

Left-wing populism

A legacy of defeat

Interview with Éric Fassin

Martina Tazzioli [MT] Your latest book, published in 2017, *Populisme: le grand ressentiment* [‘Populism and deep resentment’], develops a critical reading of the concept and political role of populism today.¹ You offer an explanation for the apparent appeal of populist options in recent elections in Europe and the US, and you distance yourself from any defence of a ‘left-wing populism’ – for instance, from the sort of argument made in recent years by Chantal Mouffe, Íñigo Errejón and various others. Could we start by asking you to say more about how you understand the role and status of populism today, and why you are worried by its recent rehabilitation by some influential figures and currents on the left?

Eric Fassin [EF] I avoid giving a general definition of populism because I don’t intend to elaborate this notion as a theoretical concept. I’m more interested in the political uses of the term. What is relatively new, at least in a European context, is that the word ‘populism’ is used not only negatively but also positively by some on the left. In that sense, I can borrow Chantal Mouffe’s notion of a ‘populist moment’, while at the same time I disagree with her defence of a ‘left-wing populism’.²

My argument is about the strategic use of populism on the left. This strategy is relatively new, since in most countries, starting with France, the term populism has been used, first, against the surge of far-right xenophobia, and second, by a sort of contagion, against the critical left. In fact, in the last few years, the radical critique of neoliberal policies in Europe has often been dismissed in these terms: either you supported neoliberal Europe or you were accused of being a populist. This is why anti-immigration policies in neoliberal Europe are never labelled ‘populist’. What’s new is that parties on the left, in particular Podemos in Spain and La France Insoumise in my own country, are trying to turn things around and reverse the stigma. The attempt to reclaim this label for the left defines what I call today’s ‘populist moment’. Many have come to the conclusion that this is good politics. And my question is: is it really? In my essay, and in various discussions since, I have left out any personal distaste for this rhetoric: the point is not whether one likes populism or not. I have tried to enter the logic of those whom I criticise. I argue in strategic terms, since this is how the question has been framed. Is it a good strategy? Does it work?

I should point out that Chantal Mouffe’s original use of the phrase ‘populist moment’ is somewhat different from mine. She is not describing a strategy, but a political context that requires populist strategies – not only on the right, but also on the left. If we admit this, then we have to ask: what is it that justifies using the same term, despite the ideological gap between them, for right-wing and left-wing populisms? They must have something in common. So what is

it? For those who attack populism, whether right or left, the answer is usually simple: xenophobia and racism, that is, the rejection of migrants and racial minorities in the name of the people – implicitly or explicitly defined as a white people. I don't believe that this characterisation holds true, since Mélenchon voters do tend to be less xenophobic and racist than the majority. Moreover, I'm interested in convincing those who are tempted by left-wing populism, not in antagonising them: this is a debate, not a polemic.

Hence a second hypothesis, which I think has been central for those who advocate a progressive populism, especially in the wake of Brexit and Trump's election. In Britain and in the United States, but also in Spain and in France, many believe that right-wing populism and its left-wing counterpoint both start from a reaction against neoliberal policies by the victims of globalisation. I dispute this. You just have to look at what happens when right-wing populists win. When Trump was elected, Wall Street came to power. After Brexit, conservatives stayed in power. Theresa May is no enemy of neoliberalism. The same is true in other countries such as Hungary and Turkey: Viktor Orbán and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan are neoliberal populists. Why, then, should we believe the opposite?

Chantal Mouffe argues that the 'populist moment' is a reaction against what I would call the 'neoliberal moment', that is, against the conversion of social democrats to the neoliberal consensus – the Democratic Party under Bill Clinton, the Labour Party with Tony Blair, or the Socialist Party in France. I share with her, and with many other commentators on the left, this critique of a neoliberal turn. But I believe that the history is more complex than the story of a populist reaction against this moment. We should remember Stuart Hall's critique of Thatcherism in the 1980s as a form of 'authoritarian populism'.³ Ronald Reagan also played a populist card. In a word, the founding figures of neoliberal politics in Europe were populists. Thus I argue that both past and present should serve as a warning: populism is compatible with neoliberal policies, no less than 'Third Way' politics.

Peter Hallward [PH] That's true about Thatcher and Reagan. But with this appeal to a new populist moment, isn't there at least the sense of a political opportunity, one that hasn't yet been seized but that still exists as a real possibility today, in a way that it did not a few years ago, for example around Corbyn and Momentum in the UK, Sanders in the US, Podemos in Spain, perhaps Jean-Luc Mélenchon in France, and so on? Doesn't this suggest a potential break, at least up to a point, with the long decades of neoliberal consensus and *la pensée unique*? What you describe with reference to Trump and May is certainly the continuation of neoliberal and right-wing policies with a 'populist veneer', i.e. a version of good old-fashioned right-wing populism; but aren't the mobilisations around Corbyn and Podemos aiming at something different?

