Radical democracy, populism, and ideological entrenchment: A critique of Laclau's conception of democracy

Perhaps what is dawning as a possibility in our political experience is something radically different from what postmodern prophets of the ‘end of politics’ are announcing: the arrival at a fully political era, because the dissolution of the marks of certainty does not give the political game any aprioristic necessary terrain but, rather, the possibility of constantly redefining the terrain itself.

Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason*

Ernesto Laclau was at the center of the recent explosion of populist studies and his thought has had a great revival these last few years. On the one hand, Laclau offers a new conception of populism where he describes it, not in terms of specific social groups or policies, but in terms of the framing of disparate issues within a rhetoric of “the elites” versus “the people.” For Laclau, populism cannot be reduced to any specific set of issues but, rather, it is a form of politics inherent to democratic politics that calls disaffected parts of the population to organize in a political block (“the people”) and make demands to the establishment (“the elites”). On the other hand, Laclau’s ideas have attracted a lot of attention because he believes that there is an intimate connection between populism and democracy. He argues that, far from being a defect of democratic politics, populism is a good thing for democracy as it enables disaffected parts of the population to be heard and to make changes to democratic institutions.

Because Laclau sees an intimate connection between populism and democracy, several scholars have offered critiques of his political theory that, unfortunately, too often take the form of a condemnation of its potentially negative consequences (Urbinati, 2019; Arato and Cohen, 2022). These critiques usually look at Laclau’s ideas to point out how that they have the potential to generate intolerance and violence. However, Laclau doesn’t deny that populism can have bad consequences, but he thinks that these bad consequences are part of the risks of political projects that disrupt the establishment and that try to make structural changes. In the end, it is difficult to successfully criticize Laclau’s populism by looking at its potential consequences because his theory is flexible. His populism can take a variety of forms and, aside from integrating disaffected individuals, its means and final goals are open-ended.

Laclau’s political theory remains attractive to supporters of conflictual forms of democracy because his ideas have the potential of helping disaffected individuals and do not necessarily lapse in authoritarianism. Instead of focusing on the potentially negative consequences of his ideas, I present a critique of Laclau by analyzing his ideas internally and by looking at what makes his thought attractive. More specifically, I look at his conception of radical democracy that motivates his advocacy of populism.

For Laclau, an essential aspect of democracy is that it is a regime that can change its institutions in order to tackle new and unexpected problems (e.g., new political causes or disaffected parts of the population). Democracy is radical when it is radically open to change, i.e., it is open to structural reforms and even revolutionary change. This puts him at odds with two other conceptions of democracy. On the one hand, Laclau is opposed to radical forms of politics (e.g., Marxism) that want to structurally change society in order to bring about a form of democracy embodied in a predetermined set of institutions. On the other hand, he is opposed to conversationalist forms of democracy that accept small reforms but reject radical and structural change. Laclau finds populism attractive because it is a political paradigm that opens the way to radically reform democratic institutions but does not preemptively impose one rigid set of institutions irrespective of the context.

A central concern of theories of radical democracy is the possibility of changing one’s political beliefs in case these beliefs are no longer adapted to new circumstances. For radical democrats, conflict prevents democracies from holding too tightly to specific beliefs about politics and to specific institutions that might no longer make sense. For instance, if a given context requires populism to integrate disaffected parts of the population, unquestioned beliefs about the virtues of liberal-democratic institutions will prevent democracies from using populism in this new context. For radical democrats, the problem of Marxism’s radicalism and liberal-democratic reformism is that they do not leave open the possibility of change in order to tackle unexpected problems and integrate new political causes – e.g., new minority groups.

Against Laclau, I will argue that the prioritization of conflict entrenches the agonistic contenders and prevents them from changing their beliefs. Laclau’s notion of radical democracy is not consistent with its goal of leaving open the possibility of changing one’s beliefs. When two political groups conflict without a clear knowledge of what both sides defend, genuine conflict is not possible because both sides have given up on trying to look at their own beliefs from the point of view of the ones of their opponents. Ideological entrenchment makes both sides increasingly oblivious to the nature of their own political beliefs and locks them on a path where they become increasingly unable to revise their beliefs. On the reverse, it is only by engaging with political ideas that are the opposite of their own that political opponents can see the nature of their own beliefs and therefore have a chance to change them.

