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Didier Fassin

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The Blind Spots of Left Populism

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In the profusion of essays recently published on populism (Müller 2016, Moffitt 2017, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017) one stands out for its claim of the term, the idea and the program: Chantal Mouffe's (2018) manifesto *For a Left Populism*, which has received much attention from political scientists as well as politicians. Whereas most authors writing on this timely topic distance themselves from what they regard as a nefarious ideology or a treacherous disguise, the Belgian political theorist promotes it as the only way, for the left, to respond effectively to right-wing populism and, like the phoenix, rise from the ashes.

The starting point of her argument is a relatively straightforward political diagnosis, which she develops in four steps (9-24). First, we are living through a populist moment. Populism is not an ideology but the discursive strategy that sets up an opposition between the elite and the people and is therefore able to accommodate various institutional frameworks. Second, this moment results from the crisis of the neoliberal hegemonic formation which has itself replaced the social-democratic welfare state in the 1980s. This crisis corresponds to the disarticulation of liberal principles of freedom and the rule of law from democratic principles of equality and sovereignty of the people, the former remaining alone after the elimination of the latter, thus causing the advent of current post-democracy. Third, the left has

committed two historical errors. Initially, its class essentialism has made it impervious to the emergence of new social movements involving race, gender, sexuality and environment. Later, its attempt to propose a third way to create a consensus at the center generated a post-politics which did not leave space any more for contradictions and conflicts. Fourth, the combination of post-democracy (decline of social justice and distrust in representation) and of post-politics (extinction of the right/left opposition) paved the way to populism as the only alternative to neoliberalism and the sole response to people's discontent. Q. E. D.

Based on this diagnosis, Mouffe draws her plan for the left, taking as her model Margaret Thatcher who gained power by using populist arguments (25-38). Indeed, the Conservative prime minister successfully contrasted the oppressive establishment of the state and the unions with the industrious people who did not receive the benefits of its labour. But once in power, she implemented a classical form of authoritarian neoliberalism which not only allowed her to apply her Hayekian political project but which was later adopted by her successors of the Labour Party under the aegis of Tony Blair. Right-wing populism had therefore served as a stepping-stone for imposing a hegemonic model. For Mouffe, this is what the left should in turn do, but with as an objective the advent of a new hegemony reuniting liberalism and democracy. In her view, populism is a short-term tactic for a long-term strategy. She sees Jeremy Corbyn as the best example of the successful application of this winning scheme based on his espousal of the opposition us/them. More generally, for her, populism is the means, whereas radical democracy, which supposes pluralism and representation, is the end (39-57). Contrary to other radical thinkers, she does not consider pluralist representative democracy itself to be in crisis. It is rather its contemporary post-political expression that is failing because it does not allow for the agonistic confrontation between various hegemonic projects. The objective is therefore not to reject representation but to render it more democratic, which is what left populism achieves. But for populism to exist, there has to be a people. As an anti-essentialist, Mouffe proposes to construct it (59-78). Indeed, what she means by people has no empirical reality; it is a discursive construction including and excluding various segments of the population. Thus, while a few decades ago, the left was focused on the working class, ignoring new social

movements, it is today the opposite. To avoid this counter-productive segmentation, the left then needs to retrieve the social question, while not losing sight of the causes of minorities, feminists, immigrants, and the environment. But it must not do so in a horizontal way. Left populism is vertical. The people have to be represented – in its plurality – and it shall have a leader – though not an authoritarian one. Moreover, the struggles to be fought should not be global. They need a national frame, in which affective identifications that are crucial to populism can occur.

Such is the outline of the diagnosis and the project proposed by Chantal Mouffe. Although the examples she provides mostly come from the European context, the type of left populism she calls for in her essay is profoundly influenced by the national and regional context in which her late husband developed his theory of populism. Like the great majority of leftist intellectuals in Argentina, Ernesto Laclau was a *kirchnerista*, that is, a supporter and even occasionally an informal advisor of Nestor and later Cristina Kirchner, who are the most recent incarnations of Peronism. For Laclau, Kirchner epitomized left populism, with personalized charismatic leadership, vertical political organization, broad popular support, anti-establishment rhetoric, and nationalist discourse. But beyond his Argentinian experience, he also regarded as a welcome alternative to the expansion of an aggressive and predatory neoliberalism in Latin America a series of political experiments conducted by Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Evo Morales in Bolivia, and Rafael Correa in Ecuador. For Laclau, these countries showed that, with the mobilization of grassroots organizations, peasant communities and the working class, left populism could succeed, leading to the election of progressive leaders.

