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The (Too) Small Prince of Left Populism: Rereading Laclau and Mouffe

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Abstract. From a theoretical standpoint, this article examines Mouffe's political project of left populism based on Ernesto Laclau's theory. It first shows how the distinctiveness of left populism lies in its ability to radicalise democracy. However, the theory of the populist logic developed by Laclau and faithfully adopted by Mouffe tends to impose a series of negative implications on the idea of radicalising democracy originally formulated by the two scholars in the 1980s. The elements of originality are abandoned in favour of a "one-dimensional flattening" of the political. As a result, the very "left" element that should, for Mouffe, be the defining feature of left populism ends up being severely weakened.
Keywords: Populism; Left Populism; Democracy; Laclau; Mouffe.

[es] El (demasiado) pequeño príncipe del populismo de izquierda: releer a Laclau y Mouffe

Resumen. Desde un punto de vista teórico, este artículo examina el proyecto político de populismo de izquierda de Mouffe, basado en la teoría de Ernesto Laclau. En primer lugar, muestra cómo la singularidad del populismo de izquierda radica en su capacidad para radicalizar la democracia. Sin embargo, la teoría de la lógica populista desarrollada por Laclau y adoptada fielmente por Mouffe tiende a imponer una serie de implicaciones negativas sobre la idea de radicalizar la democracia, tal como fue formulada originalmente por ambos autores en la década de 1980. Los elementos de originalidad son abandonados en favor de un "aplanamiento unidimensional" de lo político. Como resultado, el propio elemento "de izquierda" que, para Mouffe, debería ser el rasgo definitorio del populismo de izquierda, termina quedando gravemente debilitado.
Palabras clave: populismo; populismo de izquierda; democracia; Laclau; Mouffe.

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Introduction

In 1970, Alberto Asor Rosa, in a political science dictionary edited by Antonio Negri, defined populism as "the form taken by the socialist movement in Russia, especially in the decades from the 1860s to the 1880s[1]. After reconstructing the history of *narodnicestvo*, he further concluded his analysis by stating that, in general, populism should be understood as the "nostalgic expression of an imaginary rural past, set in opposition to the march of the times and to the powerful historical development of the working class"[2]. A few years earlier, in *Scrittori e popolo*, he had indeed adopted precisely that view to accuse most of the Italian progressive culture – including Antonio Gramsci and the Italian Communist Party of Palmiro Togliatti – of having been populist[3]. Despite his criticism, however, Asor Rosa appeared to have no doubt that populism, though offering a consolatory and moralistic vision of "the people, was an expression of progressive and left-wing culture.

Today, things are quite different. In the first quarter of the twenty-first century, the term "populism" has

1 A. Asor Rosa, *Populismo*, in A. Negri (ed.), *Scienze politiche 1 (Stato e politica)*, Milano, Feltrinelli-Fischer, 1970, p. 366.

2 *Ibidem*, p. 370.

3 A. Asor Rosa, *Scrittori e popolo. Il populismo nella letteratura italiana contemporanea*, Roma, Savelli, 1965.

become widespread. Since the 1980s, with few exceptions, it has been used to refer to parties and leaders aligned with the right, neither traceable to traditional conservative parties nor to the neo-fascist right, but rather clearly opposed to the left and to "progressive" values[4]. In this context, the publication in 2005 of Ernesto Laclau's *On Populist Reason* introduced a marked element of discontinuity and at times provoked considerable disorientation. With that book, the Argentine theorist sought not only to rehabilitate the concept of populism – generally burdened with a strong pejorative connotation – but also to make it the cornerstone of a theory of political identities, if not, in many respects, of a "general theory" of the political[5]. After the outbreak of the global economic crisis, his theory was also taken up –in line, probably, with the author's own intentions– as a kind of guide for devising a strategy to overcome the traditional left-wing parties. These parties were seen as incapable of engaging with the reality of a complex society and of challenging neoliberal hegemony. Ironically, Laclau's thought enjoyed its greatest fortune immediately after the sudden and untimely death of the Argentine theorist. It was precisely then that new political formations began to take shape in Europe. Most notably, Podemos in Spain, Syriza in Greece and *La France Insoumise* in France represented an unprecedented left-wing variant of populism. These movements more or less explicitly referred to his theory, sometimes even reclaiming a term as discredited as "populism" to oppose the "oligarchy" in power. Riding on the wave of these new parties" success, Chantal Mouffe –who had co-authored *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* with Laclau in the 1980s and had shared a long personal and intellectual partnership with him– made explicit the coordinates of what should constitute a left populism; she aimed to weave together the various strands of Laclau's research and provide an action strategy for the new movements aspiring to "construct" a "new" people[6].

Today, the experiment of left populism, at least in Europe, has largely run its course[7]. At the very least, both the innovative scope of those proposals and, often, their electoral weight have been substantially reduced. Meanwhile, right-wing populism, with increasingly radical positions, has remained the main actor on the political stage. Nevertheless, the question of whether one can meaningfully speak of a left populism remains open and merits careful examination. This is important, if only to clarify whether populism can also embody those emancipatory values to which the left has historically aspired, or whether, in its genetic makeup, it should instead be seen as intrinsically tied to the values of the right-wing tradition (or, more precisely, of the various rights).

