

Reformist radicalism

Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* (London: Verso, 2018). 112pp., £10.99 hb., £9.99 pb., 978 1 78663 755 0 hb., 978 1 78663 756 7 pb.

Despite its present ubiquity, the term ‘populism’ remains ambiguous. Does populism describe a set of radically democratic demands, or the appeal to an exclusive society predicated on sameness? Can it be placed alongside or within the left-right spectrum that has characterised more than two centuries of political antagonism? And if so, how is ‘left populism’ distinct from prior articulations of mass politics?

Years before the appearance of Podemos and Syriza, Jair Bolsonaro’s PSL or Steve Bannon’s parasitised GOP, ‘populism’ was heralded by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe as a response to a political impasse of the Left. For Laclau and Mouffe, populism describes a form of politics rather than a principle; a discursive operation whereby an otherwise heterogeneous movement marks itself apart from a common adversary, and which is, as such, highly changeable. Mouffe’s latest book succinctly reiterates this position, issuing a demand for a left populism that could counter an insurgence from the contemporary right. Yet the shortcomings of Mouffe’s programme are clear. Commencing from a liberal precept of individual interest and affirming the limitations of the extant nation-state, Mouffe’s description of populism furnishes its roving subject with no objective standard by which to delineate left from right, let alone distinguish a revolutionary politics from a bureaucratic restatement of power. Consequently, Mouffe’s description of populism appears strategically devoid of content.

As Mouffe explains, populism serves the interest of a select group under the hegemonic sign of ‘the’ people, marking an ‘us’ from a ‘them’ – but neither subject preexists the operation by which they are symbolised. Specific claims enter into a provisional equivalency only with reference to a common sign. Populist discourse thus establishes ‘equivalential chains’ of otherwise heterogeneous positions, whose meaning cannot be specified in advance. For Mouffe, this heterogeneity eludes the ‘essentialist’ perspective of Marxism, and the alleged incapacity of this tradition to account for demands originating elsewhere than in class. As such, Mouffe narrates, forgetting the

concerted anti-communist campaigns of the Cold War era, Marxism gradually cedes purchase on the popular imaginary over the course of the twentieth century. In her account, a multiplication of demands irreducible to class produces a new politics beginning in the late 1960s with ‘the second wave of feminism, the gay movement, the anti-racist struggles and issues around the environment’. This historical account tempts the identification of Mouffe’s programme with so-called identity politics – somewhat ironically, considering that today’s populist firebrands mobilise imprecisely against this catch-all label. Meanwhile, for many liberal commentators, populism, whether left or right, stands for a version of the very ‘class essentialism’ that Mouffe invokes by way of contrast.

Against this commonplace – that left and right convene upon an identical discontent – one must reinstate a properly political antagonism. Mouffe struggles on this point, despite her title’s promise. In succession, she argues for a ‘left populism, understood as a discursive strategy of construction of the political frontier between “the people” and “the oligarchy”’, then specifies that this frontier (‘people/oligarchy’) should supplant that of ‘left/right’, for ‘such a frontier is no longer adequate to articulate a collective will that contains the variety of democratic demands that exist today.’ Nevertheless, she continues, this populism-to-come must be distinguished from that of the right; and so back to the language of the left we go. This self-contradictory approach reveals further problems with the empty formalism of Mouffe’s account as a whole, within which populism is so generic a concept as to necessitate a meta-political doubling, without which its terms are indiscernible in reference.

Rightism, by Mouffe’s own admission, has dictated the terms of populism so far, and her proposed timeline begins in the United Kingdom, with a Thatcherite revolt against a welfare state that Labour ultimately failed to protect. Here again, Mouffe’s formalism invites confusion. On the one hand, she states that today’s populism derives from a backlash against the neoliberal post-

politics wrought by Thatcher in England, Reagan in the United States, and other leaders world over, but on the other, she asserts (correctly) that these figures were themselves originators of a populist style: ‘Her project was clearly a populist one’, Mouffe writes of Thatcher: ‘[b]y erecting a political frontier, she was able to disarticulate the key elements of the social-democratic hegemony and to establish a new hegemonic order based on popular consent.’

Stuart Hall counselled readers to learn from Thatcher’s populism, which orients a constituency of absolutised individuals toward an authoritarian signifier. But Mouffe takes Hall’s challenge further still, asserting that ‘we should follow Thatcher’s route, adopting a populist strategy, but this time with a progressive objective.’ Mouffe cites Jeremy Corbyn’s revivification of a moribund Labour Party, noting that Corbyn’s campaign slogan, ‘For the many, not the few’, was used by Tony Blair as well, with ‘many’ and ‘few’ signifying differently. This says little in itself, for the right has a long history of appropriating leftist talking points; but the left must be cautious in borrowing them back. Signifiers are subject to alteration as they pass between campaigns and ideologies, with residual effects. Any programme of quotation must proceed with specificity, asking for and by whom a signal is deployed.

