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The Limits of Populism in the Face of Planetary Boundaries: A Response to Mouffe

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Abstract

This paper critically examines Chantal Mouffe's argument for a Green Democratic Revolution as a way to address the political challenges posed by democratic decline in the age of ecological crises. Although Mouffe's articulations of agonistic pluralism, populist strategy, and the construction of collective adversaries and allies offer valuable insights, our response identifies significant limitations to her argument. More specifically, we problematise her focus on discursive contestation in relation to planetary boundaries, and the dangers of the personalisation, moralisation, and oversimplification of systemic causes and structural forces. Overall, our critique suggests that addressing ecological and democratic challenges requires, first and foremost, a clear understanding of the materialities of climate change and capitalism, rather than a populist strategy that targets *bad actors* while leaving deeper systemic causes intact. While adversarial contestation is a crucial component of ecological and democratic transformation, this should not come at the expense of careful structural analyses.

Keywords: democracy, agonism, deliberation, populism, climate denial

Impending climate catastrophe confronts us with a profound political puzzle: how can we respond to a growing demand for security, without collapsing into authoritarian, neoliberal, or techno-solutionist responses that foreclose democratic contestation? This is the central puzzle addressed in Chantal Mouffe's contribution, as well as in her book *Towards a Green Democratic Revolution: Left Populism and the Power of Affects* (2022). Mouffe argues that periods of profound social dislocation, including pandemics and ecological disasters, tend to produce an intensified yearning for

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security. This sentiment, she warns, is increasingly mobilised in dangerous directions: it is harnessed by neoliberal governments and tech-elites, who offer protection through surveillance infrastructures, algorithmic control, and depoliticised forms of governance, creating what she calls a "neoliberal version of techno-authoritarianism" (Mouffe, in this issue at 130). In her view, the urgent question is not only how to resist this trend but how to meet legitimate demands for security in ways that reactivates, rather than suppresses, *the political* as a site of contestation and possibility.

Mouffe builds her intervention on the theoretical foundations established in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (Laclau and Mouffe 2014), where she rejects the class essentialism of the *old left*, in favour of a post-structuralist understanding of politics as a field of discursive struggle. Politics, for Mouffe, is not the neutral management of social affairs or the aggregation of individual preferences; rather, it is an inherently conflictual terrain in which competing hegemonic projects attempt to "incarnate the universal" and "define the parameters of social life" (Mouffe, in this issue at 127). Her conception of *the political* is explicitly normative: it is the space in which collective identities are formed and re-formed, where social antagonisms are rendered visible, and where counter-hegemonic demands can be articulated. Within this framework, neoliberal and techno-authoritarian strategies are understood as attempts to foreclose, not just our ability for political contestation itself, but our very capacity to articulate demands for equality, social justice, and freedom.

To counteract these forces, Mouffe calls for the development of a "left populist strategy." Populism, as she defines it, is "a political strategy of construction of the political frontier dividing society into two camps and calling for the mobilisation of the 'underdog' against those in power, the 'people' against the 'establishment'" (Mouffe, in this issue at 127-128). Crucially, where right-wing populism constructs the *people* along ethno-nationalist lines, left populism aims to construct a *people* that articulates diverse democratic demands against extant neoliberal regimes and their post-political forms of governance. By linking the "defence of the environment with the manifold democratic struggles against different forms of inequality" (Mouffe, in this issue at 132), such as feminism, antiracism and LGBTQ+ movements, a left populist strategy can construct a transversal, counter-hegemonic collective will capable of challenging technocratic reformism and nationalist regression, thereby achieving a Green Democratic Revolution that straddles the line between "the revolutionary strategy of the 'extreme left' and [...] the sterile reformism of the social liberals" (Mouffe, in this issue at 128).