Ultimately, it is not populism and agonism that can create the sort of democracy that Laclau wants, but a new pluralism that requires adversaries to actively engage with one another’s political beliefs – a pluralism where political contenders know their opponents’ ideas better than their own. Unfortunately, the prioritization of conflict and the tendency towards entrenchment is already well underway in several aspects of contemporary life. In academia, there is an increasing tendency towards compartmentalization and, in politics, an increasing simplification of the arguments of one’s opponents.

In the first part of this essay, I will review some of the recent critiques of Laclau’s political theory and his conception of populism. These critiques mainly read Laclau in terms of the liberal ideas that he opposed and, therefore, they already reflect a tendency toward entrenchment, i.e., a tendency to construe one’s opponent political beliefs in terms of one’s own. In the second part, I describe Laclau’s radical democracy and why, to be consistent, Laclau’s democracy must be pluralistic and not populistic. In a third part, I flesh out the notion of pluralistic democracy.

1. Shortcomings of the liberal critiques of Laclau and radical democracy

Laclau wants a radical form of democracy where individuals can create systemic political projects if they need to change their institutions. He argues that, since populism doesn’t necessarily generate bad consequences and has the potential to help disaffected groups, individuals should create populist projects if they need to make systemic reforms. Against critics that point out that populism can have bad consequences, Laclau says that these are the inherent risks of political projects that aim at making systemic reforms. In this first part, I will describe Nadia Urbinati’s critique of populism – one of the most sustained liberal engagements with Laclau – and I will show that her critiques are not enough to undermine these aspects of his political theory.

In her triad *Representative Democracy* (2006), *Democracy Disfigured* (2014), and *Me the People* (2019), Urbinati develops a diarchic theory of democracy where she distinguishes the domain of the “will” (procedures and institutions that regulate the collective decisions) and the one of the “opinion” (the extra-institutional domain of political opinions). For Urbinati, older conceptions of sovereignty saw politics in terms of how a part of the city uses the mechanisms of will to take decisions. What is peculiar about modern sovereignty is that, thanks to the dimension of opinion, politics is no longer reduced to a series of successive decisions that are taken by the part, but it becomes a site of ideological narratives that interpret past decisions and gives an interpretation to future ones (e.g., parties can offer different interpretations of election cycles). For Urbinati, what is peculiar about modern democracies isn’t just the fact that they guarantee specific institutions (e.g., elections), but the fact that they ensure that the mechanisms of will can always be effectively checked by the ones of opinion. There are many implications to her argument, such as the fact that democracies have to ensure that extra-institutional point of views (e.g., journalism, social media) are diverse and impartial.

By separating the domain of will and the one of opinion, Urbinati creates an attractive angle of attack because, even if a populist claims that she does not want to abolish the mechanisms of will, Urbinati can still criticize her for not being attentive enough to the democratic dimension of opinion. While Laclau argued that populism was democratic thanks to its ability to reintegrate excluded groups, Urbinati argues that populism is *anti-democratic* because, even when it maintains the institutional domain of will relatively intact, it still attacks the domain of opinion and its capacity to effectively check democratic rules and institutions. While Laclau argued that populism is pluralistic because it enables the reconfiguration of the terrain where political groups and identities emerge, she argues that it is *anti-pluralistic* because it homogenizes the extra-institutional domain where diverse conflicts and alliances can flourish. While Laclau argued that populism is eminently political because it creates a frontier that lets genuine conflict and demands emerge, she argues that it is *anti-political* because populism says that the people can do no wrong because it has no proximity to power.

One of Laclau’s central argument is that it is an inherent risk of systemic projects (e.g., populism) that they can generate bad consequences. In *Me the People*, Urbinati sidesteps this argument by saying that populism necessarily damages the way in which parliamentarian democracies understand their rules and institutional arrangements. For instance, she says that parliamentarians see elections as turns-taking and as temporary majorities, while populists see elections as a mean to permanently exclude a group and conquer the majority. She also argues that parliamentarians see leaders as mandates, while populist see leaders in terms of embodiment which promotes manipulative leaders that do not take the interests of their representatives into account.

