FROM MY BOOKSHELF 31.10.2018 | Paul Hockenos

Review of 'For a Left Populism'

In this book, political scientist Chantal Mouffe argues that populism could be the only way to reinvigorate a faltering left

In Europe, populism has distinctly negative connotations: of the mob, fierce demagoguery, scapegoating, charismatic strong-arm leaders and violence. But Belgian political scientist Chantal Mouffe is one of a number of intellectuals and leftist politicos arguing that populism isn't *per se* sinister, nor is it the sole preserve of the right.

Left-wing populism, she argues, can be effective in the form of a broad, progressive, grassroots movement rallying discontents around a struggle for radical democracy. In terms of theory, she joins US philosopher Nancy Fraser, who made a similar argument last year in the pages of *Dissent*. But there are relevant flesh-and-blood incarnations of left populism too: Podemos in Spain, Syriza in Greece, Labour's Momentum in the UK and Bernie Sanders' 2016 campaign, among others.

Mouffe draws on these examples, as well as her own work, to argue that progressives can corral populism to their benefit. To do so, they must draw sharp lines again between left and right, not shirking a fight with the neoliberal establishment as, she claims, most of the contemporary left has, hoping to have a few crumbs thrown its way. This lazy compromise has enabled the far right to attack the status quo so successfully, she argues, and capture the votes of the system's many discontented in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis.

She labels this condition the 'populist moment', which leftists ignore at their own peril – as European Social Democrats and US Democrats have in the recent past, with disastrous results. She spares Europe's Social Democrats nothing, calling them 'prisoners of their post-political dogmas, and reluctant to admit their mistakes'. They cannot, she says, 'recognize that many of the demands articulated by right-wing populist parties are democratic demands, to which a progressive answer must be given'.

Democracy undone

It's difficult to say that Mouffe's notion of the populist moment helps understand our current conundrum. In the 1980s, she argues legitimately enough, political elites abandoned Western Europe's social democratic welfare states for a free-market economic model that we know today as neo-liberalism. The rule of the free market took over that of the state, ushering in a permanent regime of deregulation, privatisation and fiscal austerity. The role of the state was circumscribed to the protection of the market, property rights and free trade. And neoliberalist 'possessive individualism', Mouffe claims, infused society too.

The neoliberal project sailed along, gaining adherents and hegemony until the financial crisis, when it fell apart. Yet there was no alternative to replace it, she argues, so embedded had the whole spectrum of political parties and institutions become in the consensus. Democracy itself had become undone, there being no real choice among the elites representing corporate interests. In systems in which elections don't matter, citizens were deprived of democratic rights – and they were unhappy about it.

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This opened the way for the far right and national populists, who challenged the elites and 'post-democracy' as a system without offering a viable alternative. France's National Front and Austria's Freedom Party, to name just two, cashed in with calls to return the polity to the people. Their classic populist dichotomy of 'us against them' obviously made sense to many voters, which is why right-wing protest parties prospered, she argues.

Thus, the main prerequisite for the left getting back on its feet is to abandon the neoliberal status quo, which may once have been seductive but certainly no longer is. The response cannot limit itself to narrow categories such as class, gender or race, but rather must 'federate all the democratic struggles against post-democracy. Instead of excluding *a priori* the voters of right-wing populist parties as necessarily moved by atavistic passions … it is necessary to recognize the democratic nucleus at the origin of many of their demands.' It is democracy itself – with a strong dose of social justice – that will unite majorities large enough to overturn the status quo.

Populism with a dose of nationalism

Mouffe's critique of Europe's centre parties is strong, and certainly to a large extent legitimate. But her claim that discontents will abandon nationalism and authoritarian politicos to rally around something as vague as 'radical democracy' is highly questionable. Many of the right's voters have strongly authoritarian leanings and flock to the right because they want a strong-arm leader. Hungary's Viktor Orbán makes no pretences about his brand of 'illiberal democracy'. It's not something hidden from Hungarian voters – they like it, and many profit from it. Nationalism isn't just 'imagined communities', as political scientist Benedict Anderson argues. There's something to it that so boggles the left-wing mind that leftists dismiss it, wrongly, as a form of false consciousness.

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There is, of course, also the danger, which we see in one current of Germany's democratic socialists, Die Linke (The Left), as well as Italy's Five Star Movement: namely that leftists will exploit populism using a dose of nationalism to lure back the working class. This is exactly what Germany's new political project Aufstehen (Rise Up), is trying to do. The Five Star Movement is currently in a governing coalition with Italy's far right Northern League, signing on to its fierce anti-immigration policies.

Interestingly, other strands in Die Linke are urban and libertine, they embrace radical democracy and demand a social welfare state that appears to be what you would get if you meshed 1980s Sweden and the GDR. They are among the harshest critics of Aufstehen and the leftist national populists, who they say stoop to anti-immigrant tropes to win over right-wing voters.

Stealing fire from the right

Germany's Greens would fall squarely into Mouffe's criticism of a mainstream party prepared to throw in its lot with the neoliberal establishment in order to take away compromises – on sustainability and climate issues, for example. Two elections ago, the Greens ran on their most socially progressive platform ever, which called for the introduction of a handful of new and higher taxes. As a direct result, they were walloped in the vote. The Greens long ago abandoned the idea of posing 'fundamental opposition' to the establishment in favour of working with other democratic parties to make headway on the issues they prioritise,

many of which aren't anathema to capitalism.

Climate change is so critical, they argue, they have to be part of a government to affect legislation, as they did in the 1998-2005 red-green coalition. As junior partner, the Greens initiated the Energiewende, or renewable energy transition, which broke up Germany's energy monopoly and triggered the boom in renewables. The Greens would have accepted a traditional Social Democratic line on the economy – it was SPD chancellor Gerhard Schröder who didn't.

Nevertheless, there's much in Mouffe's short, polemical book that makes sense and that leftists can take away. Stealing fire from the right might just mean culling a few of their insights and tricks. But does empathising with right-wing voters implicitly mean playing down their affinities, as Aufstehen does? Populism, a notoriously thin ideology, perhaps fits radical right-wing movements better than those of the left. It will be very difficult indeed to cherry-pick from the method while not touching the content.



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