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Title: For a Left Populism (2018). By Chantal Mouffe (2018)
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When we think about populism, we immediately make the association with provocative rhetoric, an anti-elite leader and outspoken appearances like Donald Trump or Silvio Berlusconi. In short, populism does not have a very solid reputation nowadays. The Belgian political philosopher Chantal Mouffe offers another perspective on populism in her newest book 'For a Left Populism'. In this book, she elaborates on strategies that could prevent the decline of left political parties. For years left European parties have been losing one election after the other. They struggle to find their position in the political arena. According to Mouffe it is precisely by adopting a populist strategy that there are opportunities for left-wing parties. She defines this strategy as "a discursive strategy of constructing a political frontier dividing society into two camps and calling for the mobilization of the 'underdog' against 'those in power'" (Mouffe, 2018, p. 10).

With this strategy she formulates an answer on the post-political era we live in, an era she considers as a problematic source for democracy. What is remarkable about this book is that the author addresses the matter in an outspoken partisan manner. For instance, Mouffe looks for ways to deal with the success of populist right parties. This seems like a challenging attempt, even though her arguments are based on thorough political theory.

In the introduction, Mouffe tries to capture the essential reason behind the decline of left political parties. It happens to be a phenomenon that she has already addressed extensively elsewhere: an essentialist or post-political conception of politics. The post-political era is characterized by the belief that the current state of politics, a neoliberal globalization, is an essential and unavoidable outcome of history. Right and left parties found a consensus in neoliberalism and this 'third way' is now part of the center of the political center. Therefore, the contest between parties to realize their political project has become unnecessary. That is how politics has evolved into a matter of problem-solving policies. Not the clash of ideologies but the maintenance of the neoliberal consensus is now at the core of democracy.

Mouffe criticizes this essentialist perspective on politics. She believes that these views deny the contingent nature of politics and the fact that a particular state is always the outcome of the hegemony of some and the exclusion of others. When the current dominant hegemonic state is not recognized as of a political nature, it becomes very hard to challenge

or contest it. Alternative views or the revolt of political antagonists are certified as ‘extreme’ or ‘populist’. In contrast to an essentialist perspective, not consensus but conflict has to be the beating heart of democracy. Besides, it’s this essentialist view and the acceptance of the neoliberal hegemony that keeps social-democratic parties from a political revival.

In the first chapter ‘The Populist Moment’, Mouffe defines the context in which Western democracies are situated in more detail and highlights the potential for left parties. The contemporary condition of Western democracy can be considered as ‘a populist moment’. This moment occurs when the dominant fundamentals on which democracies are built no longer fit with the needs or demands of the people. The populist moment offers a reactivation of the political. More specifically, it uncovers the defects of the current ‘neoliberal hegemonic formation’ and its negative impact on democracy. The worldwide financial crisis in 2008 offered a boost to the populist moment. The dominance of the neoliberal ideology has led to a ‘post-political democracy’ in which there’s no real agonistic confrontation between political parties. It can be a remarkable remedy, but according to Mouffe, populism can be a very effective tool to counter this post-political era. Before going into this tool in more detail, Mouffe redefines the concept of ‘populism’. While many theorists claim that populism can be seen as a political regime, an ideology or something that goes along with specific political ideas, Mouffe suggests another view on this. Relying on the definition of Ernesto Laclau, she declares that populism is “a discursive strategy of constructing a political frontier dividing society into two camps and calling for the mobilization of the ‘underdog’ against ‘those in power’” (Mouffe, 2018, p. 10).

By building such a frontier, a new hegemonic political order can be installed. According to Mouffe, the success of right-wing populist parties can be seen as a demonstration of how a ‘populist moment’ can be employed to gain electoral success and political power. Unlike other political parties, right-wing populists do succeed in offering a political alternative to the current post-political order by using anti-establishment discourse. However, a crucial difference between the strategy Mouffe proposes for leftist parties, these right-wing political parties are attacking democratic principles.