EF Yes, I agree with you (and with Chantal Mouffe): all these political figures are critics of the neoliberal consensus, radically different both from right-wing populists and from the neoliberal Third Way. But my question remains: why call this left-wing *populism*, if it has nothing in common with right-wing populism? Is it not misleading? After all, Corbyn does not claim to be a populist, even though the term is used about (or rather against) him. And Sanders's rhetoric certainly recalls the People's Party of the late nineteenth century. But in today's context, I don't believe that calling him a populist is helpful.

I think that the reason why people advocate left-wing populism is that they believe that it opens up the possibility of converting voters from right to left – from Trump to Sanders, from Le Pen to Mélenchon. But in my view, this strategic perspective is mistaken. It starts from a sociological representation of the people: for the populists, this is supposed to be 'the common

people' or, especially on the left, the working class. Now, there is no doubt that working-class voters have deserted social democratic parties as a result of their neoliberal turn, and I agree that the left must win them back. However, things are more complicated. First, it is not accurate to say that a majority of workers voted for Trump or even Le Pen. Let us start with the example of the United States 2016 election, which I analysed in some detail in the days that followed it. Hillary Clinton still held a twelve-point advantage over Trump among low-income American voters. The problem is not so much that the poor vote for Republicans; rather, they tend not to vote at all. There is no doubt that working-class voters in general have not been happy with neoliberal Democrats, from Bill to Hillary Clinton. But this has not translated into an edge for the Republicans, at least *not yet*.

In the French case, one could argue that this shift of the working class to the far-right has become real: in the most recent French election, more workers did vote for Marine Le Pen than for any other candidates. However, we need to be careful: we are not talking about a majority of workers, but rather about a majority of those who vote ... Strategically, this distinction is very important. If left-wing populism is based on the idea that we need to convert right-wing populist voters, then what about non-voters?

Let us first consider the reality of such 'conversions'. We are already familiar with the opposite scenario. It has long been argued that left-wing critics of neoliberalism were falling into the lap of Le Pen's National Front; we have often been told that former communists and other traditional left-wing voters were becoming so-called *gaucho-lepenistes*. People who have done empirical work on this issue have shown that this prediction hasn't actually come true. It's a marginal phenomenon. This has been confirmed by recent opinion polls. Only 3% of those who voted for Le Pen in the spring of 2017 had voted for Mélenchon five years earlier, which is statistically insignificant. What about the opposite? The same polls show that only 3% of those who voted for Mélenchon this time around had voted for Le Pen five years earlier. What this means is that there is no empirical evidence to support the hypothesis of *gaucho-lepenisme*, nor to support the symmetrical claim that voters will shift from the National Front to La France Insoumise.

How can we explain the fact, then, that more French workers vote for Le Pen than for other parties? There are several factors. First, right-wing workers have given up on mainstream right-wing parties. In 2017, they didn't vote for Macron, but they didn't vote for Fillon either. Working-class votes for the far right tend to come from the traditional right. Conversely, left-wing workers have largely stopped voting altogether.

This explains the emphasis that I put on *non-voters*, on abstentionists, as potential voters for the left. In this light, let us reconsider the populist strategy. The idea is to pay attention to the alleged suffering of far-right voters, understood as victims of globalisation and neoliberal policies. Far from criticising them, populists are more likely to woo them in the hope of winning them over. What I have tried to demonstrate is that this does not work. An alternative strategy that I support focuses on people who don't vote, in particular those who have stopped voting. There is a better chance of converting non-voters into voters, I argue, than of converting far-right populists into left-wing voters. Those who advocate the latter strategy might respond that there is no need to choose between the two options. Why not address both groups? Well, this is a question of priorities. If you want to mobilise voters who are lured by fascism, you will try to avoid antagonising them on issues such as immigration or minority rights; that needn't involve becoming actually racist or xenophobic, but perhaps you will put more emphasis on national identity. Such a strategic choice alters the nature of the political discourse you defend.

On the other hand, if the people we are trying to move are abstentionists, then several

elements change right away. The first and most obvious thing to say about people who don't vote is that they tend not to look the same as people who do vote. We know that in countries like France or the US voters tend to be richer, and they tend to be older and whiter. If you are trying to appeal to a group of voters who are richer, older and whiter, you are not going to say the same kinds of things that you would to appeal to a group that is poorer, younger and less white. In other words, the question of strategy is important because it's a matter, not just of winning votes, but of *which* votes you are trying to win, and therefore of the policies you defend in order to win them.

The problem with the populist strategy, for the left, is that it's neither left nor a winning strategy. It was even less so during the latest presidential campaign in France: everyone played that same card at the same time, including Macron, with a rhetoric of 'centre' populism! Of course, my argument is not just about France. The same considerations apply to the United States. But another dimension becomes apparent there, thanks to the availability of racial data. Trump's success is not so much among working-class voters in general, but more specifically among the white working class. In a left-wing populist strategy, the racial dimension of the Trump vote is underestimated, and the class dimension is overestimated – whereas it now seems clear that his critique of the establishment was always just an illusion.

