

BOOK REVIEW

For a Left Populism by Chantal Mouffe, New York: Verso, 2018. \$23.99 CAN, hardcover, ISBN-13: 978-1-78663-755-0. Pages: 1-98.

Reviewed by Barret Weber¹

For decades, political theorist Chantal Mouffe led efforts to outline a theory of politics capable of coming to terms with on-the-ground struggles generally referred to as New Social Movements. The path-breaking work, *Hegemony and Socialist Struggle* (1985), written with long-time collaborator Ernesto Laclau, put a unique theory of hegemony on the table for discussion in which “the political” was placed squarely at the centre of analysis. The push was to move beyond “essentialist” thinking in the left that relegated many diverse struggles to the margins.

According to Mouffe and Laclau, a deepened and radicalized concept of hegemony was needed to bring about a new “ontology of the social,” which the authors thought was needed to escape problems they diagnosed in the canons of Marxism that reified social class as the *a priori* category of social and political analysis, as well as the regrettable conversion of social democracy to neoliberalism under “the third way” and New Labour. In the influential preface to the second edition of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (2001), they argued that the left should:

create a chain of equivalence among various democratic struggles against different forms of subordination. We argued that struggles against sexism, racism, sexual discrimination, and in the defence of the environment needed to be articulated with those of the workers in a new left-wing hegemonic project (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: xviii).

It was around this time that I first encountered Mouffe and Laclau’s work as I began to study and explore my interests in politics and social theory. I fondly remember their interventions as being insightful - while certainly a challenging read - for theorists and activists building a framework to unite sometimes conflicting struggles in search of social justice. Mouffe and Laclau’s work was important in articulating a sophisticated, theoretically-informed renewal project capable of providing a framework to unite diverse struggles into an overall democratic project.

Almost twenty years later, it would seem little has changed: the left is still in search of a unified project and the stakes couldn’t be higher given the obvious advances of right-wing populism across much of the world. *For a Left Populism* should be read in the context of well-trod debates in Marxist and reformist circles about the nature of politics and social class since the 1980s. It will also likely be read as a restatement of the main tenants of the project after the passing of her famous writing partner and husband Ernesto Laclau (1935-2014).

The main thesis of *For a Left Populism* is virtually indistinguishable from many of the earlier texts. Mouffe describes the purpose of the book as an effort to challenge an “inadequate conception of politics” in which the left “in both its Marxist and social-democratic versions” has failed to unite social movements that cannot be reduced to class terms (1-2). Where this book does

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depart from previous works is to directly confront the “populist moment” (5) where neoliberal capitalism has brought about “new forms of subordination...outside the productive process” (6).

Mouffe builds on Laclau’s definition of populism in *On Populist Reason* (2005), which is defined “as a discursive strategy of constructing a political frontier dividing society into two camps and calling for the mobilization of the ‘underdog’ against ‘those in power’” (10-11). Mouffe argues that the populist moment “signals the crisis of neoliberal hegemonic formation” in Western Europe since the 1980s. She argues that the solution to the crisis is not quite yet in view, leading to the “expression of a variety of resistances to the political and economic transformations seen during the years of neoliberal hegemony” (12). However, Mouffe is clear enough that the task at hand is to build a politics “oriented towards the establishment of a different hegemonic order within the liberal-democratic framework” (38). Jeremy Corbyn’s “repoliticization” of the British Labour Party is noted as a recent example of this type of approach.

On this basis, Mouffe revisits previous work while reflecting on the possibilities for a left populism. Chapter 1, as briefly described above, engages with today’s “populist moment.” Chapter 2, “Learning from Thatcherism,” is one of the most interesting and potentially controversial chapters, given the claim that we “should follow Thatcher’s route, adopting a populist strategy, but this time with a progressive objective, intervening on a multiplicity of fronts to build a new hegemony aiming at recovering and deepening democracy” (35).

Chapter 3 “Radicalizing Democracy” takes up a distinctly anti-capitalist stance, while reasserting the idea that “there is no reason to assume that the working class has an *a priori* privileged role in the anti-capitalist struggle” (49). This is, as mentioned, part of Mouffe’s long-standing polemic against what she goes so far as calling the “extreme left” that does not “engage with how people are in reality, but with how they should be according to their theories” (50). There has been no shortage of debate and even antagonism between those who identify as Marxists and Mouffe and Laclau’s explicitly “post-Marxist” approach. Chapter 4 “The Construction of a People,” a short conclusion, and a “theoretical appendix,” subtitled “An Anti-Essentialist Approach,” make up the remainder of the book.

These chapters certainly raise some interesting points - particularly around the possibilities of a “left populist strategy” given the changing nature of politics and democratic movements. However, they also contain heavy doses of jargon, tend to repetition in places, and at times come off as defensive. With that being said, Mouffe and Laclau’s project was always heavy on theoretical detail to the point where it became rather cluttered in terms of the many theoretical traditions it attempted to synthesize. *For a Left Populism* contains these traditional weaknesses while itself failing anew to clearly outline a strategy for how the left can effectively oppose the right wing populist moment with a much-needed left wing populist alternative.

For readers looking to revisit the debates of the past, including Mouffe’s response to the main criticisms of her work, this would be a valued resource. However, for those who are already fatigued by some of the poststructuralist discourse that has informed the project for decades, there really isn’t much new to learn here.

For a Left Populism does important work of articulating how left populism might rise to the challenge of opposing neoliberal capitalism. But it is short on offering insights into how this could be organized amongst real grassroots struggles in real situations. The closest answers we get were already contained in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* from 1985; that is, we need “the construction of a collective subject apt to launch a political offensive in order to establish a new hegemonic formation within the liberal democratic framework” (80).

For those who are weary of just such a turn away from the traditions of the working class, and who would like to find spaces for struggle outside of liberal democracy – whose very institutional foundations have been damaged and corrupted by neoliberalism – Mouffe only responds by saying “there is no point in answering those criticisms that proceed from the very conception of politics against which I have been arguing” (80). In this respect, the more things change, the more they stay the same... According to Chantal Mouffe, it’s hegemony within liberal democracy or bust.

References

Laclau, Ernesto and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. Second Edition. New York: Verso, 2001.

Laclau, Ernesto, *On Populist Reason*, New York: Verso, 2005. New edition, 2018