However, Laclau doesn’t disagree that more populism would damage Urbinati’s conception of parliamentarian democracy. Laclau wants a radical democracy that promotes the idea that institutions are contingent and can be radically changed if needed. For Laclau, many forms of radical change are not possible if the group that is asking for change sees itself as only one party among others and has no strong exclusionary claims. In *Me the People*, Urbinati points out several cases of populist movements with strong exclusionary claims that went wrong, but Laclau would have probably responded with examples that he approved – e.g., anti-racism’s exclusion of racist people or the French Revolutionaries’ exclusion of the nobility.

This issue then repeats itself in the question of the leader. For Laclau, leaders that want to bring radical change must become “embodied” so that they can partially constitute and represent a group of marginalized causes. Urbinati gives examples of how this could go wrong, but Laclau also spend some time giving examples of how it could succeed – e.g., through his rhetoric, Bernie Sander partially constitutes and represents a front between feminist, workerist, queer, and racial causes. Here, again, Laclau admits that leaders can go wrong. On the one hand, if a populist leader becomes purely manipulative or even authoritarian, his words and actions lose their force because they are no longer seen as representing something wider than themselves – the leader is only representing *his particular self* and, therefore, his actions are *only* *his* *actions* and not the ones of the populist front. Not only is the effectiveness of the front compromised, but its democratic element is also compromised since the leader is no longer representing marginalized groups.

Urbinati argues that her diarchic theory accommodates all antiestablishmentarian forms of politics except Laclau’s populism. However, on the one hand, Urbinati’s model excludes Laclau’s populism while also excluding many forms of antiestablishment politics that she wants to preserve – Marxism’s exclusion of the bourgeoisie, antiracism’s exclusion of racism. On the other hand, she argues that Laclau’s populism differs from other antiestablishment claims because it is not based on economic or social claims, but purely on political ones – i.e., the proximity of the excluded group to state power. However, for Laclau, populism is both a form and a content: it identifies some social and economic group that it then excludes – e.g., “the elites in New York” or “the billionaire class.” This problem of Urbinati’s phenomenological approach repeats itself when she argues that populism has no universal values. Since, for Laclau, populism is both a form and a content, it always has values to universalize – e.g. a nation’s self-determination or basic human rights.

What is true of Urbinati’s critique is also true of other critics, such as Andrew Arato and Jan-Werner Müller: their critiques use liberal presuppositions; they are meant to resonate with a liberal public rather than an agonistic one. Laclau wants a radical democracy and not a parliamentary one. Therefore, critiques that point out that he is damaging a liberal conception of democracy do not address him on his own grounds.

Furthermore, these critiques put liberals in a weak spot because, in practice, they adopt the theoretical presuppositions of their agonistic opponents. In his recent work, *Democracy Rules* (2021), Müller essentially accepts the radical democratic notion that democracy is a regime where all beliefs are uncertain. However, he puts two “hard borders” that try to block the excesses of the radical democratic framework:

Uncertainty (…) must be contained within two hard borders: people cannot have license to undermine the standing of their fellow citizens as free and equal members of the polity, and while everyone is entitled to their opinions, everyone cannot have their own facts.

The very term “hard border” indicates that Müller is working within the radical democrats’ framework. Liberals are therefore in a defensive posture: they can only draw borders within the theoretical presuppositions of their opponents. As I argued in a previous essay:

(…) accepting and sharing [Laclau’s] anti-essentialist premises and then looking for a “middle ground” essentialism ensures that liberals will have Laclauean radicalism as a permanent sparring partner— someone who will always ask, “How do you know that this is the *correct* hard border? Why draw the limits of violence and intolerance *there*?”[[1]](#footnote-1)

In the next two sections, I will show that, by addressing Laclau’s political theory on its own terms, we can see that radical democrats are not consistent. A radical democracy that prioritizes conflict instead of pluralism will creates citizens that are increasingly unable to revise their own beliefs. Only a pluralistic democracy can avoid the ideological entrenchment of radical democratic paradigms.