Recall Bernie Sanders. His campaign was very powerful – and I must say that I fully agree with his critique of Hillary Clinton's neoliberal version of Democratic politics. However, Sanders also made and reiterated an argument that I find problematic, against Clinton's notorious 'basket of deplorables', i.e. her claim that half of Trump voters are racist, sexist and homophobic. Sanders has repeatedly expressed his disagreement with Clinton's assessment. They are not bigoted, he argues – clearly hoping to win them over. Well, they certainly *are* racist and sexist, etc. That's why they voted for Trump. This empirical mistake leads to a political one. Sure, some of these people were offended. But when you are on the left, offending fascists is a good start, isn't it?

Neoliberalism and immigration

Claudia Aradau [CA] Your point about populist evasion of issues surrounding immigration in France and the US chimes with the major speech that Jeremy Corbyn gave recently to the 2017 Labour Party Conference.⁴ He spoke for 75 minutes, and only mentioned immigration three times, very quietly; he tried to say nothing of substance apart from some banal comments about values we all share, and that it's not the migrants who are to blame but the most abusive bosses. It seems to me that there is a contradiction in left thought, between the way they think about neoliberalism and about immigration. The two are not brought together, and hence they have to keep quiet about immigration.

EF I am convinced that the link between neoliberalism and immigration is essential. However, it's a complex one. A few years ago I co-wrote a book about the 'Roma question' in France (and in Europe) in which I tried to show that there is a clear link between neoliberalism and state xenophobia.⁵ First, xenophobia is a way to deflect attention from economic issues. But there is more. What the state says about the Roma, when forcing them to live in slums while expelling them repeatedly, is that their lives are worthless – and the same goes for migrants who die in the Mediterranean, or who are left to rot in Calais, or along the border between France and Italy. But in a neoliberal context, are we not all supposed to increase our value – not just our assets of course, but also our human capital? The idea that some people are worthless, that they are

literally *vauriens*, is integral to the neoliberal agenda: some people have value, some people do not. By comparison to the Roma, anyone, whether rich or poor, can feel worthy; by comparison, anyone, White or Black, or Arab, can feel ... white. This logic can extend to other 'worthless' groups, white or not. The racialisation of worthlessness is thus an essential element of neoliberal politics and policies: such is the political value of economic worthlessness.

However, at the same time, I was struck, as I think many people were, when in 2015 Angela Merkel's strong pro-refugee stance broke with this neoliberal logic, at least temporarily.⁶ This was no masquerade, it had real consequences, with over a million people admitted to Germany within a few months. The most remarkable point was that she pleaded for openness in the name of neoliberalism. It's precisely because we are good neoliberals, she argued, that we can afford to be generous; and at the same time, it is in our best economic interest to welcome refugees. This certainly complicates the link between neoliberalism and xenophobia. What appeared most clearly is that there is nothing inevitable about the link between economic policies and identity politics. Whether right or left, politicians can take opposite stances with respect to nationalism and xenophobia. Let us bear this in mind when looking at Mélenchon's evolution: the 2017 version is very different from the 2012 one, from one presidential election to the next. First, Mélenchon replaced the opposition between left and right with another one: 'us' and 'them' now meant the people and the elite, the common man and *la caste*. That's what left-wing populism is about. As a consequence, the terminology of the left disappeared. Front de Gauche and Parti de Gauche gave way to La France Insoumise, while the red flag was replaced by the tricolour Republican flag, and *L'Internationale* by *La Marseillaise*, all defining a national version of politics.



At the same time, the discourse on immigration in France changed. Compare for instance two speeches Mélenchon delivered in Marseille, the French gateway to the Maghreb. In 2012, he declared that 'we are one people around the Mediterranean.' One people, defined not in national terms, but in international ones – including Italians and Spaniards, but also Arabs from across the sea. The French were part and parcel of this Mediterranean people. In 2017, this rhetoric disappeared. Sure, Mélenchon dedicated a minute of silence to the migrants who died while crossing the Mediterranean, but this was different: it was about 'them', not 'us'. Compassion for others is not the same as belonging to the same people. The programme Mélenchon now

campaigning on insisted on creating conditions that would not force Africans into migration. That's no different from anyone else, including on the right and the far right. Everyone would agree – which means that it does not draw a line between right and left.

Avoiding the issue is not the best way to combat xenophobia. It reinforces the idea that, politically, you cannot afford to go against the tide. If you do not tell people that there is an alternative, not just on the level of the economy but to how we think about immigration, then of course you imply that we all indeed agree that immigration is a problem. And once you decide that immigration is a problem, well, who benefits from this alleged problem, if not xenophobes? I recall an opinion poll published by *Le Nouvel Observateur* in the late 1980s that asked people: 'who is in the best position to address the immigration problem?' For many, the answer was: the National Front. The editors of this left-wing magazine were shocked. But there was nothing surprising about the answer, since the question was Le Pen's.

MT But aren't there important differences between the so-called populist movements across Europe? In particular, if we think about differences between populist movements in Spain and France, for instance, between Podemos and La France Insoumise, there are some important political differences that the label of 'left-wing populism' does not allow us to capture.

