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CRITICAL REVIEW

Mouffe, Chantal (2019). *Por Um Populismo de Esquerda*. Colecção Trajectos. Lisboa: Gradiva. ISBN 978-989-616-906-0. 104 pp[1]

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The work *Por Um Populismo de Esquerda* (For a Left Populism) by Chantal Mouffe is part of the long-standing neo-Marxist tradition endorsed by a vast and diverse community of readers, ranging from Sociology to Political Science and Philosophy. For the French author, it is clear that populism itself may not be solely and simply synonymous with dysfunctionality and democratic pathology. What she calls the "populist moment" is inserted in a socio-historical and cultural narrative, where different dispositions of the different social structures are metamorphosed in a permanent dialectical process of thesis, antithesis and synthesis.

The essay denotes conceptual and analytical rigour coupled with a remarkable observational argument and synthesis capacity. The author starts by making a statement of intentions that we consider relevant. She declares that it is a theoretical and reflective contribution to the study of populism. Still, it does not disregard the militant and activist side that the political and communicational moment imposes. It contributes to a left-wing populist programme with a strong cultural anchorage, promoting the revitalization of the political and public life of liberal democracies.

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[1] Critical Review translated by Carolina Peralta.

The work is organized in seven parts: introduction, four chapters, conclusion and a theoretical appendix. In the latter, the author makes relevant conceptual clarifications. The book has the foreword of José Neves (FCSH-Universidade Nova Lisboa).

In the *Introduction*, Mouffe defines the research problem and argues that we are currently facing a crisis in the neoliberal hegemonic formation. In this sense, this is a historic opportunity to transform political and social structures in favour of a left-wing policy: the populist moment is the moment when the political and social institutions that guide current neoliberalism must be called into question by left-wing populism. The neoliberal hegemony that has prevailed over the past three to four decades has led to what she calls post-politics. This period reveals itself in the growing lack of interest in political life on the part of an increasing number of social categories.

There are two reasons for this hegemony. The first is the essentialist conception of the political practice of a good part of the left political actors, who continue to see political expression as the result of class configurations. The other is the consensus around TINA (There is no alternative) embraced by social democracy under Tony Blair's government through the so-called "third way". Accordingly, the "populist moment" requires the mobilization of the discursive dimension through which "(...) "a political frontier between 'the people' and 'the oligarchy' "(...)" (2019: 19) is built.

In the first chapter, *The Populist Moment*, Mouffe begins by making a declaration of interests. This involves postulating the programmatic and activist horizons of her proposal, albeit guided theoretically and conceptually by a stance that she calls "anti-essentialist". Under this epistemological preamble, she argues that society is divided and constructed discursively through hegemonic practices.

Considering populism as a way of making politics based on discourse, the ideological component, the programmatic one, and its institutional dimension as a political regime, are removed.

Historically, the neoliberal hegemonic formation has followed that of the welfare state with a social-democratic matrix. However, more recently, and in the face of growing dissatisfaction and demand from broad social categories, the neoliberal hegemonic formation is under pressure and erosion. Organically, this formation consists of: deregulation; privatization; austerity; limitation of the role of the State; individualism; and materialistic ascendant.

Post-democracy corresponds precisely to the height of neoliberal hegemony. In this phase, the principles of liberalism gain prominence in the regulation of political and institutional activity, especially economic liberalism, to the detriment of equality and popular sovereignty and with them the closing of agonistic spaces. The populist moment is the time for the distinction of populism.

Thus, the design and adoption of a new language are proposed. This new language has the power of political identification of broad social strata disaffected and removed from the public sphere. This new linguistic code would allow the second proposed aspect, the definition of the boundary between the "people" and the "oligarchy". It is at this point that the bifurcation between left-wing populism and right-wing populism occurs. The "we" of left-wing populism should be able to articulate the interests of social groups such as workers, the LGBTI community, immigrants and the precarious middle class.