2. Critique of Laclau’s radical democracy

A helpful way to understand Laclau’s radical democracy is by inserting him in the history of political thought and by showing the similarities between his thought and the one of the cold war liberals (e.g., Karl Popper, Isaiah Berlin, and Raymond Aron). All of these thinkers have similar critiques of Marxism that will help us understand where Laclau is coming from. Let’s note three things before we begin. First, Laclau and these liberals differ considerably ideologically speaking and, aside from a few citations, I have no textual evidence that Laclau has read these liberals very deeply. These are not problems, however, since the advantage of historic-political approaches is precisely that they help us take a step back and see the long-term connections between ideas, even between unlikely thinkers. Second, the potential advantages of this approach touch several publics: on the one hand, Laclau scholars and their opponents who will acquire a better understanding of the cold war assumptions of Laclau and will be able to better determine the extent of his “liberal” and “conservative” heritage; on the other hand, liberal scholars who will acquire a better understanding of how Laclau has undermined crucial assumptions of the liberal conception of democracy, and how he made room for radical democracy and populism. Third, all thinkers are unique and it would be impossible to compare their common ideas without using a meta-vocabulary that they did not use. Only at the end of this inquiry will we be able to assess whether it was worth it and whether the benefits that we acquired surpassed the necessary simplifications.

Laclau and the cold war liberals all criticized the universalist, dogmatic, and authoritarian assumptions of Marxism. They were especially critical of the fact that Marxism had a rigid political blueprint that held true irrespective of one’s context (e.g., the revolution and the achievement of socialism were always and everywhere the final political goals). Where Laclau and the liberals part ways is when they formulate their respective conceptions of democracy. For instance, Popper (on whom I will focus in this paper) argued that the alternative to Marxism’s closed society was an open society that eschewed radical change and prioritized institutions that fostered the peaceful discussion of policies. Laclau, however, does not think that these institutions are necessary for democracy. He argues that, on the contrary, if we are to take democracy seriously, then we should allow even the possibility that revolutions and radical reforms are possible in a democratic context.

There is a fundamental epistemological dimension to the critique of the cold war liberals against Marxism.[[2]](#footnote-2) Each in their own way, they argued that the authoritarian streak of Marxism is derived from beliefs about politics and society that are dogmatic and not open to revision. Popper, for instance, argues that Marxism is sustained thanks to historicist beliefs that posit that the arrival of socialism is a necessary law of history. In turn, he says, these historicist beliefs find their source in a dogmatic conception of science that shields the militant from having to critically reflect about their political beliefs and their flaws. Against Marxism’s historicism, Popper proposed a fallibilistic conception of science where scientists compete to refute one another’s theory, test hypotheses by trial-and-error, and focus on making piecemeal refutations rather than proposing grand-scale theories about the nature of history.

Although he wrote on politics, Popper was foremost a philosopher of science and his conception of democracy mirrors his fallibilistic epistemology. Against Marxism’s claim that a genuine democracy would emerge out of its political program, Popper offered his notion of open society where policies would be openly discussed and where decisions would proceed through partial reforms. Against Marxism, cold war liberals like Popper emphasized an institutional form of democracy that eschewed radicalism and revolutionary change, and they praised the virtues of institutionalism and conversationalism.

Laclau’s political thought is similar to the cold war liberals’ in that he also sees the source of Marxism’s authoritarianism in its epistemological dimension. Once a political militant possesses a science that gives her irrefutable insight into the very laws of history, the militant will not be willing to criticize and revise her beliefs. For instance, for the Marxist, politics was necessarily the struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletarian as these actors were the reflection of universal sociological and economic laws. For Laclau, on the contrary, we cannot foresee the type of problems that we will eventually face nor do we know who will be the relevant actors of tomorrow’s political struggles. Although Laclau does not reject the possibility that revolutions might be needed to achieve specific reforms, he rejects the idea of a revolution that could lead to a utopia where society’s problems would be permanently solved. For Laclau, once a specific political project has achieved its goals, it cannot remain obsessed with a specific set of problems otherwise it will never stop to pursue a supposed enemy (e.g., capitalism, the bourgeoisie) that has ceased to become a problem. A political project with dogmatic beliefs will not become a project to radically improve society, but an unshakeable political religion that leads to totalitarianism.

