



For a Left Populism

Chantal Mouffe

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What is the "populist moment" and what does it mean for the left?

Populism, today, is the expression of a crisis of liberal-democratic politics. It is more than an ideology or a political regime. It is a way of doing politics that can take various forms but emerges when one aims at building a new subject of collective action--the people.

In this new book the leading political thinker Chantal Mouffe proposes a new way to define left populism. The political is to be constructed by establishing a political frontier that divides society into two camps, mobilising an "underdog" against "those in power". Populism, far from being a perversion of democracy, constitutes the most adequate political force to recover and reconstitute itself. This new politics must recognise its partisan character. This presents itself as more than the image of demagoguery and emotive rabbles seen across our media. Furthermore, it is an urgent struggle, because the future will be formed by the kind of populism that emerges victorious from the conflict against the current threats of post-politics and post-democracy.

For a Left Populism Details

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Dafydd says

Right - heard of Chantal Mouffe? Sort of? Heard a bit about 'agonistics', maybe heard of her writing collaboration with Ernesto Laclau? Ok, maybe wandering what the hell the left are playing at in the face of Trump, Brexit, Bolsinario, Orban, etc? If any or all of these are true, this book is excellent. It gives you a basic understanding of her previous writing, and is a right up to date update on her answer as to how the left can win.

Brendan James says

Mouffe's premise is definitely valid; we certainly appear to be in a 'populist moment' in which right- and left-populisms are challenging the neoliberal project. Finding a strategy for the left that taps into that and paves a road to power is an urgent task, and Mouffe's book is an accessible and succinct description of the situation.

Mouffe's conclusions about what to do are less convincing. Her argument that liberal democratic institutions must not only be the **path** to power but also that the left must preserve these institutions once **in** power raises a lot of questions about the actual political goals here.

The book talks a lot about neoliberalism and very little about capitalism. The idea that the left should take advantage of popular discontent with the anti-democratic neoliberal model makes sense (don't put the cart before the horse) but perhaps for reasons of urgency/strategy there's very little in this already slim book about advancing beyond neoliberalism and finding ways to take on capitalist production itself.

Luchian Flofoftei says

„A hegemonic formation is a configuration of social practices of different natures: economic, cultural, political, and juridical, whose articulation is secured around some key symbolic signifiers which shape the ‘common sense’ and provide the normative framework of a given society. The objective of the hegemonic struggle consists in disarticulating the sedimented practices of an existing formation and, through the transformation of these practices and the instauration of new ones, establishing the nodal points of a new hegemonic social formation. This process comports as a necessary step with the rearticulation of the hegemonic signifiers and their mode of institutionalization. Clearly articulating democracy with equal rights, social appropriation of the means of production and popular sovereignty will command a very different politics and inform different socioeconomic practices than when democracy was articulated with the free market, private property and unfettered individualism.”

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„Now we need to consider a question that I take to be crucial for envisaging the construction of a ‘people’: the decisive role played by affects in the constitution of political identities. The lack of understanding of the affective dimension in the processes of identification is, in my view, one of the main reasons for which the left, locked in a rationalist framework, is unable to grasp the dynamics of politics. This rationalism is no doubt at the origin of the stubborn refusal of so many left theorists to accept the teachings of psychoanalysis.”

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„Freud shows that, far from being organized around the transparency of an ego, personality is structured on a number of levels that lie outside of the consciousness and rationality of the agents. He therefore obliges us to abandon one of the key tenets of rationalist philosophy – the category of the subject as a rational, transparent entity able to confer a homogeneous meaning on the totality of her conduct – and to accept that ‘individuals’ are mere referential identities, resulting from the articulation between localized subject positions. The claim of psychoanalysis that there are no essential identities but only forms of identification is at the centre of the anti-essentialist approach that stipulates that the history of the subject is the history of her identifications and that there is no concealed identity to be rescued beyond the latter.”