The second chapter, *Learning from Thatcherism*, goes back to the mid-1970s, when the tensions in the social-democratic hegemony began to multiply. An exponent of this crisis, the Thatcherite offensive involved questioning the legitimacy of the welfare state. The legitimacy crisis was amplified by economic factors, such as the 1975 oil crisis, but also by the contesting role of the new social movements that advocated greater individual rights and freedoms. This historical weakness of the welfare state and the hegemony that legitimized it were relentlessly used to erect a new hegemony, the neoliberal one.

The strategy included the construction, at the discursive level, of "us", that is, the hardworking people, victims of bureaucrats and a "them" that encompassed the forces of the system, state bureaucrats, trade unions, and the beneficiaries of social benefits. The hegemonic strategy of Thatcher's populism resulted in a combination of traditional Conservative Party themes, such as self-interest, individualism, support for competition and a strong anti-state culture. The intervention occurred at several levels: economic, political, and ideological, in order to establish a new cultural hegemony.

The consolidation of neoliberal hegemony included the adoption of aesthetic canons of counterculture such as authenticity, self-management and the absence of hierarchies, allowing the neutralization of new social movements.

In the third chapter, *Radicalizing Democracy*, Mouffe begins by postulating what she calls hegemonic formation, stating that "(…) it is a configuration of social practices of different natures: economic, cultural, political and legal, and their articulation is ensured around some key symbolic signifiers that shape "common sense" and offer the normative framework of a given society" (2019: 53). Basically, we are facing a social structure that aims to replace the dominant regulatory framework. It is based on this that social practices are guided, including those based on common sense.

According to the author, the institutional bodies that support Western societies are faced with a growing erosion not only of the trust placed by the citizens, but also regarding their own functioning, especially when prioritizing freedom, especially economic, to the detriment of equality as the basic principle of democratic life.

It is paradoxical that there is no robust opposition/rejection to/of the neoliberal project for financialization of the economy and other aspects of social activity. At this point, the author "sees" an opportunity for left-wing populism, capturing and mobilizing the discontent of broad social categories regarding the regime's elites.

It is up to left-wing populism to radicalize democracy. The constitution of an actor capable of carrying out this transformation at the level of social and political institutions should consider and start from the contribution of three types of the leftist actor: pure reformism; radical reformism; and revolutionary politics. All of them will necessarily have the State as an agonistic space as imperative for their action. To this end, it is not just any version of the extreme left, but a left that promotes a break with the neoliberal status quo.

As a consequence, left-wing populism as a collective political actor should intensify the agonistic confrontation in society and, in particular, in the structures of the State.

The fourth and final chapter, entitled *The Construction of a People*, is where the author problematizes the process of radicalization of democracy, which should include the

construction of a political subject that articulates different interests and intensifies the equality component, equating it with freedom. The "people" of left-wing populism must be constituted by a cause, defined in a clear and objective way that brings together several manifestations of the popular will. A second aspect is the emergence and consolidation of the figure of a leader, preferably with charismatic contours. This double dimension of building a left-wing populist political actor leads us to two important observations. On the one hand, the model of democracy underlying the transition from a neoliberal hegemony to a populist hegemony of the left, in which a citizen's role should replace that of a consumer. This passage implies active involvement of collective and community life. On the other hand, the figure of the left populist leader distances itself from the right populist leader who has authoritarian and centralizing features.

In the *Conclusion*, the author discusses the "populist moment" that has arisen in contemporary western societies. She sees it as the result of the erosion of the institutional mechanisms of democratic regimes, which thus accumulate tensions and clusters of social conflict, sometimes latent, others manifest. As a result of the neoliberal hegemony that has emerged triumphant in the last decades, the post-democratic condition is currently undermined by the growing discontent of broad social categories.