One of the reasons behind Laclau’s epistemological criticism of Marxism is that, at the time he and Chantal Mouffe published *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985), he was trying to convince leftwing circles to adopt a more flexible vision of politics that could integrate the New Social Movements (e.g., queer, racial, and feminist politics). However, his conception of democracy is also radical: the new political causes that will emerge tomorrow do not necessarily have to adopt the sort of conversationalist and institutional conception of democracy of the cold war liberals. In fact, Laclau criticizes liberal democracy for the same reason that he criticizes Marxism: if no belief is immune to revision, then why assume that specific institutional arrangements (e.g., parliaments) or behaviors (e.g., civilized conversation) are themselves outside of revision?[[3]](#footnote-3) If democracy is a regime where specific institutional arrangements or specific political procedures are presupposed from the onset, then this would violate the idea that democracy is a regime where no beliefs are immune to revision. Laclau also argues that we cannot presuppose the means of how we will change our institutions either. Perhaps democracy will proceed piecemeal, but perhaps it will need to use radical change or even revolution in order to change its own institutions.

Laclau’s idea that democracy is a regime where no institutions is immune to radical revision helps explain his affinity with populism. For Laclau, populism is a form of radical politics and it is inherently at odds with liberal conceptions of democracy. It forces elites to face the possibility that their policies and institutional arrangements are not set in stone and that they might be in need of revision. He did not think that populism was a panacea for all future situations, but he did think that, if democratic actors became more willing to use populism more often, then this would ultimately create better democracies in the sense that democratic actors, and especially members of the establishment, would become more willing to see their own institutional arrangements as contingent and in need of revision.

However, Laclau’s notion of democracy is not consistent because conflict does not ensure a democracy where political adversaries can change their beliefs. A nationalist (or a Marxist, a feminist, etc.) that is completely immersed in her own political beliefs will never be able to thoroughly revise or even abandon her ideas if she does not contrast them with ideas from opposed ideologies. In fact, conflict entrenches political contenders and prevents them from changing their beliefs. In order to enable our nationalist, Marxist, or feminist (or any other type of political ideologist) to revise her beliefs, she would need to actively confront these ideas with the ideas of a political ideology of the opposite type. She would need a form of democracy whose priority is not conflict but the engagement with the beliefs of one’s opponent.

Radical democracy is inconsistent because conflict alone does not increase the awareness of one’s own political beliefs. Democratic conflict is beneficial when it exists under conditions where political adversaries are aware of their opponents’ beliefs. But conflict is blind when it is agonistic. It increases the contenders’ obliviousness to their own ideas, prevents them from assessing whether their ideas should be revised, and prevents them from abandoning outdated beliefs. Agonistic conflict creates the kind of politics that Laclau wanted to avoid: a politics of relentless pursuit of one goal without self-critical assessment.

The inconsistency of Laclau’s radical democracy comes from the fact that he highly prizes the possibility of changing one’s political beliefs and, therefore, he makes democracy dependent on the existence of one’s opponent in a way that undercuts its radicalism. For the orthodox Marxist, this difficulty did not present itself since the beliefs of the Marxist were sanctioned by a dogmatic science. The Marxist believed that he was right and that his opponents were wrong. He did not need to check his political ideas against the ones of his bourgeois opponents. Laclau’s radical democracy, however, requires the active engagement of the radical democrats with their opponents. Political opponents can only become aware of their own beliefs when they confront their beliefs with opposite beliefs.

In the end, Laclau’s notion of democracy entails, not a conflictual form of democracy, but a pluralistic democracy where political actors are aware of their own political beliefs by knowing and actively engaging with the beliefs of their opponents – a democracy where the Marxist will read and know the conservative, and the conservative will read and know the Marxist. The active engagement of opposed political beliefs enables adversaries to know their own beliefs, prevents them from becoming entrenched in their own beliefs, and enables them to practice the self-criticism of their beliefs.

3. Pluralistic democracy

Theories of radical democracy value conflict but also entrench the agonistic contenders further within their own ideas. Prioritizing conflict in democracy worsens the very problem that conflict was supposed to solve: the possibility of changing one’s political beliefs. Today, the effects of this ideological entrenchment are increasingly clear. In academia, compartmentalization and specialization are making it increasingly difficult to engage in the study of opposed political beliefs. Engaging with the ideas of one’s opponent used to be the norm but this preoccupation is now increasingly marginal. It is also increasingly difficult to engage in the impartial study of rival ideologies. Heightened ideological conflict, coupled with the dearth of resources and jobs, has made it more beneficial to become entrenched in one’s ideological camp.