In chapter two ‘Learning from Thatcherism’, Mouffe illustrates how a leftist populist strategy can be accomplished. Therefore, she refers to a great example of such a politicizing act. Somewhat surprising is that the reference she puts forward can be considered as the human reincarnation of neoliberalism itself: Margaret Thatcher, former Prime Minister of Great Britain. She is known for her legendary quote “there is no such thing as society”, for extended privatization and for the marginalizing of labor unions. A few aspects were of crucial importance when Thatcher transformed the then social-democratic hegemonic order. First of all, she acknowledged the ideological dimension of her strategies to make her neoliberal vision the new hegemonic order. Secondly, she did not only provide a new social, economic, and political program, she also redefined democracy, tracing it back to ‘freedom’. Thirdly, she gained a lot of support by framing the bureaucratic elites as misusers of the taxpayers’ contributions to the welfare state. In this way, she created a political frontier of ‘the underdog’ against ‘those in power’. It’s the combination of these features a leftist populist strategy should entail (however, not to implement a neoliberal order but to realize a progressive project in which democracy will be recovered).

The third chapter ‘Radicalizing Democracy’ provides a categorizing framework in which left parties can be situated. Mouffe emphasizes that a new leftist populist strategy

shouldn't be categorized as 'extreme left', anarchistic or revolutionary. It's not about deconstructing the fundamentals of democracy but about recovering and radicalizing democracy in order to break with neoliberalism. The left-wing populist moment shouldn't be about implementing socialist values but about demanding fundamental democratic values.

In the last chapter 'The Construction of a People', Mouffe specifies which challenges lay ahead for left-wing political parties. In short, the challenge is about creating a momentum in which people are involved around the subordination of different natures such as the discrimination of people of color and women, the exploitation of the planet, the on-going imperialization of third world-countries, or other groups that are faced with discrimination. It stands out that the notion of 'people' as Mouffe interprets it, is characterized by a great heterogeneity. Mouffe wants to avoid a homogeneous interpretation because of its incompatibility with democratic pluralism. Additionally, Mouffe counters several critics addressed to the leftist populist strategy. One of those critics has to do with leadership. Mouffe notices that strong leadership is frequently equalized with authoritarianism. According to her, this assumption doesn't always have to be true. Convincing leadership can be very fruitful to crystalize shared values and affects which can strengthen ties in a political collective.

From the first chapter, it is clear that this book entails an outspoken partisan nature. Mouffe doesn't merely describe a social phenomenon from a distance but considers herself as an active actor *in* a specific conjuncture. It can be considered daring to explicitly acknowledge that 'For a Left Populism' has a political objective, but the transparency that she puts forward with it is creditable. By using a clear diagnosis, Mouffe offers insights into multiple characteristics of current Western democracies such as the advance of right populism, the decline of social democratic parties, and the overall distrust and indifference among citizens towards politics. Not only does she offer a diagnosis, but she also sheds light on possible remedies. Those remedies are specifically targeting left-wing parties.

A shortcoming of such a specific target is that it doesn't incorporate other value actors in the political field such as civil society organizations or social movements (e.g. the #MeToo movement gaining worldwide support by claiming equal gender rights; the school strikes for climate all over the world). Whereas these movements arose after the publication date of this book, the target scope of the remedies mentioned in the book could have been expanded. Another weakness of the book is that it's quite repetitive. Although it's useful to stress the essence of a book regularly, this should be done in a way the chapters maintain their identity or their own specific content. This could have provided a clearer structure while reading the book.

Nevertheless, Chantal Mouffe should be acknowledged for her critical and independent thoughts on politics. She manages to challenge ideas that became part of common sense, in a convincing and daring manner. 'For a Left Populism' is a true political intervention. Whether or not she is crossing red lines with this intervention, is up to the audience to decide. But there's at least one thing we can be sure of: even though Western democracies are facing challenging times, Mouffe will always offer some food for political thought.