

## Recovering Democracy: Chantal Mouffe on Left Populist Strategy

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### Abstract

This paper attempts to reconstruct Chantal Mouffe's notion of a left-populist strategy as an approach to recovering democracy from its elitist and restrictive form today. This is predicated on the idea that left populism has not been taken seriously in mainstream discussions, oftentimes dismissed as a threat to democracy, which is a product of disdain towards populism as a whole. To be sure, this negative view of populism is not surprising having seen the emergence of authoritarian populist figures in recent years. However, I argue, following Mouffe, that a left populist strategy carries a unique signification to populism that propounds progressive ideals and values necessary for the radical transformation of democracy. Using Mouffe, the paper offers an alternative reading to populism that allows us to envision a radical democracy that restores our hope for a qualitatively new society: one where genuine freedom and equality exist.

**Keywords:** Populism, Left populist strategy, elite politics, radical democracy

## Introduction

This paper attempts to reconstruct Chantal Mouffe's notion of a left populist strategy as a viable strategy in recovering democracy from its elitist and restrictive form today. This is predicated on the idea that left populism has not been taken seriously in mainstream discussions, oftentimes dismissed as a threat to democracy, and denigrated as outright demagogical. Incontrovertibly, this negative view of populism is not surprising having seen the surge of authoritarian populist figures in recent years. However, I argue, following Mouffe, that a left populist strategy carries a unique signification to populism that propounds progressive ideals and values necessary for the radical transformation of liberal democracy. Using Mouffe, the paper offers an alternative reading to populism that allows us to envision a radical democracy that restores our hope for a qualitatively new society: one where genuine freedom and equality exist.

In recent years, the world saw a dramatic turn of events with the surge of populist leaders. In 2016, former US President Donald Trump successfully defeated Hillary Clinton with his childish and unconventional antics on the political stage. Whilst a billionaire, he ran a campaign that positioned himself as an outsider<sup>1</sup> – rallying against the establishment, questioning the failures of the US in the context of the Iraq War, NAFTA, immigration policies, and others, promising to “Make America Great Again”. In 2019, Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro came to power with his campaign slogan, “Brazil above everything, God above all,” concretized in the form of denigrating women, indigenous peoples, homosexuals, and other minority groups of the population.<sup>2</sup> Over in Asia, we saw the rise of Narendra Modi as India's prime minister vowing to revitalize India after the 2009-2014 corruption and black money controversies that outraged the Indian population.<sup>3</sup> The Philippines also celebrated a populist leader in the form of Rodrigo Duterte who shook the ground of traditional politics in the country by

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Cox, “Understanding the Global Rise of Populism,” LSE IDEAS, May 2017, 6, <https://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/publications/updates/populism.aspx>.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Postel, “Populism as a Concept and the Challenge of U.S. History,” *IdeAs. Idées d'Amérique*, no. 14 (October 1, 2019): 1, <https://doi.org/10.4000/ideas.6472>.

<sup>3</sup> Indu Ratra, “Case for Progressive Populism: A Fresh Indian Initiative,” *SocDem Asia Quarterly*, 6, no. 3 (December 2017): 15.

using foul language and declaring a commitment to bring peace and order by eliminating drug addicts with his violent war on drugs. Of course, populist figures in Poland, Israel, Italy, and other parts of the world add to the list of the populist moment as well.

At present, populist figures across the world seem to have declined in number. According to the Centre for Governance Studies, the number of governments across the world under populist leaders declined from 19 to 12, which is especially noticeable in Europe.<sup>4</sup> Considering that most, if not all, of the populist leaders, mentioned above demonstrated authoritarian tendencies, the waning of populism may merit a celebration. Indeed, the populist movements seen through the years have caused more division and hate among groups of people. As a corollary, populism has been denigrated and earned the reputation of being a threat to democracy, maybe even incompatible with liberal ideals and democratic values.

To be sure, it would be disingenuous to deny the damage caused by populism in a plethora of democratic societies; however, reducing the problem to populism misses the point. As the paper will illustrate, populism, while part of the problem, is not the central problem. It is only a symptom of a bigger issue; it is the structural failures of existing democracies today that form the basis of the populist appeal. Hence, with the waning of populism, we have only returned to “business as usual,” i.e., it has only brought us back to center-left and center-right politics, resulting in an elitist and restrictive form of democracy. As such, we are still confronted with the same set of problems in most democratic societies today: income inequality, racial and gender discrimination, climate change, neoliberal education, unaffordable rent prices and issues of public housing, limited healthcare, economic anxiety, inflation, and a whole range of problems. In other words, we are still troubled by the failures of elite democracy. The question then is how to recover democracy from elite capture.

It is against this backdrop that I attempt to rescue populism from being dismissed as solely and entirely authoritarian and a threat to democracy. Indeed, it is easy to pin the problem on populism. However, populism comes in different forms. One need not reject populism outright as it can also offer an alternative solution to the

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<sup>4</sup> Ashok Swain, “Populism in Asia is More Robust Than in Europe,” *Centre for Governance Studies*, July 16, 2022, <https://cgs-bd.com/article/9169/Populism-in-Asia-is-More-Robust-Than-in-Europe%23.Yvjmy8ozRHY.twitter>.

crisis of democracy. This is where I situate Mouffe and her notion of a left populist strategy. As opposed to the authoritarian tendencies of right-wing populism seen in recent years, left populism offers a different path that attempts to address the failure of elite democracy. Drawing on this nexus between progressive ideals and populism in general, Mouffe calls for a consideration of left populism as a legitimate and serious approach to addressing the failures of the prevailing social reality.

