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The siren song of left-wing populism

Why European left-wing parties should not follow the path of their Latin American counterparts

Social democratic parties around the world are struggling. In France's 2017 presidential election, the candidate for the Socialists – once the mainstream party of the French left – received a mere 6 per cent of the vote, and the party has since been forced to sell its headquarters on the chic Rue de Solférino in Paris.

Likewise, Germany's Social Democratic Party (SPD) gained just 20 per cent of the vote in that country's federal election last fall – the party's worst showing in the post-war period. And the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) secured just over 20 per cent of the vote in the 2015 and 2016 general elections, which is half the share it received a decade ago.

Meanwhile, in each of these countries, left-wing populist parties have been capturing a significant share of the vote. Twenty percent of French voters cast ballots for Jean-Luc Mélenchon's *La France Insoumise* (France Unbowed) in 2017; 9 per cent of Germans voted for *Die Linke* (The Left); and 21 per cent of Spaniards backed Podemos.

'The people' vs 'the oligarchy'

A growing number of pundits and academics now believe that left-wing populism is the best strategy for returning the left to power and implementing policies to help the so-called 'losers' of neoliberal globalisation. In her new book *For a Left Populism*, Chantal Mouffe of the University of Westminster argues that 'left populism, understood as a discursive strategy of construction of the political frontier between 'the people' and 'the oligarchy,' constitutes, in the present conjuncture, the type of politics needed to recover and deepen democracy.'

Western Europe's left-wing populists have often drawn inspiration from

Curiously, Mouffe spends an entire chapter drawing lessons from Thatcherism, but then overlooks many real-world examples of left-

their Latin American counterparts.

wing populist governments in recent years. These include, most notably, Rafael Correa's 2007-2017 presidency in Ecuador; the increasingly brutal regime of Hugo Chávez and his successor, Nicolás Maduro, in Venezuela; and the administration of President Evo Morales in Bolivia.

Mouffe thus confines her analysis to Western Europe. Despite some resemblances, she believes that the different varieties of left-wing populism around the world 'need to be apprehended according to their various contexts.' But while it is true that the Latin American and Western European strains of left-wing populism are not identical, nor can they be delinked. After all, Western Europe's left-wing populists have often drawn inspiration from their Latin American counterparts.

Europe's lessons from Latin America

For example, Íñigo Errejón, the architect of Podemos's original electoral strategy, wrote his doctoral thesis on the rise of Morales, whom he openly admires. Similarly, Mélenchon has repeatedly defended Chavism and the Maduro regime. And in his 2017 electoral manifesto, he proposed that France join the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of our America, an intergovernmental institution created by the late Cuban dictator Fidel Castro and Chávez in 2004.

In 2016, Mouffe and Errejón co-authored a book in which they discuss Bolivia's experience under Morales. And in her new book, she lists Mélenchon in the acknowledgements, even as she omits the Latin American roots of left-wing populism in Western Europe.

But to examine the track record of radical left-wing populism in contemporary Latin America is to find a devastating picture. A cursory review of the scholarly literature shows that such forces have laid waste to their countries' democracies since the turn of the century.

An objective, empirical examination of the experience of Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela demonstrates that nominally inclusive populist policies have come

When Correa, Chávez, and Morales came to power, they immediately implemented major constitutional reforms through referenda. In each country, the new constitutions not only diminished the power of the old elites, but also severely constrained opposition parties' ability to compete on a level playing field. The executive director of Human Rights Watch's Americas Division has raised several warnings

at far too high a cost.

over the past decade about the deterioration of the rule of law under Correa, Chávez/Maduro, and Morales.

The other populist threat to democracy

Venezuela stands out in this regard. The judiciary has lost its independence, corruption is rampant, and inflation is out of control. And, as Amnesty International's Americas director recently reported, 'People in Venezuela are fleeing an agonising situation that has transformed treatable health conditions into matters of life and death.' Under Maduro, 'basic health services have collapsed and finding essential medicine is a constant struggle, leaving thousands with no choice but to seek health care abroad.'

Clearly, Latin America's recent experience with left-wing populism has been nothing short of disastrous. Those who advocate it as a way 'to recover and deepen democracy' would do well to acknowledge this reality. In my own research, I have always stressed the importance of examining the relationship between populism and democracy empirically. The reason is simple: Though populism can bolster democracy, it can also pose a serious threat to it.

An objective, empirical examination of the experience of Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela demonstrates that nominally inclusive populist policies have come at far too high a cost. Morales, Correa, and Maduro have done lasting damage to their countries' democratic norms and institutions. And Maduro, in particular, has shown that the price for supposedly helping the 'losers' can be the creation of an even greater number of them.

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