

EXCHANGE OF ARGUMENTS

A Left Populist Strategy for a Green Democratic Revolution

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Abstract

This contribution argues that a left politics should be renewed through a post-foundational and hegemonic approach. It argues that neoliberalism's post-pandemic, techno-authoritarian turn must be confronted by a counter-hegemonic project linking social justice with ecological transformation. In doing this, it advocates for a Green Democratic Revolution that mobilizes collective affects, connects ecological, feminist, anti-racist, and labour struggles, and deepens democracy through radical reformism rather than rupture. This strategy, the essay contends, can forge a new popular majority and reassert democratic equality against neoliberal post-politics.

Keywords: Left Populism, Hegemony, Radical Democracy, Green Democratic Revolution, Neoliberalism

1. When we began writing *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* at the beginning of the 1980s, we wanted to understand the reasons for the crisis of the left in both its communist and social democratic versions. We felt that it was due to their incapacity to grasp the nature and the role of the new social movements which represented conflicts that could not be expressed in terms of class. We came to the conclusion that it was the essentialist conception of the social and the class reductionism which provided the theoretical framework for those political practices which prevented them from coming to terms with the new demands which had emerged in the 1960s. This led us to elaborate a new theoretical framework for left politics, so as to overcome those limitations. Bringing together insights from post-structuralism and from Antonio Gramsci, we proposed an alternative approach, centered around the

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notion of the social as a discursive space, emphasizing the central role of the political moment in the structuration of society. Two key concepts, we argued, are needed to address the question of the political: *antagonism* and *hegemony*. On one side it is necessary to acknowledge the dimension of *the political* as the ever present possibility of antagonism (dissociative conception of the political) and this requires, on the other side, coming to terms with the lack of a final ground and the undecidability that pervades every order (post-foundationalism), conceiving society as the product of a series of practices whose aim is to establish order in a context of contingency.

Envisaged from this dissociative, anti-essentialist, and post-foundationalist discursive approach, politics is a struggle between conflicting hegemonic projects attempting to incarnate the universal so as to define the parameters of social life. Hegemony is obtained through the construction of nodal points, which discursively fix the meaning of institutions and social practices, thereby establishing a specific conception of reality. Such a result will always be contingent and precarious, and every order is susceptible to being challenged by counter-hegemonic interventions aiming at disarticulating it, so as to install another form of hegemony.

This is why radical politics cannot be conceived as a step outside all institutional arrangements, either as a total rupture or as a process of desertion, but as an engagement with those institutions to transform them. The aim is to disarticulate the existing discourses and practices through which the current hegemony is established and reproduced in order to construct a new one. Borrowing a notion from Gramsci, we proposed to visualize this strategy as one of *war of position*, which consists of a series of counter-hegemonic interventions in a multiplicity of sites with the aim of disarticulating the existing hegemony to bring about a more progressive one, through a re-articulation of new and old elements into a different configuration of power. What is at stake is a profound transformation of those institutions so as to make them a vehicle for the expression of the manifold of democratic demands which would extend the principle of equality to as many social relations as possible. This requires establishing a synergy between a variety of actors: social movements, parties, and trade unions. This is why we proposed to envisage socialism in terms of a process of radicalization of democracy.

2. It is within such a discursive hegemonic approach that the reflections of Ernesto Laclau in *On Populist Reason* are inscribed. In contrast to numerous studies that claim to provide the correct definition of populism on the basis on a particular ontic content, Laclau's perspective is a formal one. Populism, for him, is neither an ideology nor a political regime; it is a political strategy of constructing 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*. This confrontation, which is characteristic of the populist strategy, can be constructed in very different ways (right-wing

populism/left-wing populism), and it will also vary according to the historical and geographical contexts in which it is deployed. To apprehend the different populist movements, it is therefore necessary to start from the specific conjunctures in which they emerge.

Drawing on the discursive hegemonic approach elaborated in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* and on Laclau's conception of populism as construction of a political frontier, in *For a Left Populism* I have analysed a specific conjuncture, the one existing in Western Europe in the years following the 2008 crisis, a conjuncture that is characterized by the emergence of a variety of anti-establishment movements in the context of the crisis of hegemony of neoliberalism. It is this conjuncture that I designate as a *populist moment*.