Steffi says

‘For a Left Populism’ (VERSO, 2018) is a MUST READ for a number of reasons. I will also add it to the carefully curated mandatory induction reading list for new boyfriends. I must investigate this thought some more but I really feel like there is an increasing trend to make socialist political theory more accessible and relevant to actually existing struggles, kind of a populism within the mostly academic discourse. The book is very short, only about 80 pages, and breaks down Mouffe’s earlier and theory heavy work into a few key thoughts and proposed consequences for a left populism. For those who are familiar with Gramsci and post-Marxism this is a neat summary and recap of the story since Mouffe’s and her late husband Laclau’s 1985 post-Marxist manifesto Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. Then, in 1985, they argued that Marxists need to accommodate (theoretically and politically) the demands made by the new movements, moving beyond an economic and class essentializing understanding of social relations towards building chains of equivalence between the various emancipatory struggles. In the 1990s and 2000s, neoliberal hegemony subverted the progressive potential of the new movements, as reflected in liberal feminism, rainbow capitalism, green growth. The 2008 global financial crisis brought about an ongoing crisis in and of neoliberal hegemony (and the model of liberal democracy wedded to the liberal economy) which opened a ‘populist moment’ both for the right and the left (the right on the basis of an authoritarian and nationalist neoliberalism rather than an alternative to neoliberalism itself). Interestingly, the only remaining social force fighting for the neoliberal hegemony status quo is the centre-left/social democracy. The left populism, which we are currently seeing (especially in the US where there is no social democratic tradition and the undemocratic two-party state which structurally enables populism), is precisely the chain of equivalence between the various struggles – minimum wage, immigration, rent control, racism – under the populist antagonism of ‘the people’ versus the oligarchy. Contrary to social democracy’s post-political and post-democratic technocratic fixes to social ills – eg Obama’s market based health insurance or silicon valley’s universal basic income or digital or green capitalism – the left populism aims to re-politicize and re-democratize politics and the economy through disarticulating liberal democracy from the liberal economy and the free market.

Kelly Burton says

Interesting. I am still thinking about this book.

Manuel says

Un libro para Europa, pero que también nos sirve en Sudamérica. Plantea que vivimos un "momento

populista" en la política occidental, y que puede aprovecharse o padecerse.

S M-B says

Euro-communist opportunism, tail-ending Corbyn's Labour Party and aiming to provide academic respectability to nationalism, Brexit and the project of erecting popular hostility to ill-defined 'elites' in place of class politics.

Donald says

A great summary of Mouffe's political arguments over the years as they culminate in the present crisis of neoliberalism. Mouffe explains her shift in emphasis over time from a sort of renewed socialist politics towards a 'popular' left politics that focuses on deepening democracy. The short book also handles traditional annoyances of Mouffe's, like attempts to transcend the liberal-democratic state through Hardt/Negri style theorizing, but each of these interventions is focused on a useful contemporary update. It is also probably Mouffe's most accessible book. The main weakness is that it does not give much room to discussing what happens when the strategy runs into problems. The crisis in Greece is mentioned but does not seem to trouble Mouffe at the level of theory.

Sarah says

As a political science novice, this gave me some language to address the current post-democracy state of Western politics. What the left is doing wrong is outlined very well. I would like to see more about how to create this left populism. I agree that the language being used is not effective, but I didn't draw the conclusions from the author's Freudian analysis that I wanted.

Szymon Pytlak says

W sumie nic nowego. Wszystko ju? u niej by?o. Male repetytorium dla zapominalskich.

Étienne-Alexandre Beauregard says

« Pour un populisme de gauche » de Chantal Mouffe est un livre-éclair qui se lit en un rien de temps, mais il réussit néanmoins à se répéter.

La thèse de l'auteure est simple: alors que le populisme est populaire, la gauche devrait s'en créer un en rassemblant toutes les revendications (féministes, écologistes, antiracistes, alouette) sous une même bannière unie contre « l'oligarchie ». Le but ultime étant de provoquer un changement de paradigme politique à la manière de Margaret Thatcher à la fin du XXe siècle.

L'idée est rudimentaire, surexpliquée mais presque pas mise en application ou comparée au monde réel au-delà de rapides références qui ne dépassent pas le « name dropping ». Considérant le potentiel d'un tel enjeu, je suis relativement déçu du livre de Chantal Mouffe, qui en égratigne à peine la surface.

Kristofer Dubbels says

I'm giving this a 3/5, but read the review for some context. Mouffe is great and deserves to be read and discussed as widely as Zizek or Judith Butler, particularly during this political moment.