Chantal Mouffe's intervention offers a compelling account of some of the relationships between climate collapse, neoliberalism, social justice, and democracy. Her work confronts the urgency of ecological devastation without separating it from the broader challenge of democratic decline, and effectively frames the climate

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emergency, not as a discrete policy challenge, but as a hegemonic battleground, where the meanings of security, justice, and democracy are being redefined. This is an important achievement, and for that reason, we hope that the avenues of critique outlined below will prove as generative to Chantal Mouffe as her own argument is to us.

Critique 1: Politicisation and Climate Denial

Chantal Mouffe's commitment to agonistic pluralism as the normative foundation for democratic life has offered a vital corrective to the rationalism of liberal democracy and the proceduralism of deliberative democracy. Her conception of politics as a site of contestation, identification and contingency, and her insistence that the foreclosure of the political entails a disarticulation of claims to equality, justice and freedom, has helped to re-legitimise counter-hegemonic struggles in and beyond these theoretical paradigms. However, when the agonist political ontology encounters the existential urgency of ecological collapse, its normative commitments come under scrutiny. The notion that all political projects are and should be open to contestation looks less appealing in the face of irreversible tipping points and planetary limits.

This is not because Mouffe underestimates the urgency of climate collapse. On the contrary, her call for a Green Democratic Revolution reflects her recognition of its existential stakes. However, the emphasis on *the political* as a perpetual struggle between adversaries risks reproducing dynamics that serve entrenched power structures rather than dismantling them. Politicisation, in this context, has been weaponised by actors with material interests in maintaining the status quo. Fossil fuel lobbies and climate denial networks, for example, have politicised scientific consensus, international cooperation, and ecological expertise, creating confusion and delaying action. In this sense, politicisation itself has been instrumental in sustaining hegemonic power rather than challenging it.

The rise of right-wing populist opposition to climate policy reinforces this concern. Until recently, sustainability was regarded as a broadly accepted principle, with explicit rejection rare among governments and corporations (cf. Adloff & Neckel 2019). Whatever progress was achieved in international climate governance – limited though it was – depended at least in part on insulating environmental commitments from the volatility of electoral politics. Today, however, climate politics has become deeply polarised, producing widespread policy reversals and growing hostility from authoritarian governments. This suggests that some level of depoliticisation – such as the protection of scientific expertise or ecological thresholds from partisan manipulation – might be necessary. Although this approach risks

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appearing technocratic, it may be preferable to the destabilising effects of constant politicisation, which has often enabled climate denial and inaction.

A second tension in Mouffe's framework lies in her treatment of material realities. Her argument for a left populism is built upon indisputable facts: the physical reality of climate change, the finitude of planetary resources, and the systemic imperatives of global capitalism. Yet her theoretical architecture largely portrays *the political* as a discursive field, one in which meaning is constructed, contested, and renegotiated. This emphasis on discourse, while analytically productive, risks detaching political struggle from the ecological and structural conditions that shape our present crisis. In doing so, it may underplay the entrenched power of transnational corporations, financial institutions, and global production networks – forces that often operate outside the reach of discursive intervention.

The danger is that populist conflicts framed predominantly in moral or identitarian terms focus attention on surface-level expressions of ecological breakdown without sufficiently challenging the deeper economic systems that perpetuate it. Mouffe's assertion that "[h]egemony is obtained through the construction of nodal points which discursively fix the meaning of institutions and social practices" (Mouffe, in this issue at 127) captures the importance of narrative formation in shaping power relations. Yet this insight is incomplete when applied to planetary collapse, which is not merely a contest of meanings but a material emergency embedded in resource extraction, industrial production, and deep global inequalities. By privileging discursive construction, Mouffe's framework risks underestimating the structural inertia of global capitalism. Ecological crises are not simply the product of competing interpretations; they are anchored in physical systems, feedback loops, and planetary boundaries that do not respond to discourse alone. A politics that focuses too heavily on the symbolic risks obscuring the non-negotiable character of these limits.

