

# The “populist moment” - The dialogue between Chantal Mouffe and Jean-Luc Mélenchon

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The “populist moment” is a concept proposed by the philosopher Chantal Mouffe. According to Mouffe, globalization, the hegemony of financial capital and the integration of social democracy into neo-liberal politics have created a “post-democracy”.

The principle of the sovereign people has become a hollow formula: there is no more sovereignty, therefore no more debate between left and right. The defense of the interests of the financial oligarchy is ensured by a caste which reduces political problems to technical problems, to be decided by experts. In this context, the relationship between the principles of equality (the left) and freedom (the right) is unbalanced to the disadvantage of the left. The people, for Mouffe, is not a given sociological reality: it is a political construction that depends on the delineation of the boundary between the “them” and the “us”. For her, the mode of this political construction constitutes populism.

Today, there is a “populist moment” because we can see everywhere deep frustration and a “popular” aspiration to democracy, so to sovereignty, and thus a rebalancing of equality and freedom. These feelings are mainly captured by right-wing populism, but this situation is not inevitable. “Right-wing populism re-establishes popular sovereignty, but not equality” – particularly because it ethnicizes social problems. It therefore builds a “we” that reduces democracy instead of expanding it. This is its Achilles heel. The left can and must develop a left populism, the only way to fight right-wing populism. To do this, Mouffe recommends not to speak of “fascism” or “the far right”: “It is a way of not seeking to understand,” she said. “It must be recognized that the demands which are the basis of right-wing populist movements are democratic demands”. Marine Le Pen gives answers to the victims of “happy globalization”. Left-wing populism, for Mouffe, is distinguished from right-wing populism by saying that the opponent is neo-liberal globalization, not immigrants.

## Poor Gramsci!

Marxists distinguish between “class in itself” and “class for itself”. The difference lies in consciousness. Class itself is a sociological datum. “Class for itself” is constituted by the experience of struggles, self-organization, the extension and the unification of struggles, which enables the proletariat to go beyond its demands in order to lay the foundations of a complete revolution of social relations and relations between humanity and nature. But Mouffe insists: the construction of a people is not the constitution of the “class for itself”. It is a “much more transversal” process, which centralizes “heterogeneous demands” from “different social sectors”. Which ones? Mouffe cites feminism, LGBT movements, ecology... But this is not the substance of the affair. The bottom line is that transversality is necessary because we are no longer in Fordist capitalism: “Today we are all under the domination of financial capitalism, including the sociological sectors that belong to the right.” It is therefore a matter of “reformulating the socialist project in terms of the radicalization of

democracy". This requires the political crystallization of demands coming also from sectors of the employers. This crystallization requires a charismatic leader who mobilizes passions, for there are not only arguments: in politics the affective factor is important. Right-wing populism has clearly understood this, and left-wing populism must do the same.

is, in a very condensed form, the essence of the political theory that a part of the left today is fascinated by. Under a modern and radical exterior, it is very old wine in new bottles. The point of departure is false: it consists in separating finance capital and capital in general, whereas the two are inextricably intertwined. For Mouffe and her followers, the enemy is not capitalism which exploits labour and destroys the environment, but globalized capital that empties "popular sovereignty" of its content. The result is a "citizens' insurrection" to restore ... what? The "democracy" and the "sovereignty" of before the neoliberal turn, with its "balance" between the left and the right within the framework of the nation. Mouffe is explicit: referring to Syriza and Podemos, she considers that populism must enter the institutions to transform them. Such are, for her, the conclusions to be drawn from Gramsci's analysis of the conquest of hegemony. Poor Gramsci! He must be turning in his grave because what Mouffe proposes is what social-democracy claimed to be doing... and which has transformed it into social-liberalism.

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*The quotations are taken from the debate between Chantal Mouffe and Jean-Luc Mélenchon:*  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FtriFMxsOWw>

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\* Translated by International Viewpoint. <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article5121>