The outbreak of discontent in such diverse social categories occurs in a very different way, embodying what is conceived as a "populist moment": at the discursive level, with the construction of a discursive category, "the people", which aggregates very diverse social categories. As there is no general criterion that applies across the different Western democracies, those who feel distant from the decision-making and social mobility circuits come together. It also includes the growing preponderance of affections in politics.

For this reason, more than the programmatic definition of a hypothetical left-wing populism, the delimitation of a political frontier will culminate in the discursive dimension. From this point of view, the negative connotation of populism that proliferates in the West must be dismantled, since this is nothing more than a strategy originating from post-political interest groups.

Antagonistically, populism can be seen as a promising strategy of democratic radicalization and its aspect of equality and social justice, as distinctive criteria of left-wing populism in relation to the others.

In the *Theoretical Appendix - An anti-essentialist approach*, the author makes some conceptual clarifications which, in addition to reinforcing the epistemological and theoretical foundations of the work, are also pedagogical. She begins by clarifying that her approach is situated in what she calls a dissociative perspective by perceiving the political structure as the space where antagonistic interests with conflicting potential are at odds. The anti-essentialist analysis is based on two basic concepts: first, the "hegemonic practices" that comprise "all social orders are the temporary and precarious articulation of hegemonic practices whose purpose is to establish an order in a contingent context. Hegemonic practices are articulation practices whereby a given order is created and the meaning of social institutions is fixed" (2019: 90). A second concept, that of social agent "(...) consists of a set of "discursive positions" that can never be totally fixed in a closed system of differences" (2019: 90). In short, she affirms that there is no

structural determinism, since the positioning of each actor lies in an unstable discursive structure, constantly reassessed by each actor.

An agonistic concept of democracy - the great contemporary challenge for liberal regimes is to establish a space for agonistic confrontation that allows the establishment of criteria that lead to the construction of "us" and "them". The "them" is not an enemy that we have to objectively eliminate, but an adversary that gives rise to a fight of ideas in a clear distinction between the "adversary" and the "enemy".

Even so, fighting against enemies, perceived as those who refuse to play the democratic game with its rules and principles, cannot be dispensed with. Hence, the distinction between "antagonism" associated with the enemies of democracy and "agonism" where different political perspectives are confronted is also relevant.

Reflections and dialogue with the work

This work represents a substantive attempt to revalue the concept of "populism" and recycle it from the social debris where it is commonly found, especially in the daily political and media discourse. It may constitute an opportunity to renew democratic procedures (Judis, 2017; Müller, 2017; Mudde & Kaltwasser 2017). The French author contributes to this debate by proposing a programme for a left-wing populism aimed at revitalizing democracy.

Regarding the definition of the cause, the author provides some clues, which include appealing to the "social issue", proposing it as an alternative to the forms of exploitation, domination and discrimination. The ecological question should also have a pivotal place in the formation of a new populist hegemony of the left, advocating in favour of a fair energy transition and the abandonment of the dominant productivist model.

Finally, the construction of left-wing populism, being anchored geographically and nationally, should: aspire to its internationalization; collaborate with the various national left-wing populisms; radicalize each of the democracies; and invoke the polarizing affects that exist between the different actors.

The author refers to a "post-political" time but she does not define it in sufficient detail so as to identify dimensions and criteria that signal the transition from a period of neoliberal hegemony to a "post-political" one. Basically, one does not understand the exact conditions and circumstances in which this transformation takes place, particularly the passage of what she calls the current "populist moment".

The author fails to examine, not even generically, the role of the media in contemporary societies and in particular in the historical dialectics process where key cultural transformations take place. An example includes the appropriation and use of new social media by actors considered to be populist (Bolsover, 2017; Benkler, Faris & Roberts, 2018; Gopalkrishnan, 2018), who base their strategy on a double practice: the establishment of communication and direct interaction with potential voters, breaking the monopoly of traditional media (Morais & Sousa, 2013); and rupture in the discourse that emphasizes denouncing corrupt elites or the plot of liberal and cosmopolitan elites regarding migratory flows (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2019).

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