

‘For A Left Populism’: An interview with Chantal Mouffe

Wednesday 24 October 2018, by [CALDERBANK Michael](#), [MOUFFE Chantal](#) (Date first published: 22 September 2018).

Michael Calderbank spoke to Chantal Mouffe about why she thinks the time is right for a left populism

Chantal Mouffe: We currently live in post-democratic societies. This is due first to the blurring of the lines between left and right, a situation that I call ‘post-politics’. This comes from the fact that social democratic parties basically accepted the idea there is no alternative to neoliberal globalisation. When citizens go to vote, they don’t have a choice because there is no fundamental difference between centre-right and centre-left programmes.

We have also been witnessing a phenomenon of ‘oligarchisation’ of our societies, in the sense that we see an increasing gulf between a small group of very rich people and the rest of the population. What is new is that with the politics of privatisation, and particularly since austerity, there has been a phenomenon of pauperisation and precaritisation of the middle classes, which are now profoundly affected by the effects of neoliberal policies. This explains the emergence of many resistances to the consensus of the centre.

What I call the ‘populist moment’ is marked by the multiplication of resistances to this post-democratic situation. Those resistances are manifesting themselves in many different ways, not necessarily in a progressive way. Those resistances are, in a sense, all expressing ‘democratic demands’ – demands for more democracy, for the people to have a voice. But these demands can be articulated in a xenophobic way. This is why we have seen the development of right-wing populism that claims ‘the problem has come from the immigrants’. Those demands, however, can also be articulated in a more progressive way, as a call for the extension and radicalisation of democracy. This is what I refer to as ‘left populism’.

In *On the Political*, published in 2015, examining the post-political phenomenon, I argued that the ‘third way’ approach did not represent progress for democracy, and that the lack of an ‘agonistic’ debate between different alternatives was a danger for democracy since it created the terrain for the development of right-wing populism.

The idea that politics is about reconciliation and consensus is definitely a wrong conception of politics. Democratic politics must be partisan. It requires establishing a frontier between left and right. There cannot be democracy without an agonistic debate about possible alternatives.

Calderbank: How do you understand the constituency for left populism, and on what basis would it be brought together?

Mouffe: Today many more sectors of society are affected by neoliberal globalisation and the new mode of regulation of capitalism than ever before. In Fordist times you were mainly affected if you were working in a factory. But with the development of financial capitalism, and what is sometimes

called biopolitics', we are all affected because many aspects of our life are now under the control of capitalism. This, of course, is negative – but it could also offer an opportunity because it means that the number of people that could be won to a project of radicalisation of democracy is bigger. It is not only the working class – there are many important sectors of the middle class that can be won.

The traditional left political frontier was established on the basis of class. There was the working class, or the proletariat, versus the bourgeoisie. Today, given the evolution of society, that is not the way in which one should establish the political frontier any more.

There are a series of democratic demands which cannot be formulated in terms of class – for example, it is necessary to take account of the demands of feminism, anti-racism, the gay movement, ecology. Those are demands that do not sit with the traditional opposition between working class and bourgeoisie. We need to build the frontier in a populist way, which is much more transversal, in terms of 'the people' against 'the oligarchy'. There are many sectors that can be won for the anti-neoliberal project and it is necessary to federate them by constructing a 'people': a collective will. The political frontier cannot be established strictly on a class basis. This does not mean that the demands of the working class have to be abandoned but that they need to be articulated with other democratic demands. This is the main characteristic of left populism and the main difference with the construction of the frontier in class terms.

In order to construct a people we need to understand what motivates people to act. Why, for instance, do people react to certain forms of subordination? Why do they claim injustice? I think the idea of equality, the idea of social justice, and the idea of popular sovereignty are fundamental values in the democratic social imaginary. That is the way in which democratic citizens are politically constituted and socialised. So when they feel those things are withheld from them, they manifest different forms of resistance. I think what moves people to act in the field of politics is a demand for equality and democracy.

This is why we are currently witnessing many resistances against post-democracy. One Indignados slogan was 'Tenemos un voto, pero no tenemos voz' — we've got a vote but we don't have a voice. Many people feel today that they have been deprived of a voice. This is what is at the centre of the 'populist moment' and it is crucial to offer a progressive answer to the demands that are at the origin of those resistances.

Instead of seeing right-wing populism as the expression of demands that are intrinsically racist and sexist, we need to see that they express in fact a call for democracy – for having a voice. This is also the case with the Brexit vote in Britain. Many people voted for Brexit not because they are xenophobes, but because they felt their concerns were not being taken into account by the establishment.

These are demands for democracy, but they can be expressed in a way that is going to restrict democracy – to recover democracy but only for a small group of people, the nationals. Or, and this is the challenge, they can be formulated in a way which is going to deepen and radicalise democracy. For me what is at stake is which kind of populism is going to be able to hegemonise, and give an answer to those demands. I am convinced that the only way to fight against right-wing populism is by developing a form of left-wing populism. That is, a populism that takes account of the variety of resistances against post-democracy and gives them a form of expression that leads to the reaffirmation and extension of democratic values.