One of the central claims of the book is that it is in the post-democratic context of the erosion of the democratic ideals of popular sovereignty and equality and the oligarchization of European societies resulting from 30 years of neoliberal hegemony that the *populist moment* can be understood. In several European countries, the anti-establishment demands have been captured by right-wing populist parties that articulate in an authoritarian way the rejection of post-democracy. Those movements construct a *people* through an exclusive ethno-nationalist discourse that excludes migrants, considered as a threat to national identity and prosperity, and they advocate a democracy aimed at exclusively defending the interests of those considered *true nationals*. In the name of recovering democracy, they want, in fact, to restrict it.

I argue that to bring about a progressive issue to the crisis of neoliberalism and to impede the success of this right-wing populist strategy, the task is the construction of a *people* around a project, which addresses the diverse forms of subordination around issues concerning exploitation, domination, or discrimination. This is what I understand by *left populist strategy*, whose objective is to federate the diversity of democratic demands in view of constructing a transversal collective will in view of creating a popular majority to come to power and establish a new hegemonic formation. The aim is to establish the conditions for a process of recovering democracy in order to extend it to many social relations.

Such a process of radicalization of democracy engages with the existing political institutions in view of transforming them through democratic procedures. It is a strategy that does not aim at a radical break with pluralist liberal democracy and the foundation of a totally new political order. It is therefore clearly different, both from the revolutionary strategy of the *extreme left* and from the sterile reformism of the social liberals. It can be called a strategy of *radical reformism*.

3. Recently, several political forces that I had presented in my book as following a *left populist* strategy, like Syriza, Podemos, France Insoumise, and Labour under Corbyn, have suffered a series of electoral setbacks. That has led to the claim in some sectors that such a project had failed and that it was time to come back to more traditional forms of left politics. Although those setbacks are undeniable, such a conclusion is clearly unfounded, as it is clearly inapposite to dismiss a political strategy on the grounds that some of its followers have failed in their first attempt to reach their objectives. To defend such a thesis is to confound the strategy of war of position with that of war of movement.

Moreover, when we examine the reasons for the disappointing results of Corbyn Labour, Podemos, and France Insoumise in recent elections, we ascertain that in each case, it is when they have abandoned the previous left populist strategy that they have done badly. Indeed, when Podemos in 2015 and Corbyn and Melançon in 2017 ran left populist campaigns, they did not win but obtained very good results. It is only when they abandoned this strategy in later elections that their votes began to decline.

This, of course, should not prevent us from inquiring about the pertinence of a left populist strategy in the wake of the sanitary crisis caused by Covid-19.

There is no denying that the conjuncture today is very different from the one that existed before the pandemic. The repeated lockdowns have brought to a halt the public demonstrations against the austerity and repressive measures implemented by several neoliberal governments. In the name of impeding the propagation of the virus, several authoritarian measures were put into place, and, as people began to live confined in *bubbles*, not much space has been left for the expression of dissent. The moment is obviously not propitious for organizing popular resistances. We are clearly not anymore in a *hot* populist moment of high politicization. The crucial question we should ask is: are we now in the midst of a new conjuncture that requires envisaging a different strategy for the left?

It could, of course, be argued that since Covid-19 has exacerbated the existing inequalities and accentuated the organic crisis of neoliberalism, once some kind of normality has been re-established, the popular struggles will resume with a renewed vigour. This is the optimistic vision found in some sectors of the left. They might be right. But I am afraid that it does not take into account the impact that the pandemic might have had on many people and the kind of affects that it might have brought to the fore.

In dealing with this issue, I think that Karl Polanyi provides us with valuable insights. In his book *The Great Transformation*, he showed how a society imperiled by the dislocation produced by advances of commodification, reacted in the 1930s with a defensive counter-movement to protect itself, readapting the economy to social needs by re-embedding the market into social structures. He also indicated

that the resistances to the dislocation produced by advances of commodification are not bound to take a democratic form. Indeed, in the 1930s they led to Roosevelt's New Deal, but also to fascism or Stalinism. Polanyi's idea of a counter-movement has gained great currency in recent years to explain the global growth of contemporary social movements resisting neoliberalism. To the point that people are saying that we are living in a *Polanyian moment*.