### **The Populist Appeal: Symptom of Democracy in Crisis**

The trivialization of populism signifies a fundamental flaw in the diagnosis of the material conditions in liberal democracies at present. My contention is that reducing all forms of populist strategies as undemocratic and illiberal undermines the legitimate concerns of a large segment of the population. Mouffe spells out that “a lot of so-called populist complaints are real democratic demands, and they need to be taken seriously instead of being dismissed as dangers to democracy.”<sup>5</sup> Regardless of whether we agree with populism or not, a nuanced discussion must take place instead of simply dismissing it as derogatory or just another demagoguery to be ridiculed and despised. Necessarily, diagnosing the populist appeal clarifies the legitimacy of such a strategy in political discourse. In no small part, this warrants a serious reflection on the crisis of democracy.

For Mouffe, the populist explosion can be attributed to the material conditions lived through by the people in the status quo. Particularly, she points to the “crisis of the neoliberal hegemonic formation,” implemented in the 1980s in Western Europe, as the primary source of the populist takeover.<sup>6</sup> Margaret Thatcher, through her populist approach, championed neoliberalism as a political project.<sup>7</sup> Articulating its novel, and scientific character, she declared

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<sup>5</sup> “Chantal Mouffe, Defiant Political Thinker: ‘Don’t Simply Dismiss Populism,’” Ku Leuven, January 31, 2019, <https://nieuws.kuleuven.be/en/content/2019/patronsaintsday-chantal-mouffe>.

<sup>6</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* (London: Verso, 2018), 2.

<sup>7</sup> Margaret Thatcher articulated the need to bring back individual freedom and emancipation from the oppressive state bureaucrats. By identifying the state bureaucrats as oppressive and ineffective as well as the trade unions for simply waiting for handouts from the latter, she demonstrated sympathy for the industrious and independent people who were relegated by bureaucratic forces. This allowed her

that there was no alternative to neoliberalism.<sup>8</sup> Her successors, such as Tony Blair and others, would later perpetuate this very logic. Spreading fast and well beyond Western Europe, the agenda of neoliberal globalization was rendered unchallenged and has since been accepted as a rational and scientific outcome of history.<sup>9</sup>

To briefly characterize, neoliberalism primarily advances globalization, abandonment of full employment for inflation targeting, shareholder value maximization over investment and growth, and pursuit of flexible labor markets over trade unions and workers' organizations.<sup>10</sup> More cogently, David Harvey identifies it as follows:

[It is] a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices.<sup>11</sup>

To be sure, this is primarily evident in liberal democracies. With the coming together of liberal democracy and the neoliberal framework, the state plays a decisive role in propagating the latter's ideals into concrete policies. With the state's assistance and cooperation, neoliberalism successfully advances the free market creating the conditions for deregulation, privatization, fiscal austerity measures, protection of private property rights, and more. Co-opted

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to gain support from various individuals for championing them by providing a grammar that made them feel seen. Posing as an outsider and anti-establishment, she gained political momentum by identifying an "other" and positioning herself with the "we" she constructed. Through her populist strategy, she championed the political project of reduced state power and celebration of individual liberty. See Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, 9.

<sup>8</sup> Margaret Thatcher, "Press Conference for American Correspondents in London," June 25, 1980.

<sup>9</sup> Maud Peeters, "For a Left Populism (2018). By Chantal Mouffe (2018)," review of *For a Left Populism*, by Chantal Mouffe, *Politics, Culture and Socialization* 9, no. 1–2 (August 7, 2021): 100.

<sup>10</sup> Cox, "Understanding the Global Rise of Populism," 11.

<sup>11</sup> David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 2.

and designed simply as an accessory to the maintenance of such policies, the state became the avenue for corporate interests to flourish without much question. It merely facilitates and protects the flow of free market transactions. Held hostage by neoliberal hegemony, liberal democratic governments end up transferring a fair amount of their power to the elites – the oligarchy, traditional politicians, *inter alia*.

For Mouffe, the neoliberal hegemony adopted and sustained by most liberal democracies has only engendered what she calls “post-politics”, which she characterizes as a way of doing politics that is limited solely to managing the existing established order primarily in the hands of experts.<sup>12</sup> In turn, democracies become a domain reserved only for technical experts and elites who control much of the power accumulated and cultivated through their consensus of maintaining the neoliberal agenda, leaving behind the greater population.

According to Mouffe, this democratic consensus among technical experts and elites constitutes a legitimate question on the real function and stature of democracy:

I want to challenge this 'post-political' vision. My main target will be those in the progressive camp who accept this optimistic view of globalization and have become the advocates of a consensual form of democracy... I will argue that such an approach is profoundly mistaken and that, instead of contributing to a 'democratization of democracy', it is at the origin of many of the problems that democratic institutions are currently facing. Notions such as 'partisan-free democracy', 'dialogic democracy', 'cosmopolitan democracy', 'good governance', 'global civil society', 'cosmopolitan sovereignty', 'absolute democracy' - to quote only a few of the currently fashionable notions - all partake of a common anti-political vision which refuses to acknowledge the antagonistic dimension constitutive of 'the political'. Their aim is the establishment of a world 'beyond left and right',

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<sup>12</sup> Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, 4.

