

Review

For a Left Populism

Chantal Mouffe. London: Verso, 2018. 112pp.

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Chantal Mouffe's brief work *For a Left Populism* sets out to tackle the issue of how left politics should respond to the global trend towards populism. While elections in recent years have ushered in populist leaders in states ranging from the Philippines to the United States, Mouffe focuses her analysis on Western European populism specifically. Her argument centres on the importance of recovering democracy in an increasingly "post-democratic" world; to successfully radicalise democracy, Mouffe argues, leftists must first reform existing political institutions. While Mouffe makes an original argument for a reclamation of the term 'populism' by a leftist audience, the brevity of *For a Left Populism* makes a thorough understanding of its theoretical underpinnings difficult for those unfamiliar with Mouffean scholarship to parse.

In setting the stage for her argument, Mouffe begins by dispelling potential misconceptions about the core requirements of a populist movement. Mouffe argues

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against an understanding of populism as an ideology; she suggests instead that a populist moment occurs when, “under the pressure of political or socioeconomic transformations, the dominant hegemony is being destabilised by the multiplication of unsatisfied demands” (Mouffe 2018: 11). The surge in right-wing populism has emerged as a response to a “post-democratic” political climate, in which the “neoliberal hegemony” has contributed to the triumph of economic liberalism and an eradication of agonistic spaces (16). With the elimination of agonistic spaces comes the removal of the tension between liberal and democratic principles (at the expense of the latter). Both left-wing and right-wing populism, Mouffe argues, aim to reclaim democracy by re-inscribing the distinction between the establishment and “the people.” The two sides differ, however, in their construction of “the people”; for right-wing populists, nationalistic and often xenophobic principles define “the people,” whereas their left-wing counterparts frame the identity of the people in opposition to a neoliberal oligarchy (23–24). Critical to this left populist identity is a move beyond the class essentialism that has characterised many previous leftist movements.

Within this broad understanding of a left-wing populist identity, Mouffe distinguishes between three potential segments of “the left” and outlines the goals associated with each. The first type, which she calls “pure reformist,” accepts both liberal democratic and neoliberal principles. The second group, composed of “radical reformists,” accepts the basic principles of legitimacy of liberal democracy but “attempts to implement a different hegemonic formation” (46). The third group, called the “revolutionary politics” group, advocates for a complete upheaval of the existing order and is most closely associated with Leninist and anarchist movements. The best path forward, Mouffe argues, is along a radical reformist line that does not require abandoning political liberalism or representative democracy—or the institutions associated with either. It is possible, Mouffe suggests, to “bring about a transformation of the existing hegemonic order without destroying liberal-democratic institutions” (36).

To bring about this transformation, potential left populists must first work to discursively construct a people and, by extension, foster the expansion of the “radical democratic collective will” (62). Mouffe makes a critical distinction here between the expansion of a collective will and the creation of a homogenous people.

To contribute to a construction of a people without homogenisation requires a reconceptualisation of citizenship. Mouffe argues that citizenship should be considered as a political “grammar of conduct,” through which “it is possible to be part of a ‘people’ identified with a radical democratic project, while being at the same time inscribed in a plurality of other social relations with their specific ‘subjectivities’” (67). Through this new construction of a “people,” leftists can combat the reinforcement of neoliberal hegemony; Mouffe argues that in order to “maintain its hegemony, the neoliberal system needs to constantly mobilise people’s desires and shape their identities” (77). Undermining neoliberal dominance requires “cultivating a multiplicity of discursive/affective practices that would erode the common affects that sustain the neoliberal hegemony and create the conditions for a radicalisation of democracy” (77). By cultivating these practices, Mouffe asserts, the new left populists will be able to break the cycle of constant ideological conditioning on which neoliberal dominance depends.

Despite its relatively recent publication date, aspects of Mouffe’s argument have not aged well. Mouffe bases her optimism for the future in large part on the example of the United Kingdom. One chapter of *For a Left Populism* centres on the lessons to be gleaned from Thatcherism: Mouffe notes that by “erecting a political frontier, [Thatcher] was able to disarticulate the key elements of the social-democratic hegemony and to establish a new hegemonic order based on popular consent” (29). Thatcher managed to break the “consensus” between Labour and the Tories by re-inscribing an “us-vs.-them” mentality to construct a right-wing populist version of democracy. Thatcher’s successful facilitation of a right shift in U.K. politics serves as proof, Mouffe asserts, of the possibility of initiating a shift in political culture without the destruction of existing institutions (36). Having established the possibility of achieving this goal on the right side of the political spectrum, however, Mouffe turns to prospects for the left.

