

EXCHANGE OF ARGUMENTS

Less Is More. A Response to Chantal Mouffe¹

Veith Selk*

Abstract

The Left finds itself in a situation of defeat. How should it respond? Chantal Mouffe argues in favor of pursuing populism while also highlighting green issues – which in turn should be linked to as many other issues from the arsenal of social movements as possible. This article argues that such a *more is more* strategy has already proven ineffective and will not work in the future either. Instead, the Left should prepare with a *less is more* strategy for a post-populist moment in which other issues will take precedence.

Keywords: Chantal Mouffe, the Left, Political strategy, Populism, Crisis

If they are to believe right-wing pundits, influencers, and politicians, leftists would have every reason to be quite satisfied. According to the Right’s political messaging, the Left dominates. It has enormous power, so the narrative goes, and society has been profoundly transformed by the Left’s policies. This narrative is, of course, not without nuance: Opposition figures on the Right describe the Left as a hegemon that controls politics, while those in office on the Right portray the Left as a powerful opponent, still dangerous even when reduced to opposition.

If only this were all true. The bleak reality is that it is not leftism but liberalism that has been on a triumphant march since the 1980s, at least until very recently – if we understand liberalism not to mean the utopian and left-leaning liberalism Richard Rorty was fond of (Rorty 1989, 1999) but rather the watered-down and hardened version that Samuel Moyn recently criticized so aptly (Moyn 2023). The Left has either been watching liberalism’s march from the sidelines or playing only a minor

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* Research cluster “Herausforderungen der Demokratie in Zeiten ihrer Regression: Zeiten, Räume und Diskurse”, Department of Political Science, Technical University of Darmstadt, Residenzschloss 1, 64283 Darmstadt, Germany, e-mail: selk@pg.tu-darmstadt.de

role as an adjunct. As a result of the hegemony of this type of liberalism, which peaked after the *end of history*, there began a process of liberalization that transfigured economics, politics, and culture. Culture became more permissive, politics became *governance*, the economy became *neoliberal*. In the course of this process, great successes were achieved in reducing institutional sadism and discrimination. Many on the Left rightly not only welcomed this outcome but also helped bring it about; in its wake, the Left also discovered sadism in its own ranks.

The problem with the triumph of liberalism, however, is that it led to the “exhaustion of utopian energies” (Habermas 1986), dissolving what Charles Maier termed the “project state” and establishing a seemingly impenetrable “web of capital” in its stead (Maier 2023). Those developments have hit the Left hard, as they made the structural transformation of society – the social-democratic containment or socialist overcoming of capitalism according to utopian ideas of universal human flourishing – unattainable. As a result, the Left finds itself in a prolonged phase of exhaustion, defeatism, and irrelevance. Against this background, some observers even believe that a significant part of the Left has now degenerated into a digitalized theater troupe that broadcasts unfounded hopes for illusory progress in order to entertain its sparse audience that sits at home, glued to its devices. The Left, meanwhile, ekes out a living as a “hope industry” (Studebaker 2024).

So much is true: The process of liberalization went hand in hand with a neglect of the fight against exploitation and the marginalization of socialist politics. It sidelined class politics or, to use an American term, economic populism. Richard Rorty demonstrated this on the basis of the US Left, coming to the conclusion that the Left can only tackle one issue at a time: If it supports the fight against sadism and discrimination, it neglects the fight against capitalist exploitation (Rorty 1998). As a result, our society has become more liberal, while exploitation has increased. Nancy Fraser has described this strange state of affairs as “progressive neoliberalism,” in which neoliberal economic policy has merged with liberal cultural policy and group identity politics (Fraser 2017).

The era of progressive neoliberalism, whose end Fraser foresaw, could also be described as a short-lived political-philosophical marriage. It was a bizarre union, namely between Robert Nozick, the philosopher of radical capitalism, and Iris Marion Young, the philosopher of group rights.¹ As we know, this marriage has now broken down after a few turbulent years, with right-wing populism playing the role of the adulterer. Now we watch with horror as it rushes from success to success.

All this raises the question of what the Left should do now. In her contribution to this issue, Chantal Mouffe proposes a strategy that builds upon ideas she has been developing for some time. At its core, her strategy is based on the maxim *more is*

1 I would like to thank Alexander Somek for bringing this marriage to my attention.

more. Though she advocates a simplified form of populist politics, on the systematic level she advises the Left to address as many issues and goals as possible and to combine them under the overarching banner of ecology. The most promising strategy, she argues, consists of “articulating the ecological question with workers’ and other democratic demands around feminism, antiracism and LGBT+ issues” (Mouffe 2026; in this issue). In addition, she calls on the Left to address people’s need for security and to discuss the increasing insecurity that came in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

I have doubts about the usefulness of Mouffe’s proposal. The first problem is that the proposal is not new; Mouffe herself has argued similarly in previous publications, and her contribution here refers to long-standing concepts such as the Green New Deal. However, one might ask why the concept of a Green New Deal – which broadly embodies what she has in mind – might prove effective for mobilization in the future when it did not do so in the past. Doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results may not be the definition of insanity, but it does not seem particularly wise either. In fact, the “Eco-Emancipatory Project” (Blühdorn 2025), of which the Green New Deal was an embodiment, is dissolving before our very eyes, and I cannot see how it can be revived by resorting to a proposal that has long been present in the debate.