'beyond hegemony', 'beyond sovereignty' and 'beyond antagonism'.<sup>13</sup>

Drawing from the quote above, post-politics operates around consensus instead of conflict. In most liberal democracies, both right and left parties define good politics as finding consensus in neoliberalism.<sup>14</sup> The Left and Right, which traditionally had strong ideological differences have now become consensual with one another. This blurring of the Left-Right divide signals that both willingly aim to preserve the neoliberal project. The problem with this consensual politics is it results in having no hardcore showdown between political parties in a supposed battlefield of diverse genuine political projects. What ends up happening is center-left and center-right alternating power to maintain neoliberalism. Anyone outside of this moderate or center position is labeled radical, undemocratic, paternalistic, extremist, and populist. Hence, politics has become a site for propagating the values of neoliberal globalization in democratic societies – impeding the possibility of tension among different political visions and projects, a point I will expound on in the section that ensues.

This is problematic because election after election, Mouffe argues, no real alternatives to neoliberal hegemony are offered. The pool of candidates often does not represent varying political projects for people to choose from. It does not matter which political party is in power, politics, viewed this way, is simply about technical issues that citizens ought to leave in the hands of policy experts capable of sustaining and reproducing the neoliberal ideals within liberal democracies. Citizens are only to evaluate the “rational” policies presented by technical experts. By diminishing the role of the citizens in having an active hand in policy decisions, democratic participation is reduced to elections making it performative. In other words, once one is done casting their ballot, institutional politics is now to be handed over to the political actors voted in office, along with the appointed experts – a figuration of democracy most evident today.

In keeping with this, leaving institutional mechanisms in the hands of the experts creates an elite democracy that brushes off the concerns of ordinary people, which egregiously imperils their material

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<sup>13</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 1-2.

<sup>14</sup> Peeters, review of *For a Left Populism*, 100.

conditions on the ground. With the reduction of democracy into an administrative matter, democracy becomes elitist and primarily serves the vested interests of the corporate ruling class and the traditional politicians. We have seen this in the 2008 financial crisis which brought economic crisis to the vast majority of people at such a massive scale. It resulted in several disastrous conditions, including inflation, wealth and income inequality, job insecurity, tax cuts for the rich, gigantic ADB and IMF loans among developing countries, debt accumulation, and cheap labor, to name a few.<sup>15</sup> While the majority of the population suffered, the government made sure to resuscitate corporations and the moneyed interests. The 2008 financial crisis, among other things, points to the idea that with elite capture comes the crisis of neoliberalism and democracy by extension. Far from championing the common people's voices and power, democracy has become oligarchic, and elitist so far removed from the lived realities of the vast majority.

All things considered; the 'post-political' phenomenon brought about by neoliberal hegemony has resulted in disaffection among people. As power is concentrated in the hands of the few, more and more individuals have become depoliticized and indifferent to politics. It must not come as a surprise then when ordinary people show no enthusiasm towards political engagements. Disillusioned, disengaged, withdrawn, hopeless, and disappointed by the same results election after another, they have resigned from any conception of better living conditions under liberal democracy— as the agenda of the common people is consistently pushed aside to privilege the vested interests of the few. Consequently, abstention and apathy are displayed by the masses as democratic institutions demonstrate weakness and disappointing outcomes.

This is where the populist appeal must be situated. In his book *On Populist Reason*, Ernesto Laclau characterizes populism as a discursive strategy that calls for a division of society into two camps, the "underdog" and the power block.<sup>16</sup> This logic of polarization articulates popular democratic discourse against the hegemonic ideology.<sup>17</sup> This calls for the underdog or "the people" to delineate its

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<sup>15</sup> Cox, "Understanding the Global Rise of Populism," 11.

<sup>16</sup> Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005), 87.

<sup>17</sup> Ernesto Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory: Capitalism Fascism Populism* (London New York: Verso, 1977), 110.



political identity from the elites in order to forge a new social order that is responsive to their needs and demands. Typically, populists are viewed as outsiders of the system, often depicting anti-establishment sentiments. Moreover, they oppose elite politics and champion the will of the people which has long been neglected by the powers that be.

Populism is best understood as an approach or strategy in doing politics. As Mouffe notes, "It is not an ideology and cannot be attributed a specific programmatic content. Nor is it a political regime. It is a way of doing politics that can take various ideological forms according to both time and place and is compatible with a variety of institutional frameworks."<sup>18</sup> Populist ruptures then are not predetermined and can take various forms depending on the ideological content that goes with it, may it be socialism, fascism, and the like.<sup>19</sup> In other words, populism is not a monolith and can be a strategy for either an authoritarian direction or a democratic solution.

