

Mazzolini S (2024) *Laclau, lo stratega: Populismo, egemonia, emancipazione*. Milan: Mimesis

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The book *Laclau, lo stratega: Populismo, egemonia, emancipazione* (Mazzolini, 2024) is the result of years of academic research and public engagement by Samuele Mazzolini. The Italian scholar earned his PhD at the University of Essex, where Ernesto Laclau founded the doctoral and master's programmes that gave rise to what became known as the Essex School of discourse analysis, and later developed his academic career in various universities in Italy and the UK. He is currently an MSCA fellow, conducting research on populism and institutions in Ecuador and Argentina. At the same time, he has worked closely with left-populist movements in Ecuador, alongside Rafael Correa, and in Spain with Podemos and Más País. He has also contributed as a political analyst for newspapers in Italy and Latin America. For several years, he was one of the leaders of *Senso Comune*, an attempt to build a left-populist movement in Italy.

This brief profile helps us better understand the main features of the work. Mazzolini's peculiar trajectory has left a distinct mark on both the book's content and its structure. The stratification of diverse experiences and interests gives his work a multidimensional quality that only such a singular profile could produce. Let us now turn to some of the consequences of this distinctive perspective, which make the book engaging and an original contribution to the field.

If we distil the book to its core – already announced by the title – we find the claim that Ernesto Laclau's thought is best read as strategic thought (Mazzolini, 2024: 13, 70). The organic relation between theory and praxis, echoing the Gramscian idea of the “philosophy of praxis,” gives this strategic thought a distinctive consistency that goes beyond understanding it merely as technical knowledge.

This aspect, inspired by Gramsci, represents a central element that Mazzolini highlights in Laclau's work and one that also animates Mazzolini himself. Just as Laclau declared that his interest in the theory that shaped him stemmed from his experience in the political life of 1960s Argentina, Mazzolini's engagement with Laclau and with left populism – despite the criticisms he develops – is rooted in a generational experience. In fact, Mazzolini explicitly states that, in recent years, the most interesting and productive challenges to neoliberalism in both Europe and Latin America have, in one way or another, been “populist” or related to Laclau's thought (Mazzolini, 2024: 15). In the case of the “pink tide” populist governments in Latin America, which Mazzolini observed first-hand in Ecuador, Laclau was himself inspired by these movements and developed close relationships with many political leaders. In the European post-crisis context, he served in some cases as a direct source of inspiration – for instance, in Podemos, where Íñigo Errejón openly declared that the party's strategy drew on Laclau's theory – and in *La France Insoumise*.

The organic connection between theory and praxis is also grounded in the post-foundational political ontology that Mazzolini, following Oliver Marchart, identifies in Laclau's work (Mazzolini, 2024: 25). Political thought must be strategic because the social is ontologically ungrounded; there is no possibility of deriving a normative injunction from the deep knowledge of the structure of reality (Mazzolini, 2024: 75). Politicians and political thinkers must therefore confront the contingency of the social world and make decisions within it.

We can therefore grasp the book's underlying articulation: an open laboratory that moves between the history of political thought, political philosophy, and political science, combining research on case studies with reflections on theoretical problems.

The first chapter offers a historical-genealogical reading of Laclau's trajectory, focusing on his theory of populism. The second chapter – which, in my view, represents the core of the book – moves from explaining the concepts of populism and hegemony in Laclau's thought to offering a first critical reassessment of his theory. Then, after two chapters devoted to specific aspects of Laclau's theory and history, it comes to the fifth and sixth chapters, which analyse two cases of left populism – Podemos in Spain and Correa's *Revolución*

Ciudadana in Ecuador – that are, according to the author, in different ways, the cases most closely connected to Laclau and that can be considered paradigmatic proxies (Mazzolini, 2024: 194) for the analysis of the phenomenon in their respective contexts, Latin America and Europe. Through these cases, we can observe both the successes and the limits of the most explicitly Laclauian forms of populism, offering a perfect basis for critical reflection. The need to apply Laclauian theory to concrete cases – and to undertake a work that tests, develops, and corrects it in light of reality – is a recurring theme throughout the book. It asserts a space in which Mazzolini situates himself alongside other scholars from the Essex School, with the aim of advancing a post-Laclauian research agenda (Mazzolini, 2024: 16, 220).

It is impossible to address all the topics explored in this “open laboratory.” What I will do instead is focus on a few aspects of Mazzolini’s work that offer the most original and relevant – and, only sometimes, also controversial – contributions to the debate.