We are pointing to a possible tension here: Mouffe rightly criticises neoliberal post-politics for foreclosing contestation. But when it comes to planetary limits, it is not clear that perpetual contestation is desirable or, indeed, rational. Perhaps, instead, what is needed is a different kind of post-political collective will-formation – not one that suppresses democratic demands in the service of technocratic or techno-solutionist rule, but one that generates a democratic consensus around non-negotiable ecological thresholds; a politics that is less about agonism and more about a truly democratic but materially grounded deliberation, insulated from the corrupting influence of powerful corporate interests and the volatility of short-term electoral politics. A careful balance is needed: between defending democratic accountability and popular mobilisation on the one hand, and, on the other, the recognition that planetary boundaries are not open to debate. Mouffe's body of work excels at promoting the former, but it is unclear whether her agonistic architectonics is capable of delivering the latter. We therefore argue it may be necessary to

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rethink the virtues of consensus – seeing it, not as an inherent erasure of the political, but as an instance of collective self-limitation in the face of irreversible environmental destruction.

Critique 2: Building a *Them*

A central feature of Chantal Mouffe's populist strategy is the construction of a political frontier: a clear antagonistic division between *us* and *them*, which provides a rallying point for left-wing, counter-hegemonic mobilisation. This approach assumes that a transformative politics must have a clearly identifiable adversary to galvanise collective will. Mouffe rightly argues that the left's political adversary must differ fundamentally from the *them* identified by right-wing populism, which scapegoats migrants, minorities, and cultural or intellectual elites, presenting them as threats to an imagined ethnically and morally *pure* nation. While she correctly critiques such exclusionary politics, her articulation of the left-populist *them* remains comparatively underdeveloped. Beyond references to finance capital, large corporations, and tech elites, Mouffe offers limited specificity on who or what constitutes the primary adversary of a Green Democratic Revolution. This lack of clarity risks weakening the strategic efficacy of left populism by failing to provide a compelling, mobilising focal point.

The question of who or what constitutes *the enemy* raises an even more fundamental issue: is ecological collapse primarily the result of malevolent actions by villainous actors – such as fossil fuel executives, financial institutions, and tech giants – or does it stem from impersonal, historically entrenched systems like financial capitalism, global supply chains, industrial agriculture, and carbon lock-in? Mouffe's post-structuralist grammar is well-suited for analysing discursive formations and hegemonic struggles, but is less equipped for investigating the material and structural drivers of ecological breakdown. Consequently, her populist framework risks collapsing into a form of moralism: targeting *bad actors* while leaving deeper systemic causes intact. While a personalised and easily identifiable *them* may be strategically effective for mobilising supporters, it also risks replicating the scapegoating dynamics of right-wing populism. Reducing complex, historically embedded systems of production and power to a set of individual villains simplifies the problem and may ultimately undermine transformative change.

Populist strategies, by design, highlight visible conflicts, but in doing so, they can create symbolic battle lines that obscure the underlying dynamics of class, capital, and institutional power. This framing risks weakening left populism's transformative potential, as it may overemphasise symptoms rather than causes. Mouffe's adversarial conception tends to depict elites as a malicious, cohesive collective rather than examining their position within broader, unequal social systems. As Petersen and

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Hecker (2022) argue, such simplification removes from view the social and material conditions that make elite power possible, reducing complex networks of exploitation to a single enemy image. This risks personalising structural issues in a way that parallels the simplifications of right-wing populism, rather than challenging the economic and political systems that perpetuate ecological degradation.

For example, Mouffe highlights financial capitalism as a central adversary, portraying the international financial elite as a primary obstacle that must be subordinated to the "interests of society and the future of the planet" (Mouffe, in this issue at 132). While it is certainly true that financialisation has intensified environmental destruction, the idea that stricter regulation of financial markets or sustainable finance initiatives could resolve the ecological crisis on their own is unconvincing. Here and elsewhere, Chantal Mouffe misunderstands or overlooks the capitalist system of production and consumption – which long predates financialisation and has historically driven both economic inequality and environmental destruction. The danger of a populist emphasis on finance is that it marginalises the productive economy's ecological costs, failing to address extractive industries, global logistics, and consumption patterns that remain central to environmental collapse.