Mouffe’s approach acknowledges that populism is empty of content and adaptable to more and less emancipatory purposes – from neoliberal agitation against bureaucracy and the subsequent rejection of that project to racist and anti-racist campaigns alike. In every case, however, it requires a formal antagonist or presumed threshold of belonging. Where do populists, both left and right, place that threshold today? Counter-intuitively, it appears that relinquishing the class emphasis of mass politics has permitted racist and scapegoating ideologies to flourish; one paradoxical effect of which is that national populisms appear to have successfully monopolised the topic of class, where it allegedly concerns the reallocation of opportunity and resources within a politically enfranchised people. Populism then appears an elite rhetorical strategy, intended to assuage a deeply felt crisis by deflecting from its factual cause – namely, the extra-discursive reality of capitalism.

Where populism concerns the rule of the signifier, it may be said to correspond to a crisis of institutional

faith. In Mouffe’s account, this corresponds to the rise of a global ‘post-democracy’, under which both parliamentary and popular power are beholden to private interest. But this imprecise periodisation implies a return to some fantasised near-past of broader representation and social cohesion. Indeed, for Mouffe, liberal democracy already expresses the range of demands that populism exerts. Throughout the book Mouffe emphasises that populism should seek to transform liberal democracy without disputing the legitimacy of this framework. Mouffe’s ‘radical reformism’ claims to reject the ‘false dilemma’ of reform versus revolution – by deciding on the necessity of reform.



Mouffe outlines three modes of left politics: pure reformism, which neither disputes liberal democracy nor neoliberal hegemony; so-called radical reformism, which asserts the legitimacy of liberal democracy as well as a new hegemonic rule; and revolutionism, which seeks a rupture or break with the existing situation. Mouffe’s recommendation, ‘to engage with the diverse state apparatuses’, endorses the middle option, avoiding questions as to the neutrality of a given apparatus in the first place.

The revolving door of populist avatars, within which left and right swap talking points, may then have as much to do with formal underdetermination as with systemic inertia. Without the political intention to transform power, power will surely transform one's politics.

Mouffe canvases for a sign of relationality that would place the individual within a political community, and in high republican style decides upon the honorific of the citizen. While Mouffe strenuously rejects the Thatcherite rewriting of the citizen as a taxpayer-consumer whose rights are essentially secured at market, she nonetheless endorses the higher-level atomisation of the nation-state. For Mouffe, radical democracy starts and remains situated at this level. Mouffe herself foresees the obvious problem, but fails to attribute it to any objective basis whatsoever: 'As the example of right populism testifies, demands for democracy can be articulated in a xenophobic vocabulary and they do not automatically have a progressive character. It is only by entering in equivalence with other democratic demands, like those of the immigrants or the feminists, that they acquire a radical democratic dimension.'

One might otherwise speak of solidarity, which Mouffe chooses to write as a provisional equivalence between demands, if not positions. With no theory of society, this suffices to account for mediation. Even Mouffe's passing evocation of intersectionality is ill-suited to her demonstrative purposes, for the non-identical antagonisms of her description fail to meet the criterion of objective simultaneity. The subject that Mouffe describes is a teeming agent of multiplicitous self-interest, not a political bloc in any traditional sense. This explains its changeability, as a formalist account of collectivity leaves the articulation of purpose largely to chance, or to power.

Moreover, the idealised autonomy of each perspective prior to a point of articulation constitutes a decision on Mouffe's part; for a summary atomisation necessarily precedes the constitution of a people from so many separate claims. Plainly, the discursive 'frontier' that allows for the formal articulation of mass politics is not so arbitrary, as it corresponds to real contradictions in the organisation of the world. To cede reality to a purely discursive play of otherwise baseless powers is to relin-

quish politics to the status quo under a series of different names.

On this point, Mouffe evokes a morally ambivalent group psychology in order to license the necessity that left populism address itself to the courtly delusions of the right. In her view:

a left populist strategy cannot ignore the strong libidinal investment at work in national – or regional – forms of identification and it would be very risky to abandon this terrain to right-wing populism. This does not mean following its example in promoting closed and defensive forms of nationalism, but instead offering another outlet for those affects, mobilising them around a patriotic identification with the best and more egalitarian aspects of the national tradition.

This ominously underqualified endorsement of rightist formalism verges on pure equivocation, which, by Mouffe's admission, is a mechanism of populism too.

As noted, Mouffe's proposed populism requires a meta-political supplement from the left, and she qualifies her perspective accordingly:

It is to avoid this political indeterminacy that I believe that it is important to speak of 'left' populism in reference to another meaning of 'left', which concerns its axiological dimension and signals the values that it defends: equality and social justice.

But if a principled leftism does not inhere in persuasion, which proceeds as a libidinal appeal rather than an argument, then so-called left populism can only realise itself as a surreptitious version of the vanguardism that Mouffe abandons to history, at best.

Faced with the practical successes of right-wing populism on a global scale, it is more pressing than ever to affirm a radical critique of society over the conciliatory solutions to crisis that Mouffe recommends. Throughout this short book, Mouffe does little more than repackage a fantasy of exclusionary stability. And while one may appreciate the impetus – to enroll as many emancipatory demands in a mass movement as possible – in order to be truly radical this cannot proceed as a simple re-description of the operations of the liberal state.

Cam Scott