Populism – and this is the second problem with her proposal – will not help here either, because the issue of ecology is not particularly well suited for populist politics. It is not surprising that previous attempts to advance a left-wing climate populism have failed (Beeson 2019) because the policy area of climate is necessarily dominated by experts and expert knowledge. The solutions that shape the debate are therefore largely disseminated by expert institutions (Beck and Oomen 2021), which is why the climate movement’s slogan “Listen to science!” was only logical; at the same time, it is also the most anti-populist slogan ever invented.

In general, populist politics is difficult to apply to green issues, as nature is not an actor that lends itself to the formation of a Manichaeian front. The populist distinction of *us versus them* must be used indirectly here, for example against evil corporations, lobbyists, and politicians who pursue anti-ecological policies, destroy nature, and put *us* over a barrel in the process. However, a problem arises when one tries to pit the good *us* against the evil *them*. While it is true that the ecological footprint of the upper class and corporations is the largest, the middle class in industrialized countries is also complicit: It might consume relatively fewer resources, but it also maintains an unsustainable lifestyle. The good ecological *us* is limited to a small circle of people in our societies. This is a poor basis for a populist strategy, which needs to appeal to as broad a circle of people as possible.²

2 On this issue, see also Kalke et al. (2024).

All in all, I find Mouffe's proposal unconvincing. What might be an alternative? First of all, as in private life, it's important in political life to admit that sometimes you cannot have everything. The Left should therefore not pretend that it has answers to all possible questions and is able to magically piece them together into a coherent whole. Most voters do not know much about politics, but they do know that some political promises are simply too good to be true. Of course, if the Left came to power, it would have to provide answers to a multitude of problems, with climate change being of central importance. But at the moment, the main concern of the Left is to get back on its feet. In such a situation, it is not especially credible to pose as a general store that supposedly has something in stock for everyone (and, can you believe it, is fully ecological and sustainable too!). So with a view toward left strategy, less is more.

But what does this mean in concrete terms? To find an answer, we can start with the prediction Chantal Mouffe formulated in *For a Left Populism* (Mouffe 2018). According to this well-aged prognosis, centrist parties will lose importance, while right-wing populism will gain importance (to which the Left should respond with a left-wing populist strategy). In fact, centrist parties are declining, while right-wing populism is on the rise. Some interpret this as an expression of a deep-seated authoritarianism that is now coming to the fore and can be attributed to the fact that a large part of the population has, by its very nature, an authoritarian predisposition. This view is held, for example, by Anne Applebaum (Applebaum 2020), and it is, sadly, becoming more prevalent among the Left. However, as Mouffe would agree, adopting it is not helpful for the development of a left-wing strategy, as it leaves us unclear about what is to be done.

More helpful than blaming the electorate is an analysis by Perry Anderson, who has identified three issues that have arisen as a result of the process of liberalization described above (which Anderson and Mouffe refer to as neoliberalism). Right-wing populism, according to Anderson, puts its finger on the wound that liberalization has inflicted:

"The neoliberal system of today, as yesterday, embodies three principles: escalation of differentials in wealth and income; abrogation of democratic control and representation; and deregulation of as many economic transactions as is feasible. In short: inequality, oligarchy and factor mobility. These are the three central targets of populist insurgencies." (Anderson 2025)

These principles are now proving to be problematic. Anderson believes that the Left can offer answers to problem area 1 (inequality) and problem area 2 (oligarchy), but does not have a coherent position on problem area 3 (factor mobility), as it only

rejects capital mobility.³ Anderson also points out that right-wing populism does not have a theory that could replace the neoliberal paradigm or that could be used as a base to systematically address all three problem areas. In the future, postliberal theory will probably fill this blank (Borg 2025), but at this moment the right-wing populist insurgency has no theoretical basis for its policies. This means that the potential for the right-wing populace's disappointment with the right-wing populist revolt is high. Right-wing populists denounce obvious problems, but they will not be able to combat them because they have no theory on how to do so. When right-wing populists in government venture into new territory, as the Trump administration is currently doing in economic policy, it therefore seems, for the most part, like a trial-and-error experiment and strangely devoid of theory. No one knows how this wild experiment will end. But there are increasing signs that right-wing populism generally has little to offer in terms of combating oligarchy and inequality and is for this reason relying more heavily on repression, as we are already witnessing.

Against this backdrop, I suggest that the Left drop the *more is more* approach and prepare for a post-populist moment with a *less is more* strategy, awaiting a time in which euphoria for right-wing populism will have subsided because it has been unable to do much about inequality and oligarchy. In the post-populist moment, the Right's anti-oligarchic spin may lose its appeal, with the people having to come to terms with the fact that they cannot eat family values. This does not mean that populist politics will be useless, but rather that the Right might lose its momentum more quickly than expected, with the issues of inequality and oligarchy becoming interesting for the Left again, in particular against the backdrop of rising inflation and increased military spending. Admittedly, there is also a downside to the post-populist moment, as populism comes with the promise of redemption (Canovan 1999). If, despite populist revolts, it turns out that democratic systems are incapable of learning, faith in democracy will largely evaporate (see Selk 2025).