The intended audience for this book is a bit hard to discern - maybe there is more of a built-in audience in Europe or Latin America (or elsewhere)? Overall, Mouffe's argument is clear, but she seems to allude to arguments (and the arguments of her interlocutors) more than she reckons with them in any substantive way. This is a fun little book if you are already familiar with Mouffe/ Laclau and are curious what she makes of certain recent developments in political theory - she discusses (and dismisses) recent work by Badiou, Zizek, Hardt and Negri, and more. However, their arguments are treated in only a summary fashion; to anyone who isn't at least passingly familiar with Badiou or Negri or whoever, the discussions here will likely confuse rather than edify. So, although the book's brevity and clarity might lead one to recommend to someone still green in political theory, I reckon the best reader for this book would be someone already familiar with contemporary political thought who is looking for a gentle intro to Mouffe's thought on the way to a more substantive engagement both with her solo efforts and her work with Laclau.

Otherwise, this book is great for anyone already familiar with Mouffe who has wondered what she would make for this political moment, one that seems to demand a reckoning with 40 years of her theorizing. I was disappointed she didn't discuss Sanders or Corbyn in any detail besides a doff of the cap, but her endorsements of Podemos and Syriza (and Melenchon, thanked in the book's acknowledgements) are a bit, uh, rose-tinted and optimistic.

Unfortunately, of course, one other outcome of this book's brevity is that some of her discussions seem to raise more questions than they answer, particularly (for me, anyhow) the sections on psychoanalysis and on liberalism. This is unfortunate; a more robust diagnosis of the failure of liberalism might go further in explaining this particular moment than the simple recognition of the failure of neoliberalism. This book, of course, is carried out a very high level of abstraction, with only passing references to actual politicians or movements, but surely the failures of political liberalism (and in particular, that of Obama) helped determine the current conjuncture? Reaffirming its necessity to **any** emancipatory project seems to beg the question; of course the old Communist movement had failed, but declaring the need for agonism AND liberalism is a bit puzzling, to put it mildly.

tl; dr

This book is good if you know some political theory and want an entry to Mouffe or if you've read some Mouffe/Laclau and want to know how she feels about this conjuncture and about some recent theoretical developments (Hardt and Negri's latest book, the "affective turn", etc).

Otherwise, you might be better off starting with Mouffe's "Antagonistics" or "The Democratic Paradox". If you are looking for an intro to left populisms that discusses politics in a little less, uh, "abstract" fashion, I'd recommend finding Susan Watkin's longish New Left Review article "Oppositions," alongside Seymour's book on Corbyn, Pablo Iglesias' book on Podemos, and Bernie Sanders' books.

dimwig says

other reviews say it all

Kai says

if you've read any of Mouffe's books since the Democratic Paradox, you can pretty much already guess what the argument is going to be here. "Democracy" is taken to be the main thing all left movements are striving towards, populism (oddly) appears to be a strategy for attaining democracy via "radical reformism" (???) and the only real route for defeating the (you guessed it) neoliberal consensus / third way technocrats. All other left analyses (namely, marxism, anti-capitalism, anarchism, etc) are reductively described as misguided or mistaken attempts to apply essentialist abstractions from afar (somehow, Mouffe has access to the real people. she has discovered that "democracy" is *not* an abstraction, but the real thing the people around the world actually desire). Gramsci is rendered a liberal reformer Mouffe reads as instructing us to "become state," a pretty incorrect reading but one i won't mind playfully throwing at my revolutionary/anarchist Gramscian friends and colleagues. the sole new contribution of this book seems to be a few pages on affective politics (which we're told was always a part of the antifoundationalist hegemonic perspective?) and Spinoza and Freud are given a few efficient pages. Of course, one couldn't perform such a synthesis without a denunciation of "the affective turn" whose promoters "present their view of affect as based on the thought of Spinoza, but there are good reasons to question such genealogy" (75). Such a claim would probably be shocking to anyone who has even a passing engagement with any number of the interminable studies that constitute "affect theory," (let alone most of the past 50 years of french and italian marxisms, marxist-feminisms, eco-marxisms, etc [I guess they can't be admitted to exist if we're to maintain the view that they're all economicistic essentialists]). Such prolific slipshod assessments make this a frustrating text (albeit one which, at 80 pages, can be easily rage-read in an hour at the library rather than purchased). No such luck for those of us who write about populism, who will now have to prepare ourselves for a Mouffe question at every talk we give (alongside the Mudde/Muller and Trump question), sidestepping the really quite interesting literature that's developing from young scholars writing on the subject (namely see: Laura Grattan's "Populism's Power" and Paulo Gerbaudo's "The Mask and the Flag")

Mio Tastas says

Om jag inte återkommit med färdigformulerade tankar inom en vecka, skicka mig en brevbomb