It is in the context of elite democracy that the populist appeal, particularly the rhetoric of right-wing parties must be apprehended. For obvious reasons, people did not suddenly wake up one day supporting authoritarian populists. Crippled by economic anxieties, resentments, and hopelessness, a disdain for the political establishment and elite democracy was imminent. It was only with the surge of political outsiders and anti-establishment parties that a paradigmatic shift transpired – the disillusioned constituents who have long yearned for an alternative finally found a voice. The crisis of democracy was an opportune time for the populist rhetoric to gain momentum as people were in search of leaders who could speak their language and articulate their frustrations and disappointments with elite democracy. This they saw in the populist figures finally standing up for the voices of the unheard providing space for them to feel important, seen, and recognized. Taken this way, it becomes clear that this affinity people have with populists is primarily a reaction to the crisis of democracy that has far too long marginalized and disenfranchised the greater population. Thus, the 'populist moment', writes Mouffe,

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<sup>18</sup> Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, 1-2.

<sup>19</sup> Carlos de la Torre, "Is Left Populism the Radical Democratic Answer?" *Irish Journal of Sociology* 27, no. 1 (April 1, 2019): 65, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0791603519827225>.

is the expression of a variety of resistances to the political and economic transformations seen during the years of neoliberal hegemony. These transformations have led to a situation that we could call 'post-democracy' to indicate the erosion of the two pillars of the democratic ideal: equality and popular sovereignty.<sup>20</sup>

The Philippines is a convenient example of this. Marred by abject poverty, economic insecurity, and a host of issues brought about by structural failures of elite democracy, Filipinos found hope in populist leaders like Duterte who radically militated against traditional politics and common decency. He communicated directly with the people and promised to give back the power to them, vowing to save the nation from the failures of liberalism. One thing to note is that the anger of the regular Filipinos against liberalism is not accidental. If we look at the 1986 EDSA People Power Revolution, it is clear that it failed to deliver on its promise of redistribution, and liberation from oligarchic rule, among other things. Perhaps, this is where Filipinos' disdain towards traditional politicians emanates. As has happened, the oligarchs identified under the Marcos administration were simply replaced by the Aquino administration with another set of oligarchs. "The Philippine state even after the People Power Revolt of 1986," Maboloc says, "is a paralyzed form of democracy that has been subordinated to the vested interests of traditional politicians and corporate masters".<sup>21</sup> This is precisely where Duterte becomes significant because he represents people's despondency and indignation. He refuses to kowtow to the powers that be and positions himself outside of the establishment consensus. It must not come as a surprise that Duterte and his drug war created such a strong impact and resonated tremendously with the greater populace because as Curato would note "...the drug war is the

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<sup>20</sup> Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, 2.

<sup>21</sup> Christopher Ryan Baquero Maboloc, "The Predatory State and Radical Politics: The Case of the Philippines," *JAS (Journal of ASEAN Studies)* 7, no. 2 (2019): 161–75, <https://doi.org/10.21512/jas.v7i2.6163>, 162.

crystallization of a bigger war the brave, tough, rude, and aggressive President is waging—a fight to save the nation from liberalism.”<sup>22</sup>

Again, it is in Duterte that Filipinos felt seen and valued for once. People no longer trust the system and have grown tired of it because it is dysfunctional and rigged against them. Political dynasties, for example, became widespread and made it extremely convenient for entrenched political clans and families to dominate Philippine politics. Elections became a battle among rich political families as though it was simply a tug of war. Everyone, regardless of left or right, is just a traditional politician serving the moneyed interests. Further, political parties are weak. The consensual relations among political parties have only become a site for the oscillation of power between and among the same oligarchs and political elites. As Bolanos writes,

...the political system in the Philippines allows political parties galore. However, despite this mechanism, unnecessarily allowing too many parties is self-defeating. Because every party is saying almost the same thing and advocating almost the same ideals.<sup>23</sup>

Contextualized this way, it becomes more apparent that the populist appeal is rooted in the structural failures of the existing system in most societies today, which warrants a serious reflection on the legitimate demands of the people. Instead of simply blaming voters for the emergence of populist parties in recent years – calling them uneducated, stupid, irrational, and anti-democratic – it is essential to recognize the legitimate concerns they hold, prompting them to vote for radical and anti-establishment political figures. Indeed, it is in the hegemonic crisis of elite democracy that the populist appeal must be understood and analyzed. Making fun of voters for supporting populist leaders misses the point as to why the latter has successfully gathered strong and popular support. Asserting intellectual superiority and parading one’s moral righteousness in order to downplay legitimate

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<sup>22</sup> Adele Webb-Groemping and Nicole Curato, “Populism in the Philippines,” in *Populism Around the World*, ed. Daniel Stockemer, Populism Around the World: A Comparative Perspective (Switzerland: Springer, 2018), 60, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-96758-5\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-96758-5_4), 60.

<sup>23</sup> Paolo Bolanos, “Critical Theory and the Prospects of Radical Democracy,” *Kritike: An Online Journal of Philosophy* 14, no. 2 (December 2020): 21.

material concerns only cultivates a dismissive attitude toward the cries of the hopeless and desperate. Blaming the poor for exacerbating the existing intolerable conditions is fundamentally lazy and patronizing.<sup>24</sup> In turn, this calls for a robust reflection because, apparently, decency and moral reform against corruption may no longer hold water for the ones who have long been ignored by elite democracy.