One point we encounter in the genealogical-historical is the question of continuity and discontinuity in his thought, with particular attention to his first works from the Argentine period and his early years in the UK. This aspect has theoretical relevance because it marks the moment when Laclau begins to move beyond the idea of structural determination in the last instance and opens up to the centrality of the category of “the people” or “the popular.” According to Mazzolini (2024: 43), there is no full continuity, in the sense that later developments were not fully contained in the earlier elaborations; nevertheless, we can identify certain issues that paved the way for new directions – directions that, at the same time, entailed the loss of other theoretical acquisitions. One concept that was later lost, but which Mazzolini rightly refers to as “the forgotten origins” of Laclauian theory, is that of “uneven and combined development” (Mazzolini, 2024: 45), taken up through the highly eclectic combination of anti-imperialist nationalism and Trotskyism of the *Izquierda Nacional* political current, led by Jorge Abelardo Ramos, in which Laclau was active during his years in Buenos Aires. This concept, still rooted in Marxist theory, led Laclau to a critique of the orthodox idea of development as a deterministic process that must pass through all historical stages in sequence. It was only from

this point of questioning that – beginning with *Towards a Theory of Populism*, included in his first book published in London in 1977, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory* – he could focus on the centrality of popular claims in the development of emancipatory politics, a focus that would remain constant up to *On Populist Reason* (Mazzolini, 2024: 42).

A second point, which brings us directly to the theoretical reassessment, is Mazzolini's criticism of Laclau's tendency to conflate the categories of hegemony and populism (Mazzolini, 2024: 105–121) – a problem that, he argues, prevented Laclau from fully recognising certain limits of “populisms in power” (Mazzolini, 2024: 192). Laclau, for Mazzolini, did not devote sufficient attention to the stage of an established hegemony and to the need to consolidate institutions – understood broadly, from state structures to cultural frameworks. This is because he tended to identify hegemony, which is a long-term process, with populism, understood as an attempt to reconstitute a collective will in moments of radical political disarticulation. Theoretically, this problem could be overcome through a reassessment of the relationship between space and time in Laclau's work (Mazzolini, 2024: 108). The Argentine theorist, Mazzolini notes, placed strong emphasis on the temporal dimension, understood as the irruption of dislocation into a systematic articulation (represented by the concept of space as repletion) in a moment of crisis. This focus, while useful for seizing opportunities, is less helpful for stabilising the achievements of popular governments (Mazzolini, 2024: 217–220).

In different ways, determined by their distinct contexts, the cases of Podemos in Spain and Correa's *Revolución Ciudadana* in Ecuador illustrate how this misunderstanding of political logic leads to the inability to consolidate what was achieved in the initial populist irruption.

In the case of Podemos, Mazzolini (2024: 173) – just as in his reading of the Laclauian theory that inspired them – identifies the main problem as the overestimation, in the initial phase, of the centrality of the political irruption, without a parallel process of social rootedness. Thus, when the movement inevitably underwent a process of “normalisation” (Mazzolini, 2024: 173), meaning its integration into the political system and the consequent reduction in

the intensity of its antagonism, it had not yet achieved a hegemonic transformation of society. As a result, Podemos ended up as a minority partner of the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE), a party belonging to the old system. Disintermediation had been a positive factor at the outset, but the failure to create alternative forms of mediation prevented Podemos from enduring over time as a leading political force (Mazzolini, 2024: 175).

In the case of Correa's *Revolución Ciudadana*, there was no direct application of Laclau's theory – although there was contact between Laclau and Correa – but, for Mazzolini (2024: 190), it nevertheless represents, alongside Venezuela's Chavismo, a case that closely fits Laclau's own description of populism. In this instance, we are looking at a form of populism that remained in power for an extended period and was characterised by strong presidential authority. Mazzolini acknowledges that it initiated an interesting process of reform – both in political-institutional terms and in the sphere of social policy (Mazzolini, 2024: 204). However, despite these attempts, Correa began to exercise power in an increasingly personal and arbitrary manner, while maintaining a strong antagonistic rhetoric against his political adversaries. The inability to strengthen institutions and to move from a decisionistic, leader-centred politics to a more routinised system – one that both protects the achievements made and respects a legal framework – prevented the transition from populism to hegemony (Mazzolini, 2024: 210–218). In this sense, the triumph of populism would ideally mark its transformation from an antagonistic movement into a hegemonic one, capable of producing stable social, legal, and political institutions (Mazzolini, 2024: 193, 220).

The importance of a new form of hegemony, realised through new institutional arrangements that do not deny the fundamental principles of liberal constitutionalism, is the most concrete outcome of Mazzolini's post-Laclauian agenda – a topic on which he is currently working. This position, while not entirely new in populist studies – in fact, he engages with and critiques certain Latin American theorisations about populism, institutions, and republicanism (Mazzolini, 2024: 199–202) – is undoubtedly a necessary step in thinking with and beyond Laclau about emancipatory politics in the era of the new (post?)-neoliberal authoritarianism.

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