

French presidential candidate - Mélenchon: A Radical Reformist Against Mounting Oligarchy

Thursday 20 April 2017, by [MOUFFE Chantal](#) (Date first published: 19 April 2017).

The Belgian philosopher Chantal Mouffe — a thinker who inspires French presidential candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon — defended her project in a column appearing in the 15 April edition of *Le Monde*.

Jean-Luc Mélenchon's breakthrough into third place in the presidential polls has unleashed a campaign by defenders of the status quo trying to pass him off as a "communist revolutionary." After long having dismissed Mélenchon, part of the press is now working to destroy the credibility of his programme, presented as the "cloud-cuckoo-land plans of the French Chávez."

Painted as a dangerous extremist, Jean-Luc Mélenchon is attacked by all those who think that there is no alternative to neoliberal globalisation. For them, democracy requires acceptance of the "post-political consensus" established among the centre-left and centre-right parties. Any questioning of this consensus must be the work of populist demagogues.

For them, defending democracy thus demands warding off the populist threat in all its forms. But if democracy is today in danger, that is precisely because of post-politics. It is this latter that has led to the "post-political" situation that today reigns in most Western countries. The ideals of popular sovereignty and greater equality have disappeared. Elections no longer offer citizens the possibility of choosing between different political projects.

As one of the slogans of the indignados movement in Spain had it, "We have a vote, but we have no voice." This rejection of post-democracy is itself expressed through the "populist moment" which characterises the present conjuncture. In this we should discern the demand for a real participation in political decisions.

Of course, this demand can take numerous forms, depending on the form in which the "people" — the "we" demanding a voice — is constructed. That is where the difference between "right populism" — authoritarian in type and seeking to restrict democracy to nationals — and "left populism" — seeking to extend and radicalize democracy — lies. If right-wing populism has thus far secured better results, that is because the Left has long remained prisoner of a consensual vision of politics and a failure to recognise the crucial role of emotions in constituting political identities.

The strength of a movement like France Insoumise is precisely that it has broken with such a vision and offers a perspective capable of creating a collective will, a "we" that crystallises common emotions and mobilises them in the direction of deepening democracy. For that is Jean-Luc

Mélenchon's objective: to bring together the people, to create a collective will around a project of citizens' revolution, in order to write a new constitution that opens up more debate and facilitates the expression of popular sovereignty.

Contrary to what his enemies claim, this is not a matter of destroying the foundations of the democratic order and establishing an authoritarian regime, but rather of putting an end to the oligarchic regime that results from neoliberal hegemony. Indeed, we have seen a veritable oligarchisation of our societies over the last thirty years, under the pressure of financial capitalism.

This oligarchisation has manifested itself on the one hand through the emergence of a small group of the super-rich, and on the other through a profound deterioration in the popular classes' living conditions and the growing pauperization and precarisation of a large part of the middle classes. It is this new form of polarisation that explains the success of movements in Europe that construct the them/us political frontier in a populist way: the below against the above, the "people" against the "elites."

This type of populist politics had thus far made more of an appearance in profoundly oligarchic countries, like in South America. National-popular movements took form in those countries in order to integrate the popular classes into representative institutions, whereas there was a different situation in Europe, where thanks to social democracy this inclusion was already partly realized. But neoliberal hegemony has brought regression, and it thus became possible to say that our societies were themselves being "Latin-Americanised." That is why populism is now here, too, on the order of the day. Jean-Luc Mélenchon's interest in the Latin American experiences stems from his conviction that they can help us understand the challenge that we are today confronted with.

Obviously enough, this is not a matter of applying Latin American models in France — as Mélenchon is often accused of doing — but rather of finding a source of inspiration for questioning some of our own certainties, especially as regards the manner in which we should conceive the Left/Right confrontation. If given the specific conditions of European history there is no question of simply abandoning this opposition, it is important to recognise that it is no longer possible to continue constructing it in the terms we are accustomed to, as the confrontation between sociological groupings defined by their economic interests. With the oligarchisation of our societies, the them/us boundary — and this boundary is constitutive of politics — must be seen in a way that takes into account the variety and heterogeneity of democratic demands. At stake in left-wing populism is how we can articulate these demands in the construction of a collective will. Its task is to construct a people that brings together the demands of the popular classes and the precarised middle classes with a whole series of claims linked to other forms of domination, such as those targeted by feminists, anti-racism activists, and a variety of minorities. Its objective is to put an end to the domination of the oligarchic system: not through a "revolution" destroying republican institutions, but through what the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) called a "war of position" leading to a profound transformation of the existing power relations and the establishment of a new hegemony. This, in view of recovering and indeed radicalising the democratic ideal.

Indeed, what is at stake in France Insoumise and Jean-Luc Mélenchon's project of a "citizen revolution" is a refoundation of left-wing politics in a perspective that distinguishes itself from both social-democracy and the radical Left [*gauche de la gauche*]. Far from being an avatar of the far Left, we could term this perspective a "radical reformism" that takes up a position within the horizon of the great democratic tradition. It is rather ironic that such a project is often accused, by its detractors, of being anti-pluralist, as if it were not in fact they who refuse to accept pluralism by denying any possibility of an alternative to neoliberalism. It is they who endanger democracy.

Chantal Mouffe

P.S.

* Verso Books. 19 April 2017:

<http://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3171-melenchon-a-radical-reformist-against-mounting-oligarchy>

* Translated by David Broder.