I find this aspect of Polanyi's analysis very important, but it is another one that I want to develop here. The part of Polanyi's argument that I find particularly relevant in the present conjuncture, is the importance he attributes to the element of self-protection in the double movement. He shows that when societies experience serious disturbances in their modes of life, the need for protection becomes the central demand, and that people are likely to follow those who they believe can best provide it. I would like to suggest that today we find ourselves in an analogous situation because one of the consequences of the pandemic has clearly been an increased demand for protection. This need for protection can be articulated in different ways, progressive or regressive. It could certainly benefit right-wing populists if they are able to convince people that protection requires adopting a view of sovereignty in terms of exclusive nationalism. And they are clearly attempting to promote such a view.

Nevertheless, unlike what I thought when I wrote *For a Left Populism*, I do not think that in the current conjuncture the main danger comes from their side. I am more concerned by the fact that the desire for protection is already being exploited by neoliberal governments to reinforce their power by fostering the development of a neoliberal version of techno-authoritarianism, presenting it as the best way to provide security and protection. They manage to reach their aim by advocating the fashionable *technological solutionism* analyzed by Evgeny Morozov. In his book *To save everything, click here*, Morozov (2013) warns us against the dangers of this ideology of solutionism promoted by Silicon Valley, and according to which all problems, even political ones, have a technological solution. He points out that solutionists defend post-ideological measures and deploy technology to avoid politics.

In my view, solutionism is a technological version of the post-political conception that I criticized in *On the Political*. And I feel that after some years during which populist mobilizations seemed to indicate a break with post-politics and a *return of the political*, we are now witnessing a *reconquista* by neoliberal forces, a renewed attempt to *dethrone* the political, which was, as we know, Hayek's proclaimed ambition. Covid-19 has no doubt represented a great opportunity for the tech giants to extend their control, and their belief that digital platforms could provide a foundation for the political order chimes with the claim of third-way politicians that political antagonisms have been overcome and that left and right are *zombie categories*. Solutionism could no doubt contribute to facilitating the acceptance of post-democratic

forms of digital authoritarianism that remain immune to democratic control. We can already see its effects in the fact that many people are, in the hope of getting protection, currently ready to accept digital forms of control that they had so far opposed. I am afraid that if it is successful, this offensive might bring a new lease of life to neoliberalism, allowing it another opportunity to *buy time*, to speak like Wolfgang Streeck.

4. Faced with a situation in which neoliberalism is trying to restore its hegemony by imposing a new form of post-democratic authoritarian digital model as the solution to the sanitary, social, and economic crisis provoked by the pandemic, it is imperative for the left to impede this restoration. It is imperative to mobilize common affects addressing this demand for protection, but articulating it with social justice and democratic values. In envisaging how to arouse common affects around a conception of protection articulated with democratic values, there is a crucial aspect of the current conjuncture that needs to be taken into account: it is the central place that the climate emergency should be occupying in the political agenda. With the ecological crisis, we are beginning to realize that we have entered a new era in which the struggle for social justice needs to include a new dimension. During the twentieth century, what was at the core of the socialist project was the question of inequality, and the fight for social justice was conceived in terms of an equal repartition of the fruits of growth. The struggles of the new social movements added new angles to the question of social justice, but their focus was on autonomy and liberty, and, with the exception of some ecological movements, they did not fundamentally target the nature of growth.

The climate emergency has made us aware that the struggle for social justice requires putting into question the productivist and extractivist model. Growth has ceased being considered a source of protection and is perceived as a danger for the reproduction of the material conditions of society. It is no longer possible to envisage a process of radicalization of democracy that does not advocate the end of a model of growth that endangers the existence of society and whose destructive effects are particularly felt by the more vulnerable groups. This is why it is now essential to put the question of an ecological bifurcation at the centre of the radical democratic project.

