

Can There Be a Left Populism? The European debate on populism brings the Left's fundamental identity into question

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Review of Eric Fassin, *Populisme: le grand ressentiment* (Textuel, 2017).

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Shunned by the White House and the right-wing US media machine, Steve Bannon [1] recently sought to reestablish his image as a political mastermind by embarking on a European speaking tour. If Bannon had begun to suspect that Donald Trump's presidency was no longer the vanguard of a global far-right turn, at least he could still show his support for the more serious neofascist movements across the Old Continent. And so, Bannon gave speeches on the importance of the Italian xenophobic party La Lega [2], praised his Brexiteer friend Nigel Farage [3], and appeared as the surprise guest at the convention of the French Front National [4]. "The populist surge is not over," he insisted in an interview with the British paper *The Spectator* [5], "it's just beginning."

Bannon is of course not the only one to speak of "populism" in this way. While the most influential voices in the political mainstream paint populism as a danger to the survival of democracy, for others, populism is the key to democracy's future. This latter narrative has obvious appeal to far-right figures [6] like Bannon: far-right populists can often *seem* [7] to be the most democratic political choice precisely because so many in the elite center decry them as an existential threat. And as Anton Jaeger has observed [8], though many of these right-wing movements never embraced democratic values in the past, the very use of the term "populism" against them has helped them reinvent themselves as champions of "the people."

Despite the word's association with the worst elements of the Right, some on the Left have also embraced populism as the wave of the future — none more articulately or more consistently than the Belgian philosopher Chantal Mouffe. Since the early years of Margaret Thatcher's premiership, she and her late husband Ernesto Laclau have argued that the contemporary center-left has lost its way. Even as the neoliberal turn was just beginning to take hold — eroding social protections, creating a pauperized and precarious workforce, and enriching a narrow oligarchy — Mouffe castigated Third Way social liberals [9] like Tony Blair and Bill Clinton for adopting a politics of "consensus" that failed to give people a voice for their discontent [10]. As the social destruction of neoliberalism intensified over the years, Mouffe has argued that "de-politicized" center-left parties have failed to provide a forceful alternative.

As a result, Mouffe believes that we are currently in the midst of a crisis in which political institutions no longer appear adequate to voice popular demands — a crisis to which "populism" is

the only solution. Mouffe's notion of populism is drawn from her understanding of democracy as a realm of conflict, in which adversarial groups struggle against one another for hegemonic control of the political terrain. Democratic politics is not about consensus, but about asserting an "us" against a "them." Mouffe claims that the Right has long understood this, so the Left has to get with the program if it is to have a future. But for Mouffe and the European movements that have claimed her as an inspiration — including Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain, and France Insoumise in France [11] — left populism is more than a necessity for survival. If the Left can succeed in building movements that speak in terms of "the people," against the oligarchy or the 1 percent, she is confident that it can not only defeat the racist and xenophobic populisms of the far right, but create a new political order beyond neoliberalism.

The Passions and the Interests

Mouffe's arguments have not gone unchallenged on the Left. In the first round of last year's election in France, one of Mouffe's frequent interlocutors [12], Jean-Luc Mélenchon of France Insoumise, came within two percentage points of edging out the Right and far-right to face Emmanuel Macron in the final round of the vote. But in the final weeks of that campaign, the French sociologist Eric Fassin penned a short but incisive pamphlet urging the Left to reject the populist strategy Mélenchon had embraced [13]. As the subtitle of Fassin's book suggests, he believes that populism is, essentially an expression of "resentment," and therefore a phenomenon of the Right that has no place in the Left's struggle against neoliberalism and racism. "There are two sorts of cholesterol, good and bad," Fassin quips, "but for the left, there is no such thing as good populism."

Fassin shares much of Mouffe's interpretation of the democratic crisis brought about by decades of neoliberal de-politicization (though his preferred authority writing in English on the matter is Wendy Brown [14]). He also takes no issue with the idea of democratic politics as essentially confrontational. His rejection of left-wing populism is nonetheless an unmistakable critique of the practical implications of Mouffe and Laclau's theory. Fassin is no more sympathetic to the recent legacy of mainstream social-democratic parties than Mouffe is — an earlier pamphlet of his blasted the French Parti Socialiste for its rightward turn under François Hollande and Prime Minister Manuel Valls. But he believes that Mouffe's account forgets that neoliberalism was the creation not of "social liberals" like Blair and Clinton (or Barack Obama and Emmanuel Macron), but rather of the "authoritarian populists" Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. Historically speaking, he writes, populism is "a weapon in the service of neoliberalism, not against it."