### **Rescuing Populism: Mouffe on Left Populist Strategy**

Now, it would be irresponsible to deny that authoritarian populists are a problem to be addressed. To a large extent, there is something to be said about the exploitative and manipulative strategy right-wing populist parties employ. Unfortunately, they were quick to take advantage of the hopelessness, fear, and desperation among people, with the veneer of bringing the power back to the people against the establishment that has failed them miserably.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, in the playbook of authoritarian figures, populism can be used as a trick to disingenuously pose as outsiders and champions of the masses.

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<sup>24</sup> While some Trump voters may be racists, white supremacists, and sexists, for example, others are not. Others find his anti-establishment rhetoric appealing against Hillary Clinton's traditional politician image. To dismiss his victory and blame voters is irresponsible and unfair. Dismissing this as simply irrational missed important nuances in the analysis.

<sup>25</sup> Understandably so, scholars warn us about the danger of populism. Muller, for example, laments that populists are always anti-pluralists in that they claim exclusive representation of the people so that anyone outside is simply viewed as illegitimate and the enemies of democracy. This explains the potent threat the populist logic poses to democracy since any exclusionary measure implies that some groups matter while others do not. See Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016). Further, John Dunn cautions us of the populists' political management of democratic institutions and paternalistic approach as a whole. This is seen, he writes, in "the durable establishment of an uninhibitedly authoritarian government, intent on dismantling the structure of civil and political liberties and displacing the rule of law by the arbitrary distribution of punishments and rewards on its own behalf by the ruling power." See John Dunn, "The Challenge of Populism: Why Populist Politics Spreads in the World," *Populism* 2, no. 1 (May 7, 2019): 65. Moreover, Heydarian cautions people from the temptations of populism in that the charisma of these populist figures and their confidence of articulating simplistic and bold overnight solutions to problems of complex nature can be detrimental. See Heydarian, "The Rise of Populists in Asia," *SocDem Asia Quarterly* 6, no. 3 (December 2017):1.

That being said, rather than abandoning populism as a whole, I argue that it can still be rescued and given new meaning in the context of being a strategy against elite democracy. As Benjamin Arditi suggests, populism may be a contested phenomenon, but it is not an intractable phenomenon. In fact, he calls it anexact, that is neither exact nor inexact:

The interesting thing about this notion is that it falls outside the binary opposition between exact and inexact, for the vagueness of the contours of anexact objects is a requisite condition and cannot be formalized as a clear truth-value. Considering the range of interpretations and positions, populism could well be an anexact object and therefore any precise description faces a real and perhaps insurmountable limit.<sup>26</sup>

One can fairly suggest then that populism comes in different forms. The question at this point is what type of populism to propound and how this populism genuinely addresses the hegemonic crisis. This is where Mouffe's concept of a left-populist strategy becomes significant. She offers a viable strategy that resembles the general populist approach but is constructed and imbued with progressive nuances that may potentially recover democracy from elite capture.

At the root of it, it is the hegemony of the neoliberal order that has created the phenomenon of the 'post-political'. The central aim at this point then is the reactivation and 'return of the political' in order to direct and align democracy to its pillars – liberty and equality.<sup>27</sup> This attempt to dismantle the existing social order becomes possible when situated in the context of hegemony. Laclau and Mouffe characterize hegemony as the dominant political project, which governs the social order of a society. This hegemonic order emerges and is retained as a

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<sup>26</sup> Benjamin Arditi, "Populism as an Internal Periphery of Democratic Politics," in *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, ed. Francisco Panizza (London: Verso, 2005), 75.

<sup>27</sup> Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, 14. See also Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, (London: Verso, 1985).

result of political articulation.<sup>28</sup> Contrary to the idea that reality is given as though it has an essence, Mouffe sees it as something that is constructed, i.e. meaning is constructed not given.<sup>29</sup> In other words, any given social reality is a product of hegemonic articulation. In the case of neoliberal hegemony presented earlier, it is a result of neoliberal articulation which was introduced in the 80s by figures like Margaret Thatcher and has since been accepted as an “essential and unavoidable outcome of history”.<sup>30</sup>

However, Mouffe asserts that any hegemonic order, which comes from a political project and allows for meaning to be constructed, is not absolute or final:

...every order is political and based on some form of exclusion. There are always other possibilities that have been repressed and that can be reactivated. The articulatory practices through which a certain order is established, and the meaning of social institutions is fixed are 'hegemonic practices'. Every hegemonic order is susceptible of being challenged by counter-hegemonic practices. i.e. practices which will attempt to disarticulate the existing order so as to install another form of hegemony.<sup>31</sup>

What this alludes to is that there is no final ground or destination for any hegemonic project. Within the margins of the dominant hegemonic order in a given society is a plethora of other hegemonic projects with the potential of counteracting such dominance. The existing social order can be challenged and replaced by counter-hegemonic practices where another meaning can be constructed and articulated. This is predicated on the idea that in any hegemonic order, there is always some level of exclusion, an outside. To be sure, this need not imply that hegemony is bad. Indeed, a

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<sup>28</sup> Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, 134.

<sup>29</sup> Nico Carpentier and Bart Cammaerts, “Hegemony, Democracy, Agonism and Journalism,” *Journalism Studies* 7, no. 6 (December 1, 2006): 4, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616700600980728>.