EF One obvious connection between Podemos and La France Insoumise is Chantal Mouffe herself: her influence extends from Íñigo Errejón to Jean-Luc Mélenchon. As a consequence, we find the same rhetoric ('us' versus 'them'), and the same vocabulary (*'la casta'* versus *'les gens'*). Podemos has also started reclaiming the term *'patria'*, or homeland, as if popular sovereignty necessarily coincided with the nation state. This probably helps us understand that party's difficulty in dealing with the situation in Catalonia. Moreover, despite some reservations, Podemos eventually supported Mélenchon shortly before the election, and since then, the two parties have tried to forge an alliance.

But you're absolutely right, there are important differences between the Spanish and the French contexts. The first one is that, contrary to France, the far right has not played a major role in Spanish politics in the recent past – for obvious reasons, after Franco's dictatorship. As a consequence, the populist idea is not to win over far-right voters; and downplaying the contrast between right and left is less dangerous. The second one is that Podemos starts from the Indignados, as an attempt to build a party from a social movement. That has not been the case in France. *Nuit debout* has not had a comparable importance, and La France Insoumise has no clear link with it or with any other major social movement. The third one is the municipal dimension of the new politics of 'confluence' in Spain, from Barcelona to Madrid. Dozens of Spanish municipalities have claimed a symbolic status as 'Sanctuary Cities' for refugees. This has not happened in France. In any case, Mélenchon's movement is not only more 'vertical' than 'horizontal', but also more centralised than local.

Beyond differences, left-wing populisms share the same premise: replace the opposition between right and left by the one between 'us' and 'them', people from below and elites from above. Obviously, the caste is less numerous than the people: 'we are the 99% and they are the 1%.' Indeed. But then, how come it's so difficult for left-wing populists to reach a majority in elections? This is why we need to differentiate sociology and politics – and not conflate them as populism tends to do. If the working class voted according to their common interest, clearly the left would be flourishing today. That is not the case.

The paradox is that Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau once contributed to the critique of Marxism precisely on such grounds. In their 1985 classic post-Marxist essay,⁷ they argued

that the left should not privilege a sociological account of voting, and not presume that workers should normally vote for the left. We must not assume that social groups go one way or the other, they argue: politics is not a question of class so much as it is a matter of ideology.

It's true that one reason why many left-wing politicians are tempted by the populist strategy, and prefer to talk about people and elites, is that opinion polls keep showing a declining interest in the division between left and right. This is not hard to explain, as it is precisely the result of the neoliberal turn of social democrats. Why vote for the left if that just means Tony Blair or François Hollande? What's the difference? This in turn reinforces the idea that there is no alternative – which is the neoliberal mantra in the first place. But I don't believe that politics need be a mere echo of opinion polls. Chantal Mouffe insists on the construction of a people implied in populism, rather than the reflection of a pre-existing population. This is yet another point of agreement. However, an ambiguity remains. Let's take the book that she co-authored with Íñigo Errejón, *Construir pueblo*: does the title mean constructing 'a people', or 'the people'?⁸ In Spanish it is not entirely clear. The French translation says *construire un peuple*, and so opts for 'a people'. If it is one people and not the people, it can be one version instead of another. To me, what we should advocate is not to construct *the* people, but *a* people, a *left-wing* people. Not accepting that would involve moving beyond left and right, and such a move, in my opinion, has never been good for the left.

Nation, race, class

PH I have two broad questions at this point. One concerns the relation between people and class, and how we might orient the construction of a people towards the left in the way that you are describing. First, though, I'd like to ask about this from the opposite perspective, about the relation between people and the nation, or *la patrie*, and how this impacts on electoral strategy.

When Mélenchon says in 2012 that we are all one people, the peoples of the Mediterranean, and thus a people that transcends racial and national differences, this people isn't yet a people that can vote. This people cannot yet combine its power through a ballot box, put a government in place, and instruct it to follow a certain agenda. So, in terms of strategy, *if* you're going to play the game of electoral politics, aren't you then stuck, at least initially, with the existing set of national boundaries, electoral registers, and so on? And if the goal is to win by those rules, don't you then need to start, at least, by accepting the notion of a people as filtered by the existence of a *patrie*, and so perhaps draw on what might remain progressive or emancipatory in the patriotic tradition (which at least in the French case, can certainly include the revolutionary or Jacobin tradition)?

You argue that rather than try to win over right-wing voters we should appeal to those who don't vote at all; rather than risk reference to terms that might be appropriated by either the right or the left (like the nation, *la patrie*, a specific national history, etc.), we should stand unequivocally by left-wing principles, based on class, justice, internationalism, the legacy of colonialism, and so on – the sort of principles that might well win an election dominated by working class voters across the Mediterranean. But wouldn't Mélenchon respond by saying that yes, that would be very nice, but the fact is that we can't yet hold such an election, and in the meantime we need to win an actually-existing election in France, with all the constraints that this currently involves? And that under these circumstances the best way to move forward is by affirming a sort of transitional position, a patriotic internationalism if you like?