Mouffe describes the current left in the U.K. as a group that has moved away from the “consensual model instigated by Tony Blair” under Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership (38). Corbyn’s strategy corresponds to Mouffe’s vision of a left populist strategy, one that promotes “the establishment of a political frontier between the people and the establishment” (38). Mouffe cites Corbyn’s success in “win[ing] back

many disillusioned voters” as evidence of the “capacity of left populism to give a new impulse to democratic politics” (38). Given the resounding failure of the December 2019 general election for the Labour party, however, this optimism seems less warranted. With the subsequent selection of Keir Starmer as Corbyn’s successor as Labour leader, furthermore, the left appears to be moving closer to, rather than further from, the Blairite consensus model. Though Mouffe focuses on European populism specifically, results from the 2020 United States Democratic primary also suggest a shift away from a radicalisation of democracy and towards a centrist strategy. Given these backslides in progression towards the construction of a new left populist identity, Mouffe’s vision seems increasingly unrealistic rather than simply optimistic.

While the length of *For a Left Populism* contributes to a potential sense of accessibility for a wider audience, its brevity also leads to a lack of clarity on core concepts. Readers familiar with the works of Mouffe (see, for example, Mouffe 1992, 1993, 2000, 2005, and 2013) and Laclau (see Laclau and Mouffe 1985) will have little trouble navigating the discussions of agonism, hegemony, grammars of conduct, and subjectivities; those approaching *For a Left Populism* without a solid understanding of these concepts, however, will have difficulty in making sense of Mouffe’s prescriptions. While Mouffe includes a theoretical appendix expanding on her anti-essentialist approach and an agonistic approach to democracy (Mouffe 2018: 87–93), these concepts require additional expansion and contextualisation to give clarity to their precise role in forming a left populist movement.

Of these two concepts, agonism in particular will likely be alien to those who have not previously encountered Mouffe. Agonism, the subject of many of Mouffe’s other works, is presented in vaguer and more watered-down terms throughout *For a Left Populism*. An agonistic approach to democracy is one that seeks to embrace contestation and division in society rather than attempting to eradicate it in order to reach consensus (an outcome whose possibility agonists firmly reject). While agonistic approaches typically fall under the umbrella of radical democratic theory, the agonistic approach outlined in *For a Left Populism* displays weaker boundaries with traditional liberal approaches. Mouffe speaks of “the agonistic tension between the liberal and the democratic principles” in liberal democracies (16). This version of

agonism suggests a radical reformist approach that tends more towards the reformist side; without elaboration on the exact parameters of agonism in the context of left populism, the critical distinction between agonistic and traditional liberal politics becomes less evident.

In addition to the two areas covered in the theoretical appendix, Mouffe's work (and a deeper grasp of agonism) depends on a clear understanding of the concept of hegemony. Mouffe's use of the term 'hegemony' refers to a specific understanding based on Gramscian principles. Despite frequent references to Gramsci throughout *For a Left Populism*, Mouffe fails to fully delineate this understanding in the book. Laclau and Mouffe (1985: xii) previously defined hegemony as a process by which "elements whose own nature does not predetermine them to enter into one type of arrangement rather than another nevertheless coalesce, as a result of an external or articulatory practice." This definition, which differs sharply from traditional understandings of hegemony, is implied but not clearly explained in *For a Left Populism*. These gaps in description, necessitated to some extent by the slimness of the volume, detract from the potential impact of Mouffe's vision for a new left.

Despite the shortcomings in this work, *For a Left Populism* is an ambitious attempt to navigate the boundaries between academic scholarship and policy guidance. This attempt serves as both a strength and a weakness: while there are aspects of the book that offer significant contributions to each realm, *For a Left Populism* remains too abstract to offer clear direction to policymakers and too generalised to make a substantial impact in the scholarly community. The book also raises questions regarding its scope and generalisability. To what extent do the principles outlined here extend to other (and, more specifically, non-European) contexts? Mouffe notes early on that Western European populism differs from its Eastern European and Latin American counterparts (10), but her work leaves ambiguous the extent to which context limits the applicability of the strategies outlined. At a broader level, given the downfall of a Corbynite Labour party, does the promise of a left-wing response to right populism remain feasible? By raising these questions, *For a Left Populism* opens the door for a host of further research on the future of leftist strategic planning and party development.

On the whole, Mouffe's *For a Left Populism* represents a bold endeavour to tackle an understudied subset of populist scholarship. The book offers suggestions for critical first steps in conceptualising a path forward as leftists struggle to construct a progressive answer to their right wing populist counterparts. While the brevity of the work and its unfortunate choice in case studies have limited *For a Left Populism's* potential impact, it raises important questions for the consideration of scholars and policymakers alike.

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