<sup>30</sup> Peeters, review of *For a Left Populism*, 100.

<sup>31</sup> Mouffe, *On the Political*, 18; Chantal Mouffe, “The Affects of Democracy,” Eurozine, November 23, 2018, <https://www.eurozine.com/the-affects-of-democracy/>.

dominant hegemonic order is necessary. Social order is needed, thus hegemonic order that constructs meaning is necessary. Power will most definitely play a crucial role in social order formation. The question is which hegemonic project prevails. Indeed, some hegemonic projects are paternalistic and propagate authoritarian tendencies, while other forms are more democratic.

For Mouffe, it is the Left's project to radically recover democracy by carrying out a counter-hegemony against the entrenched elite democracy. For this to take place, a serious reevaluation of the previous and present Leftist strategies may be necessary – to move away from some of the old ways of the Left that have not proven to be effective. As is well known, the Left has been unpopular and ineffective in bringing about genuine and far-reaching change against elite democracy. It faces a crisis on how to confront the structures of power and the social order in general. It is in disarray and has failed to come up with more potent alternatives to a plethora of oppression in various social relations, and an alternative to corporate politics in most democracies today. Left political parties clearly struggle to establish their credibility and political legitimacy in that election after election, individuals are consistently presented with the lesser of two evils debate. Part of this problem stems from the Left's failure to present a hegemonic challenge to the powers that be. Clearly, a new Leftist strategy is in question if we are to recover democracy.

Now, Mouffe distinguishes various strategies for the Left: pure reformist, radical reformist, and revolutionary politics.<sup>32</sup> The first is a strategy that embraces and works within liberal democratic and neoliberal principles. The second strategy “accepts the basic principles of the legitimacy of liberal democracy but attempts to implement a different hegemonic formation”<sup>33</sup> Finally, the last one is closely related to Leninist and anarchist movements as it calls for a complete revolution of the given social order. The first strategy falls into the trap of neoliberalism. A huge segment of the Left today, for example, find themselves lining up with the moderate left, abandoning the bigger political project of breaking away from the elitist system of democratic politics. On the other hand, the third strategy may already be too extreme and violent in today's context which may pose dangers in the political project of recovering democracy.

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<sup>32</sup> Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, 17.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

Mouffe points to the second strategy, radical reformism, as perhaps the most suitable strategy at the moment. Against the backdrop of the Left's political crisis, she calls for a redefinition of the socialist project. In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, she and Laclau point to this new socialist project as a radicalization of democracy<sup>34</sup> – an enormous concept that requires a comprehensive and separate discussion altogether. But for the purpose of this paper, we may say that radical democracy is a “radicalization’ of the ethico-political principles of a liberal-democratic regime, ‘liberty and equality for all.’<sup>35</sup> This radicalization of democracy opposes the restrictive character of elite democracy and instead brings back the redistributive power of the state so that the pillars of democracy – liberty and equality – truly apply to more social relations. In other words, radical democracy simply bridges the gap between the promise and practice of implementing liberty and equality. It is only radical in that it aims to make “liberal” in liberal democracy truly “liberal”, and not just be an empty catchphrase.

This radicalization of democracy does not simply call for the dictatorship of the proletariat. The overthrow of the existing system through arms and violence is not necessitated. Radical democracy simply recovers the antagonistic nature of democracy but in the form of agonism, a concept I shall return to later, to give room for the showdown of political projects within the existing framework of liberal democracy – without the need to destroy each other. Further, liberal democracy need not be destroyed. Elections and liberal institutions are still respected, for example, with the goal of radically transforming them to be more pluralistic, inclusive, and fair to various social relations.

This is where left populism becomes particularly significant. Indeed, populism is “a mirror in which democracy can contemplate itself, warts and all, and find out what it is about and what is lacking”.<sup>36</sup> Left populism, in particular, uses progressive values and ideals that recover, deepen, and expand democracy to more social relations, as

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<sup>34</sup> Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, 134.

<sup>35</sup> Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, 27; Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*.

<sup>36</sup> Ian Clark R. Parcon, “Understanding Duterteism: Populism and Democratic Politics in the Philippines,” *Asian Journal of Social Science* 49, no. 3 (September 1, 2021): 135, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajss.2021.03.001>.



opposed to restricting it. Markedly, the conditions today still call for a populist strategy, especially for the Left, given that elite democracy remains exclusionary across social relations, paternalistic, and confined within the hands of technical experts which reduces democracy to an administrative enterprise.<sup>37</sup>

In carrying out the populist strategy, which follows the principles of radical reformism, I highlight three central points from Mouffe: 1) articulating a political frontier; 2) constructing a chain of equivalence among heterogeneous demands of varying social relations; and 3) following the agonistic model of democracy. Mouffe is convinced that this left populist strategy has the potential to recover democracy from the perils of elite democracy brought about by neoliberal hegemony.