EF As you can imagine, my conclusion is a bit different. First, my critique is indeed based on the question: how to win the elections? You point out that foreigners do not vote. That's true, but this is one of the reasons why I think the defence of non-EU citizens' right to vote, at least in the local elections, is not just a question of fairness but also a matter of good politics. If non-EU citizens were allowed to vote, candidates in cities like Marseille, Paris, etc., would convince the parties they represent that, for electoral reasons, they cannot afford xenophobia. This would start to change the nature of the political discourse in France (and similarly elsewhere).

Of course, you can object that this isn't yet the case today and we have to deal with reality as it is. But I don't think that my argument is naively idealistic: I plead for a strategy aimed at non-voters. My point is that the racial dimension of abstention should not be overlooked. The discussion about immigration is often a discussion about who is French and who is not, but it is also, simultaneously (though often implicitly), a discussion about race. For example, while the French state has been condemned for racial profiling, this continues – and, worse, the state attempts to justify racial profiling as a way to control immigration: you need to stop and question people who 'look' foreign if you want to arrest foreigners. The same goes for anti-terrorist measures. The experience of French people who happen not to be white, in France, is that they already feel more and more looked upon as foreigners.

When politicians argue that we are not winning over people by talking about immigration, I think first of all about French people who are not 'white' – Arabs, people whose parents migrated from the French Antilles, or from the former colonies of sub-Saharan Africa, but also Muslims (since Islam functions, more and more, like a racial category). They are French citizens. When they hear discourses about immigration, all these people know that this is about them. If you are afraid of saying that immigration is not a problem, the price to pay for this will fall on them. If you're going to talk about the people, why assume that it's a white people?

Left-wing politics has to gain not from people who can't vote, but from people who don't vote because they are disgusted with politics. And this happens in particular with people who are from minority communities. What they have witnessed, for many years, is the perpetual betrayal of the left, and they respond accordingly. But why should we only think of the negative electoral consequences of a positive discourse on immigration? There are also votes to be won. Many French Arabs were very grateful for Mélenchon's 2012 speech in Marseille. These people know that any discussion about immigration is a discussion about them, and usually against them. They have every reason to support an alternative discourse about immigration, a genuine alternative: if we stop thinking that immigration is a problem, then, and only then, non-white French people will stop being perceived as a problem.

CA Before we turn to the broader question of immigration, is there a danger that you focus too much on electoral politics, and thus tacitly prioritise mobilisations timed around the electoral cycle, over more day-to-day forms of activism, solidarity, and so on?

EF You're absolutely right: that's what my essay is about. But that does not mean that this is what politics in general is all about – nor even all of my own work on politics. Indeed, in my previous essay on politics,⁹ I argued that given the betrayal of Socialists in France, and the relative failure of an alternative electoral left, one should think less in terms of electoral majorities and more in terms of social minorities. As I mentioned before, this meant including racial minorities in our definition of 'the people', so as not to oppose class and race, and not to conflate working class with Whites; but it also implied switching from 'the people' to what I call 'publics', that is, mobilisations organised around a cause. The advantage of this perspective, in my view, is not

only that it avoids reducing politics to elections. It also overcomes feelings of powerlessness: it affirms that minorities matter. You don't have to be a majority to weigh in on politics. Think of the religious right in the United States – or more recently in France, with the opposition to so-called 'marriage for all'. These people have managed to count for much more than their actual numbers. On the other side of the political battle, an association like Act-Up has proven that even a tiny minority of activists can change the world.

Politics is not just about elections. But I think that populism itself is defined by an electoral project. Mélenchon is first and foremost a former and probably future candidate running for presidential elections. So, indeed, there is more to politics than elections; but my little book was written in a context of elections, as an attempt to reclaim the opposition between right and left at a time when the populist illusion seeks to define the terms of debate far beyond elections.

MT I wonder what you think about the recent Italian election, where for the first time a populist party, the Five Star Movement (Cinque Stelle/5S) – first a movement, now a party – won 33% of the vote. 5S can't easily be labelled left or right, and it took shape as a sort of moralistic political revulsion for Berlusconi, framing itself in terms of a struggle for honesty and against corruption. It mainly took votes from a potential centre-left electorate, for whom the question of migration may not be central.

EF Cinque Stelle's success is first and foremost based on a rejection of political elites. As you point out, what is striking is that left-wing voters did not spare left-wing parties. However, the political meaning of this movement will not be defined by the voters, but by the coalition that will run the country. Political xenophobia need not be a reflection of social xenophobia; think of Macron, who was elected against Le Pen, but whose program on immigration is hailed by the National Front (and now even by Trump!). People who voted for 5S may not (all) be xenophobes, but it is clear that the xenophobia expressed by 5S was not a deterrent for them. And it seems that the xenophobia of the Lega Nord is not an obstacle to an alliance either. As things stand, an anti-immigration platform may be the only available cement for a political majority.

