty years China will have vastly beaten the USA as the principal economic force of the planet. An in this multi-polar world, which is now emerging, is evident that the individual states of Western and Eastern Europe should not act as separate actors. They have to present themselves as a voice representing the voice of whole Europe like in the case of Latin America, where we have institutions like the Mercosur and others similar regional forums, which are producing more and more an integration of the Latin American continent and a participation of this continent at international forums with a unified voice. This unified voice has to constitute in Europe. It is necessary to constitute a European identity, but this identity cannot be reached merely through measures of bureaucratic nature. This identity has to be created on the base of effective popular participation and at the present time this seems to be very far to be realized, but it is absolutely necessary.

E.A.: Dealing with the actual crisis in Europe, it seems that all intellectual attempts, without regard to their political and theoretical backgrounds, limit their field of study to the European history and present situation as well as to the past and present European political philosophical discussion as the only intellectual resource for such a reflection on Europe. Do you think that Europe has something to learn from other political present realities, past or present, or from theories coming from the so-called intellectual Periphery, namely from thinkers who develop their activities outside of Europe and the USA?

E.L.: Well, first I would immediately say that Europe has a lot to learn of the Latin American experience. What the Latin American experience has characterized in the last years has been the total refusal to the neo-liberal model. In Argentina, for example, the government has followed a policy that is totally opposed to the recommendations of International Monetary Fund. In doing this Argentina experienced an economic growth, which allowed this country to pay its debt to the IMF. Now Argentina has a merely formal relationship to the IMF. Neither recommendations nor inspections to study the situation of the Argentinian economy of IMF are now accepted by the Argentinian government and, of course, none of the policies of economic adjustment that the IMF is now proposing. So, in the case of Argentina this country could find an exit to the crisis of 2001, by doing exactly the opposite of what today the international community is trying to implement in Greece.

And in most of the other countries in Latin America the experience is very similar. I think the influence power and the relative significance of international financial institutions like the IMF or the World Bank, is going to diminishing in the next years and that other kind of institutions and agreements are going to emerge, by means of which the new model will have to prevail in a long term, because if we continue with this kind of policies of adjustment like in Greece now, there will be evidently no exit to the crisis. We do not know very well how we will exit of the crisis in the long term, but what we well know is how we entered it. We entered the crisis because of the deregulation of the economy, the extreme monetarism and because of all formulas of neoliberalism that also have led to today crisis. I am not against the existence of a unique currency in the European continent, but evidently it is not possible to develop a unique monetary policy without certain coordination at the level of the national policies. Here it has been a clear unbalance between the policies of the European Nation-States and the supranational model they were trying to implement. So, we have to come to a supranationalism, if you want, to a European national identity, but this national identity, as I said before, has to result form democratic participation.