Populist strategies that foreground *visible* conflicts ultimately risk creating symbolic battle lines that obscure the deeper social and economic dynamics driving ecological collapse. For instance, focusing on personalised adversaries can divert attention from systemic forces – such as industrial production, global supply chains, and entrenched patterns of resource extraction – that sustain environmental harm. Even radical reforms of financial systems would leave intact a carbon-intensive economy deeply embedded in trade networks and consumption practices. Mouffe's framework risks encouraging short-term political victories while leaving the underlying architecture of ecological destruction untouched. Without a sustained structural analysis of capitalism's material foundations, populist mobilisation may inadvertently reinforce superficial enemy stereotypes rather than enabling a truly transformative politics.

Moreover, while Mouffe provides little clarity on who the left's political adversaries are, she is surprisingly adamant that those adversaries do not include right-wing populists, as she does "not think that in the current conjuncture, the main danger comes from their side" (Mouffe, in this issue at 130). This is presumably best explained by bastardising Walter Sobchak's exclamation in The Big Lebowski: "Say what you want about the tenets of National Socialism, Dude, at least it's political". While Mouffe's unwillingness to disavow the dangers of right-wing populism is theoretically consistent, it overlooks the deep entanglements of neoliberalism with right-wing populism. Recent scholarship, notably Quinn Slobodian's *Hayek's Bastards* (2025), shows that neoliberalism and right-wing populism are not opposite but symbiotic forces. From Donald Trump's *drill-baby-drill!* nationalism to Jair Bolsonaro's

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Amazonian extractivism, populist calls to privatise, deregulate, and slash are not so different from Thatcherism and Reaganomics. Consequently, we might argue that "right-wing populist parties" do not merely "articulate in an authoritarian way the rejection of post-democracy" (Mouffe, in this issue at 128) – they are instead vehicles for a truly post-democratic order, wherein the contradictions between capitalism and democracy are resolved through authoritarianism. In short, the idea that neoliberalism and right-wing populism can be separated, as Mouffe suggests, misses the ways in which they co-produce one another, operating as mutually-reinforcing logics of exclusion and competition.

In summary, while Mouffe is right to emphasise the need for an adversary in left populist politics, her framework risks over-personalising systemic issues, underestimates the material complexity of ecological crises, and overlooks the interplay between neoliberalism and authoritarian populism. A more robust analysis would avoid treating elites as a singular, malicious bloc and instead focus on the structural dynamics of capitalism, consumption, and authoritarianism that underpin ecological harm.

Critique 3: Building an *Us*

Where there is a *them*, there must be an *us*. Mouffe's vision of a Green Democratic Revolution relies on the construction of a transversal collective subject: a political *we* that connects the "defence of the environment with the manifold democratic struggles against different forms of inequality" (Mouffe, in this issue at 132). She hopes to "mobilise common affects" that address demands for security in the context of ecological crises while "articulating" them in ways consistent with social justice and democratic values (Mouffe, in this issue at 131). This proposal builds on arguments from *For a Left Populism* (2018), where Mouffe identifies a "populist moment" with the potential to generate transformative politics. Yet the left has struggled to translate this moment into radical change, and the climate crisis now looms as a possible rallying point. Whether ecological breakdown can unify fragmented struggles and provide a foundation for a collective is, however, an open question.

The effort to construct a broad-based *we* is ambitious but fraught with challenges. A truly transversal coalition must grapple with deep affective pluralism and competing interests within social movements. While climate change is often described as a universal threat, its impacts and the burdens of adaptation are highly unequal. Groups that align on some issues – such as antiracism or social justice – may diverge on ecological priorities, energy policies, or labour issues. Mouffe's strategy risks assuming a coherence among progressive struggles that does not always exist in practice. Normative aspirations for solidarity cannot substitute for a sober analysis of real-world fragmentation and contradictory interests.