Fassin's charge is not that today's left populists are secret Thatcherites, nor even necessarily that their actions will lay the groundwork for further neoliberal or right-wing gains. Rather, he believes that the political strategy Mouffe advocates is premised on a hopeless attempt to win a certain type of right-wing voter over to the Left. Many contemporary populist movements — including those on the Left — present themselves as attempts to transcend the division between left and right. They could hardly do otherwise, since populism seeks to recast the terms of political struggle as a "vertical" opposition between the powerful and "the people," a category that cannot plausibly be limited to the traditional bases of left or right parties, whether defined in ideological or sociological terms. Mouffe and her allies, then, are not only seeking to criticize the traditional institutions of the Left for being out of touch with the people. They aim to build an entirely new social base for the Left, one that is independent of existing parties, unions, and associations, and that includes all those impoverished and alienated from politics after decades of neoliberalism. Among these ranks of the disaffected, Mouffe and the politicians close to her claim to find many who have supported populist movements of the Right. Though a great many far-right voters are sincere racists, xenophobes, or neofascists, left populists generally believe that it's both possible and necessary to provide an

alternate, anti-racist expression for the anger these people feel. Since unlike right populism, left populism understands the real sources of this anger — that is, neoliberalism and its consequences — it claims that its message will ultimately prove more powerful to those who otherwise would vote for the likes of Trump, Farage, and Le Pen.

Fassin contends that this element of left populist thinking is not only empirically false, but also politically quixotic. He argues that the common view of Donald Trump's supporters as Americans "left behind" by neoliberal globalization is a fiction. The typical Trump voter was not an unemployed factory worker, but rather a middle- or upper-middle-class white man.

But even were it factually true that far-right voters were expressing a rejection of neoliberalism — which Fassin acknowledges is closer to reality in the case of the Brexit vote — he believes there is a structural flaw in the left populist strategy to win them over. Like Mouffe and Laclau, he believes that it's essential to take into account the role of passions and emotions in politics. The passions he identifies behind the support for far-right movements, however, are fundamentally irreconcilable with those of the Left, populist or not. The far right is motivated by what Fassin calls "resentment" — in other words, "the idea that there are others enjoying what is mine, [and that] if I am not enjoying it, this is because of them." For those who see the world in terms of resentment, he continues, the expression of "impotent rage" against these undeserving others constitutes its own form of "enjoyment."

For Fassin, this feeling of resentment is a defining feature of the contemporary world. To a large extent, it has resulted from the creation of relatively privileged classes in economic terms who nonetheless lack what Pierre Bourdieu called "cultural capital." Members of these classes — depicted brilliantly by the novelist Michel Houellebecq in his numerous white male protagonists — feel a profound insecurity, which produces a violent emotional response. They come to hate both highly educated liberals for parading their cultural elitism and progressive values in their faces, and the underprivileged classes that these "woke" elites appear to care about more than them.

It is no mere historical accident, then, that populism played a key role in the construction of neoliberalism under the right-wing governments of the 1980s. As a political rhetoric and praxis, populism is inherently cultural, Fassin explains, which has made it an ideal tool for right-wingers from Reagan and Thatcher to Trump. The Right's primary intention over the last four or so decades has been to mobilize the white middle classes for the benefit of the neoliberal elite, and cultural populism made it possible to present this effort as a defense of "the people" against decadent liberals and the black and brown underclasses.

Fassin therefore dismisses the left populist idea that there is a base of far-right supporters whose anger can be diverted from racist populist movements to egalitarian ones. There is no subconscious desire for economic justice underneath a vote for Donald Trump or the Front National, only resentment towards perceived cultural superiors and racial inferiors. For Fassin, populism simply is resentment. Leftists can dress their ideas in populist rhetoric all they want — they can, for example, personalize their critique of neoliberalism by denouncing members of "the oligarchy" and their cultural worldview. But Fassin insists that to the extent that the Left chooses to go this route, it sacrifices properly leftist ideas and methods for a rhetoric of cultural warfare that originated on the far right, but can never satisfy the resentments and insecurities the far right feeds on.

Anglo Exceptionalism?

In her own forthcoming pamphlet-length book, *For a Left Populism* [15], Mouffe does not mention Fassin by name, but she does respond to some of his criticisms. Recognizing that others may not be

as willing as she is to jettison much of the Left's historical legacy, for example, Mouffe distinguishes between the Left's institutions and its values. Though left populism must radically question the former, she explains, it must hold onto the latter if it is to remain distinct from right populism. More importantly, Mouffe clarifies that contrary to Fassin's accusation, she does not believe that far-right populism is a movement of resistance against neoliberalism, nor does she deny the sincere racism of many of its adherents or the suffering it has the potential to cause. Still, she doubles down, maintaining that today's far right is indeed an authentic reaction against the forms of "post-democracy" that neoliberalism has helped bring about, if not a reaction against neoliberalism itself. There is what she calls a "democratic nucleus" in the demands of far-right populists, one that left populists must strive to "orient ... towards egalitarian objectives."