Immigration obsession

CA Can I push you a little bit more on this question of having an alternative discourse of immigration? You said earlier that we should turn it around, and stress that 'immigration is not a problem'. But this has already been done to some extent and, as you have said, can be absorbed within neoliberal discourse: on the right, immigration is not a problem to the extent that it chimes with the neoliberal dream. From the left, Corbyn would say that immigration is not itself a problem because the real problem is bad bosses, so that it all comes back to a state regulation of neoliberalism. So what kind of discourse does the left actually have, based on the principle that 'immigration is not a problem'? It seems to me that there is a neoliberal discourse, but there isn't a clear anti-capitalist or internationalist alternative.

EF First, in France or in Italy, not to mention Hungary or Poland, the right (not to mention the far right) is unabashedly xenophobic. We don't hear neoliberal arguments in favour of immigration as we did at the time of Blair and Zapatero. What strikes me today is the consensus in much of Europe, right and left, that immigration is a real problem. This is different from the United States, where both sides are represented (for and against), in both parties (Democrats and Republicans).

The European near-consensus against immigration means that the left has suffered an

ideological defeat: it dares not say that immigration is not a problem, for fear that this would sound like abandoning 'the people'. During the Sarkozy years, I participated in a multi-volume series on immigration policies by a group called *Cette France-là*. We drew on research conducted by scholars and institutions that, taken together, refutes the idea that 'immigration is a problem'.¹⁰ While the conclusions of this research are solidly established, very few people are aware of them. Moreover, once we presented them to a handful of sympathetic politicians, none were willing to accept them. They did not dispute any part of the argument – just the final result.

To me, this can only be interpreted as the consequence of ideological intimidation, which stems from an ideological defeat suffered in the last thirty years, on immigration as well as other issues. While there now seems to be more determination to resist defeat on economic issues, when it comes to issues of identity (nation and immigration), there isn't much ideological resistance. This may be due to the fact that it has been tempting for the left, given neoliberal globalisation, to think of the nation state as the last best hope to resist neoliberalism. In my opinion, it is a very weak defence and a potentially dangerous one; but it explains why it's so difficult to argue against xenophobia on the left without sounding like a naive person who is not interested in economic realities and is indifferent to the concerns of the working class.

PH How far, though, can these issues be kept separate, the economic issues (of precarity, exploitation, the neoliberal attacks on organised labour, etc.) and the 'political' issues of nation and immigration? In Britain and the US, and many other places too, it's long been a priority for employers to attract and exploit foreign workers in low-paid or unrewarding sectors of the economy, and then of course to blame them for being foreign ... Is someone like Corbyn wrong to say that the exploitation of foreign workers, which can be pushed to quite extreme lengths, e.g. in agriculture, has helped to undermine working conditions, and to depress wage increases?

EF I am not an economist. But what strikes me is that economic studies are rarely taken into account when they show that immigration is *not* driving salaries down. The reason is that we are convinced that you can be either generous or realistic, but not both at the same time. Now, I am not normally a fan of Angela Merkel, and I have not forgotten Germany's treatment of Greece, nor am I blind to the situation of workers in that country. But the idea that we cannot afford to be more open to immigration was disproved by Germany's very good economic results in the wake of the so-called 'refugee crisis'. How come no one is interested? Migrants turn out to be a 'good deal' for that country! But while many speak in the name of realism, reality itself is seldom taken into account.

PH Germany seems to have scooped up, on the cheap, an entire generation of highly-qualified (and relatively desperate) employees. But doesn't a lot depend on the way people are employed and paid? If we remember the bigger historical picture, didn't the influx of migrants from the countryside to the cities and industrial centres, over the early phases of primitive accumulation, play a major role in keeping wages low? The influx that Marx describes, of impoverished Irish workers into the English labour market, served to play one group of workers off against another, along effectively racist lines; the same sort of strategy has always helped to divide and rule the American working class, and the pattern seems to apply very widely. Unless employment regulations are strong, and rigorously enforced, doesn't this sort of manipulation of migrant workers help to put downward pressure on wages and undercut working conditions?

EF Saying that 'immigration is not a problem' does not mean that there are no problems with

immigration. But this distinction could draw a line between right and left. Unemployment is certainly a problem, for instance, and there are problems in education. Is immigration more like unemployment (we want to get rid of it)? Or is it more like education (we want to improve it)? The latter option is the one I defend against the contagion of far right discourses.

You're absolutely right: it depends on how migrants are employed and paid. But precisely: the problem is not the migrants themselves, but the regulations that make it possible for employers to use them as unfair competition, to undercut other workers – just like with industrial relocation. The answer is not fewer migrants, but more regulation.