We also see ideological entrenchment in some quarters of emancipatory politics. Take, for instance, the transition from second to third-wave feminism. Although the most outward expressions of sexism and patriarchalism have disappeared in the transition from one wave to the other, the rhetoric against sexism and patriarchalism has increasingly heightened. Feminist struggles have not only taken a more subtle and symbolic dimension, but they also present sexism as being more pervasive than ever. Given that there is increasingly less communication between opposed political camps, there is a real risk that this rhetoric is itself the product of ideological entrenchment. As Laclau argued, political projects that achieve their goals are supposed to shift their attention to different goals otherwise they will relentlessly pursue the same goals. In turn, we saw that changing one’s political beliefs is only possible where there is no ideological entrenchment, i.e., when I confront my beliefs with other beliefs from opposed political projects. Heightening one’s rhetoric can be an appropriate strategy, but we can only have a clear view of the appropriateness of this move when we also look at our own political beliefs from the point of view of our opponents’ beliefs.

The critique of Laclau’s radical democracy leads to a pluralistic democracy. Indeed, the problem of Laclau’s conceptions of democracy is that he saw pluralism, not as active engagement, but in terms of the bare existence of legitimate differences. The same can be said of the cold war liberals who were also more interested in institutions that ensured such bare pluralism rather than institutions that would ensure a high degree of engagement of its interlocutors. Of course, at the time, Laclau and the liberals were responding to the Marxist’s claim that bourgeois pluralism should be overthrown to give way to a genuine pluralism. Therefore, they responded to Marxism by developing a notion of pluralism that legitimized the existence of political opponents. In the end, given the opponent that they were facing, they did not need to create a more comprehensive notion of pluralism in terms of active engagement.

This critique of Laclau rebuilds the liberals’ notion of democracy on a new and firmer ground. Indeed, we saw that Laclau’s notion of radical democracy topples the conversationalist democracy of the liberals: if democracy is a regime where beliefs can be revised, there is no guarantees that democracy must necessarily exist in a specific set of institutions or that it should always obey specific rules of civilized discussion. For Laclau, we must embrace the fact that no beliefs or institutions are immune to revision and we must leave open the possibility of radical change. By undermining the idea that democracy must limit itself to deliberative and conversational forms of democracy, he opens the door to radical programs such as populism.

This new conversationalist conception of democracy is built on firmer grounds, not only because it avoids Laclau’s critique of democratic conversationalism, but also because it embraces a deeper conception of pluralism. The cold war liberals emphasized democratic debate between *mainstream* political beliefs, on the one hand, and the facts that these ideologies had to be framed in representative institutions, on the other. In the conception of pluralistic democracy that I am proposing, the emphasis is on understanding political beliefs that are the extreme opposite of one’s own. Someone close to my political ideas will only criticize some of my beliefs, while someone with the extreme opposite ideas will criticize a greater number of my beliefs, thus giving me the chance to see what my beliefs are. In other words, this conception of pluralistic democracy isn’t just one that requires its participants to only know their nearest kin, but one that requires knowing the beliefs that are the most opposite to their own.

In a pluralistic democracy, conflict exists within institutions that incentivize political opponents to know one another’s beliefs. Laclau liked to say that contingency is the precondition of democracy. In the end, we will see that the precondition for democracy is not the recognition of contingency, but to learn how to see thing from the perspective of the ones that are most different from ourselves.

1. Pedro Góis Moreira, “Laclau’s New Postmodern Radicalism: Politics, Democracy, and the Epistemology of Certainty,” *Critical Review*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08913811.2022.2060540> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Jan-Wemer Müller, “Fear and Freedom: On “Cold War Liberalism,”” *European Journal of Political Theory*, vol. 7, n°1, pp. 45-64: 48, 51-52, and 55 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Laclau therefore disagrees with Habermas’ discourse ethics and he is suspicious of Connolly’s idea that agonism presupposes a culture of mutual respect. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)