There are many proposals about the kind of measures needed to operate this ecological bifurcation, one of the most interesting being the Green New Deal of Alexandria Occasio-Cortez and the Sunrise Movement in the US. It is not the place here to examine them. What I would like to stress is that this bifurcation needs to be a radical one and that it requires a systemic change and a break with financial capitalism. This has been convincingly argued by a group of economists in the UK around Ann Pettifor, who, in their call for a Green New Deal, have brought to light the close

links existing between the financial and economic sectors and the evolution of the ecosystem. They claim that in order to address the climate crisis, it is necessary to have a radical intervention of the state to regulate the financial system, and they stress the urgency of subordinating the financial sector to the interests of society and the future of the planet. Societies need to abandon their dependency on the economic system of globalized financial capitalism that produces ecological disasters as well as economic, political, and social inequalities.

It is vital to acknowledge that a radical ecological bifurcation exacts relinquishing the post-political neoliberal view in order to construct a political frontier and define an adversary. Unfortunately, this is not recognized by most green parties or ecological movements. This is precisely where, in my view, lies the superiority of a left populist strategy whose objective is precisely the drawing of a political frontier between a *us* and a *them*, the construction of a collective will, and the determination of an adversary.

Once this is accepted, the question that arises is how to bring about such a collective will, how to mobilize affects around a project of ecological bifurcation? This question is often overlooked on the left because of the rationalist theoretical framework that too often informs left politics. Left politics is full of great ideas about how an emancipated society should be, and left politicians announce what they will do when they are in power. There is much energy spent in elaborating detailed programs. Alas, in politics, it is not enough to have a well-elaborated programme with great policies. Correct ideas are not sufficient and, as Spinoza reminded us, ideas only have force when they meet affects. To generate adhesion and move people to act, those policies have to resonate with the desires and personal experiences of the people they want to interpellate.

Now, one of the main tenets of a left populist strategy is to stress the decisive role that affects play in politics, and this constitutes another important advantage when it comes to envisaging how to fight against neoliberal authoritarian developments. To awaken affects and arouse enthusiasm, I propose to envisage the ecological bifurcation in the mode of a *Green Democratic Revolution*. I believe that a left populist counter-hegemonic offensive launched in the name of a *Green Democratic Revolution*, as a process of deepening democracy, a new phase of the democratic revolution that connects the defence of the environment with the manifold democratic struggles against different forms of inequality, would be able to mobilize the affective force of the democratic imaginary. Indeed, as Claude Lefort has shown, it is the democratic imaginary that, since the democratic revolution, has given impulse to the struggles for equality and liberty in our societies. This is why I contend that the project of a Green Democratic Revolution should constitute the hegemonic signifier of the chain of equivalence articulating the ecological question with the workers' and other democratic demands around feminism, antiracism, and LGBT+ issues.

Such a mobilization of democratic values is possible because, despite their relegation by neoliberalism, democratic values still play a significant role in the political imaginary of our societies. This is corroborated by the fact that many resistances against the post-democratic condition are being expressed in the name of equality and popular sovereignty. The fact that so many resistances against various forms of oppression are expressed as democratic demands testifies to the crucial role played by the signifier *democracy* in the political imaginary. It is no doubt significant that the main targets of the *movement of the squares* were the shortcomings of the democratic institutions and that they did not call for *socialism* but for a *real democracy*. Of course, the signifier *democracy* has been very much abused, but when used critically, emphasizing its egalitarian dimension, it constitutes a powerful weapon in the hegemonic struggle to create a new common sense.

Finally, I believe that an ambitious and well-designed project of Green Democratic Revolution, aiming at a radicalization of democracy, could offer an attractive vision of a future democratic society that might also entice some sectors currently within the neoliberal hegemonic bloc. By appealing to constituencies that so far have not identified with the left, such a strategy should be able to construct a transversal popular movement and construct a majority for an alternative to neoliberalism. This is indeed how a left populist strategy should be conceived today.

Literature

Evgeny Morozov. 2013. *To Save Everything, Click Here. The Folly of Technological Solutionism*. Public Affairs: New York.