Playing one group off against another is a constant, but the fact that it is politically effective does not prove that it is true economically. Think of Richard Nixon's 'Southern strategy', playing class versus race, the white working class versus Blacks, as if the economy were just a zero sum game. The same rules can be applied to immigration: that's what the far right wants us to believe. 'What's good for migrants must be bad for the white working class!' But if we accept the terms of the far right, how can we avoid being defeated ideologically? Above all we need to make the argument that fighting racism in France or fighting racism in Britain is not detrimental to working-class rights. We need to help provide a discourse that does not pit one group against another, while the right is doing the opposite. That's why I think the answer cannot be the nation, because the nation today in Europe inevitably speaks not just about citizens and foreigners, but also about race.

MT Both in France and in Italy, particularly in Italy, we can argue that migrants are an important component of the black economy. But isn't it a bit slippery to argue that migrants can be defended insofar as they contribute to the economy in this way? Isn't it consistent with the neoliberal principle that we accept the migrants insofar as they produce value? I remember that in your book you speak about '*la figure du déchet*', figures who appear as worthless, who can be literally thrown out. Shouldn't we build a counter-politics on migration starting from that figure of the non-valuable person, rather than on the basis of economic contributions?

EF First, I would clearly distinguish two things: the rhetoric of worthlessness and the real value of the Roma. The fact that they are treated as if they were worthless does not mean that they are! But second, let me clarify my argument to avoid any misunderstanding: I am not saying that we should accept migrants because it is in our best interest to do so (although that happens to be true). I just raise a question: how come those who claim to be realistic, those who pride themselves in being pragmatic, and who always worry about the economic consequences of migration, do not hear this economic argument? I am not making a neoliberal argument for immigration; I just wonder why neoliberals themselves seem so reluctant to make such an argument. Why don't they side with Merkel?

False alternatives

PH I hope you won't mind if I ask an all-too familiar question here, the sort of question you must have heard many times. You recommend that the left should stress the basic commonality of interest between local or 'native' workers and immigrant workers. Yes, this is surely how things *should* play out. How far, though – at least as things stand, in privileged countries like France or the UK – does any perception of this commonality itself presuppose the idea that the number of new incoming immigrants is already and will remain quite strictly controlled? How far does it presume that there are strong national borders, well-defined 'quotas', and so on (not to mention

the more or less impassable obstacles now set up in Libya, Morocco, Turkey, and elsewhere.). If you were to remove these controls altogether, what would likely happen, given the current levels of desperation and competition that are designed to prevail in the more forcefully impoverished parts of the world? As far as a winning political strategy in France or the UK goes, in other words, how free can migration actually be, so long as we maintain massive inequalities between the richer and poorer parts of the world?

On the other hand, if we retain some controls on migration, some sort of ‘border protection’ as they like to say in the UK, aren’t we then still effectively treating it as a *problem*, precisely – a problem to be managed with higher or lower quotas, etc., more or less along existing policy lines? Or to put this question another way: what is your position on political borders, and on full freedom of movement and employment beyond EU limits, for instance across the Mediterranean?



EF Immigration has become a political obsession. And whenever we question the rationality of this xenophobic obsession, we are asked whether we are ready to defend the opposite, i.e. a policy of ‘no borders’. And then we are pressed to respond: are we ready to accept an invasion? Well, the reality of migration is that there simply is no flood of migrants into Europe. Most migrants move within the global South. In France, the Roma migration from Romania and Bulgaria, a movement of people that has ignited xenophobic fears, concerns something like ... 15,000 people! For the moment, the debate is not: control or no control? It is rather: how far are we willing to go to stop migration? How many people are we prepared to see die, or be enslaved, or incarcerated? Are we prepared to see solidarity transformed into a crime in the Mediterranean, or in France in Calais, or near the border of Italy? We do not need to have the perfect alternative answer to know that the current answer is a problem, not a solution. It creates the immigration problem it claims to address.

MT Going back to the relation between ‘people’ and workers, could you say a little more about how you understand class, and so class struggle, as a political force? For instance, how far do you see

the basic antagonism between workers and employers along Marxian lines, as a struggle between proletariat and bourgeoisie? Do you think it's still helpful to think in terms of proletarianisation and the exploitation of unpaid labour, not least because the Marxian concept of the proletariat is a supra- or inter-nationalist one?

EF This would require a whole discussion. But let me just say that we always have to combine two understandings of politics. On the one hand, there is class struggle as a kind of objective reality; labour law reforms are a reminder that employers very much believe in class struggle. On the other hand, politics is about ideology; it mobilises people along lines that are not necessarily class categories. It is not 'either/or'; politics is both ('and/and'). This is not new, obviously. What may be new is that we have to take into account economic and social transformations in neoliberal capitalism. Workers are not just workers. They are also consumers, they have debts, their pensions may depend on the market, etc. The old logics have to be reinterpreted in this new context – and here I would rely on Michel Feher's work on the rise of the logic of credit (not just profit) that transforms us, in all our social dimensions, into both investors and investees.¹¹

CA What about some of the inequalities Peter was hinting at – the fact that capitalist development is not uniform, that there are zones of development but also zones of abandonment, and the fact that people's experience in these zones of abandonment is one of extreme competition. This in turn enables extreme forms of exploitation. How should we factor this into discussion about the economic consequences of migration?