In France, there are some people on the left who say: 'We should not even speak with the people who voted for Marine Le Pen, because those people are basically fascist and cannot be reformed.' I totally disagree with that position. It is well known in France that many of the people who vote for

Marine Le Pen used to vote for the Communist Party. They have been abandoned by the social democrats and Le Pen was the only one saying 'I understand your concerns', but adding 'if you are in this situation it's because of the immigrants'. Fortunately things have begun to change because the militants of La France Insoumise [Jean-Luc Mélenchon's party, often considered to be left populist] have been going to the constituencies who are voting for Marine Le Pen to discuss with them.

In the last election, it was interesting to see that in several important places, for instance in Marseille, Mélenchon came first in constituencies which had voted for Marine Le Pen before. The same thing happened in Amiens, with François Ruffin, who was elected in what used to be a stronghold of the National Front. So these people in France saying, 'People who voted for Marine Le Pen will never vote Jean-Luc Mélenchon', have been proven wrong. I was told that in Britain, 16 per cent of people who voted for UKIP before voted for Corbyn at the last election.

This shows that the demands of the working class are not necessarily progressive or xenophobic: it all depends on how they are articulated. They are articulated in a xenophobic way by right-wing populists, and the challenge for left populism is to offer a different form of articulation to those demands.

Calderbank: Why specifically appeal to a populism of the 'left', in that case, if many people no longer identify with the left?

Mouffe: First I would like to clarify that when I speak of 'left populism' I refer to an analytical category. I am not saying that you go out and claim: 'We are the left populists.' When I say that one can apply the category of 'left populism' to La France Insoumise, or to Corbyn, or to Podemos, what I'm saying is that those are parties whose political strategy can be defined as a left populist strategy. This is how they construct the frontier. They want to bring about a popular movement around the construction of a 'people' opposed to 'the oligarchy' – but it does not mean they've got to call themselves 'left populists'. La France Insoumise, for instance, means Unbowed France, which I think is a great name that can federate many struggles.

It's true that for many people the term 'left' now has a negative connotation. In Spain for instance they say the idea of the left is too discredited, because when you speak of the left, people think of the traitors of social democracy. In France it is similar: when you speak of the left many people reject it because they identify it with François Hollande. Another reason to abandon this term is that it is not suited to the transversal character of the populist strategy. As they say in Podemos: 'We want to also speak to the people who do not consider themselves left.' I understand these concerns and it is why I specify that the frontier should not be envisaged on the left-right mode as it is traditionally constructed.

But there is another meaning of the left, which is more axiological [value-based]. The left refers to specific values: social justice, popular sovereignty, equality. I think those values need to be defended and it is in that sense that I speak of 'left' populism. I think that to speak of 'progressive populism' is not enough. In France, 'progressive' has been totally captured by Macron. 'Democratic populism' is also not adequate. We need a term which is more confrontational, more partisan. I consider that to speak of 'left populism' allows us to re-establish the agonistic struggle between left and right, but in a populist way.

Calderbank: How do you think Corbyn's Labour has managed to avoid the general decline of European social democracy into the post-democratic space?

Mouffe: Corbyn's Labour is a social democratic party which is in the process of transforming itself

by adopting a left populist strategy. This is what explains that it has managed to avoid the general decline of social democracy. It's not that social democracy is suddenly recovering. The party of Corbyn is not the party of Blair. There is a clear attempt to break with the post-politics of New Labour.

What is important in the case of Britain is to see that the aim of Corbyn, and of Momentum, is to transform the Labour Party into a popular movement. A left populist strategy requires establishing a frontier, and this is what the recent manifesto of the party 'For the Many, Not the Few' has been doing. I think it is quite interesting that such a slogan was previously used by Blair in order to avoid speaking of socialism. They took it back and transformed it to draw an agonistic frontier between 'the many' and 'the few', the people in opposition to the oligarchy.

Calderbank: How does left populism relate to existing political categories on the left?

Mouffe: In general, we can distinguish between three types of 'left'. One is the 'pure reformism' of the social-liberals, who have accepted the idea that there is no alternative to neoliberal globalisation and think that the only they can do is minor reforms to the existing system without challenging the current hegemony. On the opposite side, you've got the revolutionary left saying: 'we need to establish a total break with the institutions of liberal democracy.' They believe that the state cannot be transformed and that it needs

Michael Calderbank

[Click here](#) to subscribe to our weekly newsletters in English and or French. You will receive one email every Monday containing links to all articles published in the last 7 days.

P.S.

Red Pepper

<https://www.redpepper.org.uk/for-a-left-populism-an-interview-with-chantal-mouffe/>

This article is featured in the latest issue of the magazine: 'Creating the Future', a collaboration between Red Pepper magazine and The World Transformed.