Let us begin with the need for a political frontier. Similar to the populism of the Right, left populist parties strive to reclaim the power of the people against the establishment. The fundamental difference lies in the construction of the “people;” nevertheless, a political frontier is identified. In other words, a “we” and a “they” are articulated and constructed. In most rightwing populist movements, the tendency is to use essentialist criteria of ethnicity by articulating nationalist and xenophobic vocabularies leading to the exclusion of minority groups, such as immigrants and refugees. The “we” or “the people” are viewed as the “true” nationals, while the refugees, immigrants, as well as the establishment – in their failure to deliver for the “true” nationals – constitute “they”.<sup>38</sup> By articulating and constructing a “we” and a “they”, a clamor to bring the power back to the outsiders who have long lost their voice is demonstrated.

This bifurcation of contrasting identities is necessary because politics, Mouffe notes, is antagonistic, that is, it is a site of conflict. Contrary to the hegemonic project of neoliberalism which fosters and favors consensus, Mouffe welcomes the conflictual nature of politics. As already established, because there is no final ground to reach, hegemonic projects will constantly be at a battleground against each other. She writes, “Taking account of the dimension of the political

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<sup>37</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *Towards A Green Democratic Revolution: Left Populism and the Power of Affects* (London ; New York: Verso, 2022), 1.

<sup>38</sup> Emma Murphy, "For a Left Populism," *International Dialogue*: Vol. 10, Article 10 (2020): 69, <https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.ID.10.1.1184k>.

signifies acknowledging the existence of conflicts that cannot have a rational solution.”<sup>39</sup> The inevitability of antagonism in political life is precisely the foundation of Mouffe’s defense of populism, particularly left populism. Shortly, I will clarify that this antagonism is inevitable in politics but needs to be practiced in the form of agonism.

Now, the challenge for the Left is the construction of a political frontier diametrically opposed to the antidemocratic and ultranationalist solution of the Right. The articulation of a political frontier cannot be a simplistic articulation of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie as the “we” or “people” against the “they”. Indeed, Mouffe and Laclau both develop an anti-essentialist approach in their analysis of the political conjuncture.<sup>40</sup> Rejecting the classical Marxist conception of the working class as the sole agent of radical social transformation, they argue that the complexity of contemporary society has called for a reevaluation of class essentialism. This calls for a left politics beyond class.

The subject of oppression and domination today clearly has pervaded and diffused across social relations. Hence, the construction of a “we” in this case must be articulated differently. Liberal democracies have clearly failed at extending and deepening liberty and equality across social relations. Instead of advancing redistributive policies in realizing liberty and equality across social power relations, the liberal democratic state has become restrictive and concerned only with the free market and economic liberalism in general. As such, issues like racial discrimination, economic anxiety, climate crisis, violence against women and the LGBT, bastardization of the working class, erasure of indigenous communities, etc. are disregarded. To address this, identifying and constructing popular identities is necessary to provide a grammar on their popular democratic demands.<sup>41</sup> In this sense, the “we” or the “people” signified in left populism goes beyond the working class and includes other social relations – women, LGBT, Blacks, indigenous peoples, climate activists, labor unions, etc. – that have considerably been neglected by a

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<sup>39</sup> Chantal Mouffe, “Agonistic Democracy and Populism,” *Electra*, 2022, <https://electramagazine.fundacaoedp.pt/en/editions/issue-19/agonistic-democracy-and-populism>.

<sup>40</sup> Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, 177.

<sup>41</sup> de la Torre, “Is Left Populism the Radical Democratic Answer?,” 65.

common antagonist, the oligarchy, identified as “they”. Oppressed groups need to be constructed together as the “people” or we against the establishment, the “they,” insofar as the systems of power are so deeply entrenched that the only way to go is to make a political frontier to finally challenge it.

To elaborate on the need to go beyond the working class against the oligarchy, I emphasize what Mouffe calls the ‘chain of equivalence’ among a plethora of democratic demands from various social relations. In order for the Left to display a legitimate and potent resistance against the structural dominance of elite democracy, radical groups may need to come together. Through this ‘chain of equivalence’ of demands from heterogeneous groups, the left-populist strategy becomes effective in addressing the struggles of many people against exclusion and subordination.<sup>42</sup>

Indeed, for Mouffe, it is in creating a ‘chain of equivalence’ among the struggles of workers, women, immigrants, the LGBT community, climate advocates, black individuals, and other liberation movements that a new hegemony may potentially emerge. By creating a “people” in the form of a ‘chain of equivalence’ against the oligarchy identified and articulated as “they”, a left populist strategy may potentially bring together their popular demands against the same system that impedes their causes.

To be sure, this ‘chain of equivalence’ does not point to a reduction of multifarious groups into one homogenous identity that resists the systems of power. The point is not to lump existing political subjects into one progressive group. Instead, the strategy is simply to create a collective will that will articulate the heterogeneous demands of these oppositional groups. Their unique political goals are maintained but are identified as “the people” against the oligarchy which collectively impedes the realization of their political projects. Hence, as a collective will, the said groups are not precluded from asserting their unique struggles. The strategy simply calls for their efforts to be collective for surely individual demands become stronger when tied with other political demands that confront the same system. Through the coalition and solidarity of oppressed groups, the power that has far too long been confined in the establishment may potentially be reclaimed by the neglected.

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<sup>42</sup> Mouffe, *Towards A Green Democratic Revolution*, 41.