In preparation for this situation, and following Rorty's insights on left-wing inability to multitask, the Left should follow its era of fighting sadism and discrimination by instead prioritizing the fight against exploitation (and oligarchy). It could therefore move from (seemingly) doing everything at once by posing as a general store for politics to adopting the model of a queue, in which issues are addressed one after the other (and alternately). This corresponds to a basic principle of fairness: What has been waiting a long time can now take center stage, for a limited time. And this means focusing on exploitation and oligarchy.

In the struggle to secure the kinds of liberal achievements that leftists can also agree with, the Left can leave the leadership to the liberals (and support them in

3 On this issue, see also Seeliger, Roos and Nagel (2023).

doing so). More precisely, the Left should offer the liberals a coalition, but on condition that they finally learn that without concessions to the Left, liberalism will fail. The liberals' neglect of class politics and their dismissal of utopian ideas for universal human flourishing are certainly not the only causes, but they have contributed significantly to the misery we currently find ourselves in (Moyn 2023). In short, the message to liberals and their hitherto unenlightened self-interest must be: Without a strong dose of left-wing economic populism, liberalism will ultimately crash and give way to a postliberal future. If the Left cannot make this clear to the liberals, it too is doomed, because the conservatives will either be absorbed by right-wing populists or opt to form coalitions with them, thereby paving the way toward electoral authoritarianism.

When it comes to finding a solution to climate change, the Left can leave the leadership to the Chinese, who will be heavily impacted by climate change. Against this backdrop, China is positioning itself as a "climate leviathan" (Mann and Wainwright 2018), not least as a means of demonstrating its superiority over the West, which has largely caused one of humanity's most pressing problems but is unable to solve it. Given the ongoing ecological modernization with Chinese characteristics (Tooze 2025), it seems more likely that the solution will come from the East and then be adapted in the West, at least in technological terms.⁴ Against this backdrop, it would be unwise to prioritize the issue of ecology and treat it as an overarching framework for everything else, as Mouffe suggests. The Left should combat climate change and support the energy transition to the best of its ability, but the issues of inequality and oligarchy will be the ones that come to the fore and offer the best strategic potential.

At the tactical level, these issues would of course have to be tailored to the specific circumstances of each country and addressed in a way that appeals to popular interests. Bernie Sanders's first campaign, for example, was relatively effective because it repeated four slogans in a tireless loop. Simplified to the extreme and adapted to the circumstances of the country, they therefore immediately appealed to many people who otherwise did not want to hear or know much about politics: For the working people and against plutocrats and oligarchs! Raise the minimum wage! Medicare for All! Cancel all student debt! Not all of these slogans would work in other contexts and in our current predicament. They would need to be adapted accordingly, for example, with regard to the issues of housing, inflation, geopolitics, and military spending. But Sanders's campaign shows the direction a *less is more* strategy could take in practice.

The question remains as to which theories and models the Left could use in public debate and establish an appealing perspective for transformation. I fear that serious theoretical work needs to be done here, because the socialist left actually

4 If the problem of climate change can be solved at all.

has no idea how socialism could be realized in the twenty-first century, which is why some are now focusing on the socialist implications of technological progress. There may be something to this. However, it is not a suitable issue for political debate, but rather material for science fiction novels and a topic for scholarly speculations about the end of capitalism as a consequence of capitalist rationalization (Collins 2013). I myself have great sympathy for a far less productive but more climate-friendly and cozy *Euro maxx*ing socialism. But I do not know what politically viable theory could be used to justify this goal, reconcile it with other regions' legitimate aspirations for growth, or push it on the agenda. As far as I can see, the post-growth models and theories currently under discussion have remained academic and have only been taken up on the margins of the political debate.

Two other models are under discussion among the Left. One section of the reformist left opts for the retrograde model of restoring a social-democratic nation-state, while the other section of the reformist left advocates a model of supranational social democracy. The first model has some credibility, because it can refer to something that already existed in the past. Ironically, that is also its downside: It presupposes turning back political time and is therefore anachronistic. The nation-state may have its comeback, but it will not be social democratic, as the social base and the organizational prerequisites of social democracy no longer exist. The second model, in contrast, is implausible. It requires the creation of a powerful supranational political system in the form of a social-democratic *Großraum* with a prohibition on intervention for neoliberal powers. However, the European Union, which would be the most likely candidate for this, is characterized by an institutionalized neoliberal economic model. It embodies precisely the opposite of what the supranational social democrats are proposing.

In short, the Left has little to offer in terms of theory and model building. Perhaps what it needs now is a left-wing reincarnation of Friedrich August von Hayek – some new figure who might use the current phase of defeat to develop a new theoretical vision for Left politics.

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