The fact that Mouffe does not mention any of these left populist leaders who inspired Laclau's (2005) theoretical book *On Populist Reason* is revealing. Probably, the deteriorated image of Chávez and his heir, the hold on power of Morales, the authoritarian style of Correa, and the corruption scandals surrounding Cristina Kirchner demonstrate that the passage from the conquest of power to the mode of governing poses complex problems, which they have not been able to resolve. To be fair, however, a thorough analysis of their action would give a more balanced

assessment than is found in most Western media and would acknowledge the notable achievements of these regimes, in terms of reduction of inequality and illiteracy, for instance. But obviously, Mouffe prefers to discuss European countries where left populism is still relatively untainted for never having exercised responsibilities, with the only exception of *Syriza* whose problematic alliance with *ANEL*, the right-wing populist party, she surprisingly forgets to mention. Indeed, neither the newly re-oriented Labour Party, nor *Podemos*, nor *Die Linke*, nor *La France Insoumise* – inasmuch as these parties can be characterized as left populists, as Mouffe affirms – have been in government. In this respect, her affirmation that *La France Insoumise* represents the main opposition to the government of Emmanuel Macron is somewhat optimistic as for the European elections in May 2019, the party came in fifth with only 6 per cent of the votes, almost four times less than Marine Le Pen's *Rassemblement National* and hardly half of Yannick Jadot's *Les Verts*. Thus, examining attentively and rigorously the experiments of left populism in Latin America, so often caricatured by international conservative and liberal media, would have been a good starting point.

But to return to the two sides of Mouffe's argument – the diagnosis and the project – I will limit my comments to one point on each.

Part of the diagnosis, if not original, is accurate: the general shift to the right of the political spectrum, the de-legitimation of the ideas of the left, the blurring of ideological divisions, and the hegemony of neoliberalism. I would still be more severe than Mouffe and argue that the decline of democratic life is also accompanied by a decline of liberal principles. Not only is inequality growing and popular sovereignty waning, but freedom and the rule of law are also threatened by law-and-order policies, securitization and surveillance. However, my main point is distinct. I do not think that present right-wing populism is a response to a crisis of neoliberalism, first because it is not a response, and second because there is no such crisis. On the contrary, right-wing populism is often a Trojan horse for neoliberalism. Examples abound, but one should suffice. The coming to power of Donald Trump is an electoral victory for populism but a political victory for neoliberalism. The grotesque figure of the president, that is, the unsettling combination of

ridiculous and odious, of absurd and obscene, which so effectively attracts the attention of the media and the public, allows his political allies and rich donors to discreetly get their neoliberal agenda through. Tax cuts for corporations and the wealthy, budget reductions for social and health programs, deregulation of finance, consumer protection and environmental preservation, among other decisions less discussed than the President's tweets, have largely benefited the upper segment of the population while contributing to the increase in economic disparities. This triumph of neoliberalism has been interpreted by some as a typical example of false consciousness since the blue-collar workers who succumbed to the populist candidate's sirens and voted for him were among those directly affected by his reforms. Yet, it would be more interesting to note two facts: first, exit polls of the presidential election indicate that the percentage of votes in favour of Trump was higher among the well-off than among low-income households; second, international comparisons establish that the abstention rate, which is always higher among the poor, increases with inequality, the United States having therefore one of the lowest turnouts of Western countries. In other words, rather than stigmatizing the alleged false consciousness of the working class, it would be more accurate to speak of the enlightened consciousness of the more privileged who vote for the candidate whose policy will benefit them not only directly via his neoliberal policies favouring the rich but also indirectly by affecting the abstention rate of the lower social segments.