In a practical sense, the 'chain of equivalence' discussed above need not be a violent revolution or takeover of the system. Indeed, Mouffe rejects the strategy of pure reformism and more so, revolutionary politics. Instead, it is radical reformism that a left populist strategy advocates. To backtrack a little bit, it was mentioned earlier that Mouffe recognizes 'the political' as a site of conflict, that is, antagonism is ineradicable in liberal democracy. Hence, a legitimate question arises that if 'the political' is a site of conflict, then the confrontation around it can have potential risks and consequences. In other words, how can democracy facilitate the confrontation of hegemonic projects whilst maintaining the social framework against violent confrontation, such as in the case of a civil war? To this, Mouffe responds with her agonistic model of democracy.

Mouffe is fully aware of two possibilities immanent in the antagonistic dimension: 1) a friend/enemy confrontation; or 2) confrontation among adversaries. The agonistic model celebrates the latter. The former, being an antagonistic confrontation, has the potential to result in civil war. This is because in viewing the opponent as an enemy to be destroyed, the confrontation becomes violent and undemocratic:

The agonistic confrontation is different from the antagonistic one, not because it allows for a possible consensus, but because the opponent is not considered an enemy to be destroyed but an adversary whose existence is perceived as legitimate. Their ideas will be fought with vigour, but her right to defend them will never be questioned.<sup>43</sup>

To maintain a pluralist democratic society, the agonistic perspective identifies and acknowledges the partisan character of politics. Hence, the confrontation must not be antagonistic but rather agonistic insofar as conflicting hegemonic projects that cannot be reconciled rationally are nevertheless conducted and facilitated within the ambit of democratic institutions. As such, the antagonistic dimension is ever-present but the mode in which confrontation of

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<sup>43</sup> Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, 34-35. See also Chantal Mouffe and Elke Wagner, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (London: Verso, 2013).

hegemonic projects takes place is within the procedures and framework of liberal democracy acceptable to adversaries involved.

Again, the agonistic model of democracy is not a site of civil war or outright destruction of the enemy since there is never a final solution – implying that the hardcore showdown of hegemonic projects is always immanent. She sees this not as a danger to democracy but simply as the “very conditions of existence”.<sup>44</sup> The system must not simply be replaced by the dictatorship of the proletariat. Further, it must also not call for the censorship or deplatforming of dissenting opinions, may it be from the Left or Right. They must exist altogether, despite the slim chance of ever resolving all issues, as this allows democracy to perpetually evolve and grow. The pluralism of values and ideas is surely not seductive, but it is the very character of democracy. To take away this conflictual character of democracy in the guise of “peace” and “rational solution” is in fact counter-intuitive and antithetical to the nature of democracy. The burden lies on how hegemonic projects affirm and defend their values without calling for a civil war or destruction of their so-called “enemy”.

Surely, this position must not be confused with privileging conflict over consensus. Truly, consensus is necessary for a pluralistic democracy to work. However, it must also provide space for agonistic confrontation for democracy’s full functioning – far from the elitist form of democracy that holds decisions within technical experts and the oligarchy alone. Writing on this, Mouffe says:

Of course, consensus is important, but it must also enable the availability of different and sometimes conflicting interpretations of those shared ethico-political values, in order for citizens to genuinely have the possibility of choosing between real alternatives.<sup>45</sup>

Attempts of progressive movements to disarticulate the hegemonic order of neoliberalism using left populist strategy demonstrate the need to recover democracy. Notably, some figures in Latin America showed progressive populist tendencies, such as Evo Morales in Bolivia, Brazil’s Lula da Silva, Gabriel Boric in Chile, and more. Furthermore, Bernie Sanders in 2020 gave the US Democratic

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

National Committee a run for their money when he almost clinched the nomination against Joe Biden. Rallying around populist issues of paid family leave, Medicare for All, working-class demands, and other popular social programs, many were energized and politically active once more as he positioned himself as one with the “people” against corporate politics. Accounts of outsider and anti-establishment strategies by Jeremy Corbyn’s Labour Party in the UK, the Podemos in Spain, and others, are critical examples of a left populist strategy as well. To be fair, many of these populist movements did not get their desired results. However, as Mouffe notes, “Those setbacks are undeniable, but it is clearly inadequate to dismiss a political strategy on the sole ground that some of its adherents did not manage to reach their objectives in their first attempt.”<sup>46</sup> After all, they may not have won but they showed good results, which warrants better strategic framing in the future.

In the final analysis, the historical circumstances do matter in articulating a progressive hegemony through a left-populist strategy. The construction of a people will be contingent on the historical and material conditions in a given society. Further, “its dynamics cannot be determined in isolation from all contextual reference.”<sup>47</sup> Left populism does not have a singular identity since historical circumstances vary. Ultimately, “populism can remain within the bounds of democracy, but also reach the point where they enter into conflict and go their own separate ways.”<sup>48</sup> Indeed, Mouffe’s Left populist strategy aims to remain within the internal periphery of democratic politics.

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<sup>46</sup> Mouffe, *Towards A Green Democratic Revolution*, 3.

<sup>47</sup> Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, 35.

<sup>48</sup> Benjamin Arditi, "Populism as an Internal Periphery of Democratic Politics," in *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, ed. Francisco Panizza (London: Verso, 2005), 98.

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