Though in some respects Fassin and Mouffe may have more in common than either might want to admit, their divergence on the degree of porosity between left and right is crucial. In this respect, Fassin's critique helps identify what's so novel about populism for the contemporary left — but also why it might not be the salvation its partisans believe it to be.

Advocates of left populism believe that in today's neoliberal "post-democracies," populist strategies and rhetoric provide the only path towards a successful left politics. Although Mouffe has done more than anyone to provide consistent arguments for this position, she has a tendency to flip her own reasoning on its head. Reading Mouffe's latest book, one senses that for her, if any movement succeeds in staking a position to the left of mainstream social liberalism, it must be a left-populist movement. This results in some peculiar claims. For example, early in *For a Left Populism*, Mouffe clearly states that the established social-democratic parties "have become too deeply integrated within the neoliberal hegemonic formation" to pose an authentic left alternative to neoliberalism. But throughout the rest of the book, she goes on to praise the populism of Jeremy Corbyn [16], the left-wing leader of the party of Tony Blair. And despite the fact that Bernie Sanders [17] chose to run in 2016 as a Democrat and later campaigned for the arch-centrist Hillary Clinton, we learn that he too is "clearly" a left populist.

But as for the continental movements that have aligned themselves with Mouffe's ideas, it's far from clear that they share a common strategy with Corbyn and Sanders (who are themselves hardly identical to one another). Fassin helps to clarify the important difference between these Anglophone figures — though Kevin Kühnert's youth insurgency within the German Social Democratic Party could be added to the list — and the explicitly populist left movements in countries like Spain and France. It's not merely that Sanders and Corbyn work with and within established parties; both leaders have sought to move these parties to the left by providing an updated left message that can mobilize unmistakably left-wing bases. Of course, these bases change over time: successful campaigns neither shrink from embracing new constituencies nor let themselves become overly attached to voting blocs it has lost. Thus, if Fassin has more admiration for what the Left is doing across the Channel and the Atlantic, it may be due to the fact that Corbyn and Sanders are simply more effective in identifying which voters are on their side, reaching out to them, and offering them what they want. Perhaps they're not so much populists as merely good politicians — better ones at least than the centrists in their parties.

Movements like Podemos and France Insoumise, on the other hand, set themselves a far more ambitious goal. Following Mouffe's notion of replacing the left-right divide with an opposition between the people and the elites, they make it a priority to win over to left-wing causes voters whose orientation may be fundamentally of the Right. Though such populist attempts to overcome traditional definitions of left and right may not be without their modest successes, Fassin suggests that the Left might not need to break so radically with its traditional institutions and sociological bases. That is to say, it might be possible to embrace some of Mouffe and Laclau's philosophical insights — the conflictual nature of democracy, the role of hegemonic formations in politics —

without embracing populism and all its oversights.

Left-wing populists like Mouffe have a compelling account of how someone like Steve Bannon can pose as a champion of the common people. But Fassin's little book suggests that to find a way out of this state of affairs, the Left may not be in such dire need of new ideas that it has to go looking for new supporters among those who might believe him.

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P.S.

* Jacobin. 03.29.2018:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/03/left-populism-mouffe-fassin-france-insoumise>

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Footnotes

[1] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/02/steve-bannons-autobahn>

[2] ESSF (article 43844), [It Never Went Away - Fascism and far-right violence in Italy.](#)

[3] <https://jacobinmag.com/2017/08/islamophobia-racism-uk-far-right>

[4] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/06/national-front-le-pen-fascist-france-trump-alt-right>

[5] <https://usa.spectator.co.uk/2018/03/im-fascinated-by-mussolini-steve-bannon-on-fascism-populism-and-everything-in-between/>

[6] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/08/campaign-finance-alt-right-brexit-donations-ukip-trump>

[7] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/01/trump-trans-pacific-partnership-populism>

[8] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/01/populism-douglas-hofstadter-donald-trump-democracy>

[9] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/02/atkins-dlc-third-way-clinton-blair-schroeder-social-democracy>

[10] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/08/democrats-better-deal-midterms-clinton-2016>

[11] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/02/france-insoumise-jean-luc-melenchon-macron>

[12] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FtriFMxsOWw&t=>

[13] <http://www.editionstextuel.com/index.php?cat=020377&id=673>

[14] <https://mitpress.mit.edu/books/undoing-demos>

[15] <https://www.versobooks.com/books/2748-for-a-left-populism>

[16] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/01/corbyn-populism-labour-brexit-tories-immigration>

[17] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/01/what-did-bernie-do>