Regarding the project, even if one accepts the idea that left populism is the lifeline of the left, the version proposed by Mouffe is revealing of a somewhat old conception of democracy and the people, as it leaves little space for participative democracy and people's say. First, in Mouffe's vision, democracy is classically representative and mostly vertical, with the dominant figure of the leader. In the case of *La France Insoumise*, while it is indisputable that Jean-Luc Mélenchon's talent of populist tribune explains in good part the initial success of the movement, there is little doubt that its rapid decline after the presidential election has been largely facilitated by his bullish personality, and we have to remember that he went as far as declaring to the surprise of even his supporters: "My person is sacred." The contrast between the quality of the debates inside the party and the intellectual openness of its

members, on the one hand, and the simplified messages and dogmatic discourse of the leader, on the other, is striking. It is more than an idiosyncrasy: it derives from the very populist idea of the supreme leader. Second, in Mouffe's program, the imagined people do not seem to have a voice; it is rather spoken via the leader. People are supposed to be affected emotionally by discourses, images, mobilizations, but they are on the receiving end and not on the emitting side. They are represented rather than representing themselves. Although she cites the *Indignados* three times in passing and even quotes their "We have a vote but we have no voice," she does not refer to any such movement when she analyzes the construction of the people. For her, the people is discursively constructed by the leader, it does not seem to construct itself. Significantly, the attitude of the French left parties and trade unions to the mobilization of the *gilets jaunes* – undoubtedly populist and popular, composed of the working class and low middle-class – has been at the outset prudent, if not reluctant, as protesters were depicted by the government and journalists as Poujadists, xenophobic, and anti-Semitic (Fassin and Defossez 2019). Among the numerous interesting aspects of this almost entirely spontaneous uprising which long refused leaders, two can be retained for our topic. The first lesson is that the *France Insoumise* has not taken advantage of the situation, dividing its voting intentions by half during the first six months of the mobilization, while both the *Rassemblement National* and the presidential party have slightly progressed. In sum, no benefit of the populist uprising has accrued for left populism. The second lesson is that on the roundabouts and in the street it seems that attempts at political exploitation, in particular by the far right, have failed, and that, on the contrary, right and left populists often decided to leave aside their ideological differences and to fraternize against their common enemies, which was interestingly deemed to be the state rather than capital. On the ground, the right-left division seemed to ease somewhat. Beyond this particular example, it is essential to acknowledge actual movements and to try to comprehend them – even when they do not fall into the theorists' categories.

In the critical moment many polities are going through globally, confronted as they are with the rise of right-wing populisms, from the United States to Russia, from Israel to Hungary, from India to Brazil, the idea that left populism could counter

this disquieting wave may have a seductive power. This is probably what explains the reception of Chantal Mouffe's book within some leftist circles. But whereas left populism has had electoral successes in a few Latin American countries, it has encountered profound difficulties in transforming these remarkable victories into sustainable democratic practices, often even facing the opposition of the very organizations and unions which had brought them to power. This is no coincidence. The vertical structure of left populism, its substitution of an imaginary community for the actual people, and its call for nationalism to produce an affective identification underlain by xenophobic subtexts, have generated a form of populism in which the left has lost its soul without gaining a constituency. Of course, one could legitimately argue that the expression "left populism" covers a wide range of political forms, from Sara Wagenknecht's program for *Die Linke*, with its dangerous flirtation with nationalism, to Bernie Sanders's reorientation of the Democratic Party, which would be assimilated to a form of social-democracy in the rest of the world. But it is clear that Mouffe's view is inspired by the Latin American version of it, which mirrors right-wing populism with its critique of the elite, the rhetorical construction of a people and the overwhelming presence of a líder máximo deaf to the voice of his constituency. Rather than this populism, what the left needs is to refocus on its core principles of social justice and have the courage to defend them.

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Biography

Didier Fassin

Didier Fassin is the James D. Wolfensohn Professor of Social Science at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton and is a Directeur d'Études at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris. His most recent books include *The Will to Punish* (2018), and *Life: A Critical User's Manual* (2018).