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Moreover, the global nature of ecological crises complicates the creation of a cohesive collective subject. The climate emergency operates at planetary scale, yet democratic institutions remain largely national. Policies to reduce carbon emissions – or even to heed Mouffe's call to regulate finance – exceed the capacity of individual states, requiring multilevel governance structures that span from local initiatives to international agreements. Mouffe's framework calls for strengthening democratic institutions, but the *we* of a Green Democratic Revolution must extend beyond national borders to account for global interdependencies. Without such an expansion, the revolutionary vision risks reproducing nationalist frameworks ill-suited to planetary challenges.

The unequal distribution of ecological harm further complicates this vision. Those least responsible for climate change – particularly communities in the Global South – bear its heaviest burdens, while wealthier societies often externalise environmental costs. Even well-intentioned green policies can exacerbate inequality: the extraction of rare earth minerals for decarbonisation, for instance, frequently reproduces exploitative labour conditions and ecological destruction elsewhere. Scholars such as Brand and Wissen (2021) have described this as the "imperial mode of living", in which affluent nations systematically externalise the ecological and social costs of energy transitions onto marginalised regions.

Building a unified political subject that includes both beneficiaries and victims of this unequal system is an immense challenge. Mouffe's emphasis on affective mobilisation is valuable, yet affect alone cannot overcome entrenched material inequalities. While affects can galvanise political movements, they may also deepen divisions when material inequalities and interests are not taken seriously. The difficulty of forming a collective *we* is, in that sense, not *theoretical*, but only practical: political actors operate within highly unequal systems that shape their opportunities for mobilisation, while, at the same time, their unequal capacity to mobilise perpetuates the unequal systems themselves.

This raises broader questions about whether populist strategies should aim to construct a single, stable collective subject. Instead of pursuing a coherent *we* aligned perfectly with ecological and democratic values, it may be more realistic to embrace solidarity as contingent, situational, and shifting. Alliances could be built not around fixed identities or ideological coherence but around shared experiences of precarity – such as food insecurity, energy poverty, or housing instability – that climate change is already intensifying. Such a politics would recognise that climate change disproportionately affects the global poor and vulnerable, and that survival, rather than identity, may be the most durable basis for collective action. In contexts of ecological collapse, solidarity grounded in material need could create more resilient coalitions than those built on affective coherence alone. Rather than expecting environmental,

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social, and democratic struggles to align seamlessly, a pragmatic approach would acknowledge their tensions while seeking overlapping interests.

Ultimately, Mouffe's vision of a Green Democratic Revolution highlights the urgency of linking environmental and social justice struggles, yet it risks overestimating the possibility of constructing a unified *people*. A more nuanced approach might treat *the people* as a coalition of movements with distinct but intersecting goals, united not by a singular adversary or fixed identities but by shared vulnerabilities and a commitment to collective survival in the face of planetary crises.

In sum, Mouffe offers a powerful and timely framework for understanding the intersections of climate collapse, neoliberalism, social justice, and democracy. Her work confronts the urgency of ecological devastation while refusing to isolate it from the wider crisis of democratic decline. Yet her emphasis on discourse risks underestimating the entrenched material forces – capital accumulation, property regimes, and institutional power – that structure ecological destruction. This creates a tension between her normative vision of a Green Democratic Revolution and the structural realities of capitalism and planetary limits. Furthermore, her reluctance to fully confront the dangers of right-wing populism and its entanglement with neoliberalism and techno-solutionism leaves a significant gap in her analysis, especially given their combined role in obstructing or co-opting climate policy. Addressing these tensions – integrating discursive mobilisation with material analysis and recognising the complexity of contemporary authoritarianism – is essential if Mouffe's vision of democratic and ecological transformation is to become genuinely actionable.

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