EF Neoliberalism has dire consequences for all kinds of people. I assume that's a given. Once we have said that, the question is what you do about it. For me, the racialisation of poverty has consequences for everyone, and not just for non-Whites, who of course suffer it most directly: it results in a general naturalisation of poverty, a naturalisation of unemployment, and of economic and social precarity, and so on. It serves to get us used to the idea that there are different kinds of people, and that these differences are 'natural' and cannot be fundamentally changed.

The discourse on the right says: you're working class and you're poor, but you are white, and you can blame your poverty on non-Whites. What we are doing to the Roma today is the laboratory of what we are doing to all those we exclude in terms of immigration and all those we exclude in terms of class. My point is not to minimise this but to try and offer an alternative approach, to stress how this racialisation of the economy doesn't just take place at the expense of non-Whites – it starts with non-Whites, but it ends up affecting all kinds of people.

I think this logic is something that you can develop in different ways. For example, when you see the police harassing non-Whites, you can always say 'oh well, it's just a problem for non-Whites' – but then you might see that the police are also harassing Whites who are demonstrating against the government, or people in precarious housing, etc. The abuses of the economy, and the abuses of the state, which can focus primarily on some groups of people, can also always be turned against others. I think that's the key to the alternative discourse that we should provide.

So to recap: my point is not that immigration is a good economic deal, but, first, how come those who are supposed to think in terms of good deals and bad deals don't acknowledge this, and, second, how come those who are supposed to be critical of all this actually buy into it. In fact, when people say we cannot afford to be nice to migrants because it would be against the interests of the people, they are buying the idea that it is a bad deal. My point is not to endorse the good deal argument but to question the bad deal one. It is really about the racialisation of economic issues, about how those who are racialised (and thus considered 'naturally' other or

radically alien) are considered worthless, and then by the same token, about how those who are considered worthless are in turn racialised and treated as 'other'. Such an approach avoids accepting as a fact the opposition between Whites and non-Whites.

That's my argument in favour of appealing to abstentionists. Abstentionists are both white and non-white, and they have an interest in uniting around a common cause. We should argue against any discourse that insists on an opposition between the two groups, Whites and non-Whites. We can't just ignore the issue, but we need to make it into an *argument*. Racialisation is certainly not a good thing for non-Whites, but we need to emphasise more that it is also dangerous for Whites, in particular for working-class Whites who today are told, on all sides, that they are not going to get anything – except whiteness.

Eric Fassin is Professor of Sociology at the University of Paris 8 St-Denis and author of Populisme: le grand ressentiment (2017).

Notes

1. Éric Fassin, *Populisme: le grand ressentiment* (Paris: Les éditions Textuel, 2017); forthcoming in English as *Populism, Left and Right* (Prickly Paradigm). This interview was conducted on 28 September 2017, and then amended by email in March and April 2018.
2. See Chantal Mouffe, 'The Populist Moment', *Open Democracy*, 21 November 2016, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/democraciaabierta/chantal-mouffe/populist-moment>; Mouffe, 'We Urgently Need to Promote a Left-Wing Populism', trans. David Broder, Verso Books blog, 4 August 2017, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3341-chantal-mouffe-we-urgently-need-to-promote-a-left-populism>.
3. Stuart Hall, 'The Great Moving Right Show', *Marxism Today* (January 1979), 14–20.
4. Jeremy Corbyn, 'Labour Party Conference Speech', 27 September 2017, accessed 2 April 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7_PHRX1ImAQ.
5. Éric Fassin, Carine Fouteau, Serge Guichard, Aurélie Windels, *Roms et riverains. Une politique municipale de la race* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2014).
6. Éric Fassin and Aurélie Windels, 'The German

Dream: Neoliberalism and Fortress Europe', *Near Futures Online: Europe at a Crossroads*, ed. Michel Feher, 2016, accessed 23 April 2018, <http://www.nearfuturesonline.org/the-german-dream-neoliberalism-and-fortress-europe/>.

7. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London and New York: Verso, 1985).

8. Chantal Mouffe and Íñigo Errejón, *Construir pueblo: Hegemonía y radicalización de la democracia* (Barcelona: Icaria, 2015).

9. Éric Fassin, *Gauche: l'avenir d'une désillusion*. (Paris: Textuel, 2014).

10. *Cette France-là*, vol. 1 [6 May 2007–30 June 2008] (Paris, 2009), accessed 23 April 2018, <http://www.cettefrancela.net/volume-1/>;

Cette France-là, vol. 2 [1 July 2008–30 June 2009] (Paris, 2010), accessed 23 April 2018, <http://www.cettefrancela.net/volume-2/>;

Cette France-là, Sans-Papiers et Préfets. La Culture du résultat en portraits (Paris: La Découverte, 2012); *Cette France-là, Xénophobie d'en haut. Le choix de la droite éhontée* (Paris: La Découverte, 2012).

11. Michel Feher, *Le Temps des investis: Essai sur la nouvelle question sociale* (Paris: La Découverte, 2017).