As populism is generally conceived in academic debate, it is hardly surprising that it is often regarded as a threat to liberal democracy and therefore considered, for the most part, an expression of right-wing anti-democratic tendencies. Since the conception advanced by Laclau and Mouffe instead presents populism as a political logic, potentially compatible with different sets of values, it is not superfluous to examine more closely the features of what they believe should constitute a left populism. This form of left populism is capable of countering the rise of right-wing populism while also deepening democracy and extending equality among citizens.

Parties associated with left populism have been the subject of much political science and sociological research, focusing, for instance, on their communication strategies, organisational profiles and the social backgrounds and orientations of activists, as well as – particularly in the Latin American context – their governmental performance and respect for the separation of powers. This article, however, seeks to address the matter from a theoretical perspective by examining the political project of left populism as outlined by Mouffe in light of Laclau's legacy.

First, the article reconstructs, following Laclau and especially Mouffe, the defining traits of populism in general and of left populism in particular, highlighting how the distinctiveness of left populism lies in its ability to radicalise democracy (1). Second, it underscores the continuities in Laclau and Mouffe's work, showing the connection between their "discovery" of the political, their post-Marxist re-reading of Gramscian hegemony, the project of radicalising democracy and the eventual embrace of left populism (2). Third, it examines the limitations of this approach, arguing that the theory of populism ends up "flattening" the political –which Laclau and Mouffe had restored to the centre, with valuable insights – onto the single (essentially vertical) dimension of institutional politics (3).

According to this article, the theory of the populist logic developed by Laclau and faithfully adopted by Mouffe tends to impose a number of negative implications on the idea of radicalising democracy. First, the elements of originality are abandoned in favour of a "one-dimensional flattening" of the political. Second, there is a paradoxical risk of returning to the essentialism that the two scholars had once criticised in Marxism. As this critique was the starting point of their post-Marxist trajectory, the very "left" element that should define left populism ends up being severely weakened.

1. In Search of a Left Populism

After spending roughly three decades elaborating an agonistic theory of democracy and redefining Carl

4 See for example P. Graziano, *Neopopulismi. Perché sono destinati a durare*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2018; B. Moffitt, *Populism*, London, Polity Press, 2020; C. Mudde and C. Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short introduction*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017; F. Tarragoni, *L´esprit democratique du populisme*, Paris, La Découverte, 2019; J.L. Villacañas, *Populismo*, Madrid, La Huerta Granda, 2015.

5 See S. Mazzolini, *Laclau, lo stratega. Populismo, egemonia, emancipazione*, Milano, Mimesis, 2024.

6 See Í. Errejón and C. Mouffe, *Construir el pueblo. Hegemonía y radicalización de la democracia*, Barcelona, Icaria, 2015; C. Mouffe, "La democrazia e il conflitto", *Micromega* 7, 2015, pp. 70-82; C. Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, London, Verso, 2018; C. Mouffe, *Toward a Green Democratic Revolution. Left Populism and the Power of Affects*, London, Verso, 2022.

7 See A. Borriello and A. Jäger, *The Populist Moment. The Left After the Great Recession*, London, Verso, 2023.

Schmitt's image of the political[8], Chantal Mouffe has, over the past decade, focused primarily on advancing a proposal for a left populism. Following the premature death of Ernesto Laclau in 2014, Mouffe resumed and further developed the line of enquiry initiated by the Argentine theorist[9]. This engagement was not purely theoretical; the Belgian scholar intervened directly in political debate, arguing in her writings for the possibility (indeed, the necessity) of a left populism and publicly supporting those political experiments that appeared particularly close to the project and practice of populism in Laclau's sense.

In her more "militant" writings, Mouffe aims to clarify the meaning of left populism and to demonstrate that it constitutes a strategy that the left must adopt in order to counter post-democracy and respond to the challenge posed by right-wing populism. Within this framework, she first specifies how populism should be conceived, explicitly drawing on Laclau's theory. She then indicates what distinguishes left populism from right populism, reworking some of her reflections on agonistic democracy and recalling the results achieved in the 1980s in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. It is therefore necessary to begin by examining these aspects of her conception, breaking them down into their key components. Three points particularly warrant exploration: Mouffe's understanding of populism, her account of the *populist moment* and the elements that make populism a *left* populism.

First, Mouffe's conception of populism is extremely faithful to Laclau's formulation. For her too, in fact, populism is understood as "a discursive strategy of constructing a political frontier dividing society into two camps and calling for the mobilization of «the underdog» against «those in power»"[10]. It is therefore neither an ideology nor a political regime, but rather "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"[11]. Moreover, Mouffe stresses that the political identity –the "we" constructed by the populist logic– must not be grasped in essentialist terms, as something fixed over time: identities are better conceived as *identifications* in which discursive and affective dimensions are constantly intertwined. More precisely, understood "as crystallizations of affects, these identifications are crucial for politics because they provide the motor of political action"[12]. Returning to this point in *Towards a Green Democratic Revolution*, Mouffe further emphasises the importance of affects, generally neglected by the rationalism of the left. For example, she writes, "in the current conjuncture, characterized by an increasing disaffection with democracy and marked by a worrying level of abstention, highlighting the partisan nature of politics and the centrality of affects is essential"[13]. In other words, for a left-populist party to succeed, it "needs to meet affects and empower people instead of treating them as passive recipients of policies designed by experts who know best"[14].

Although briefly summarised here, the defining elements identified by Mouffe are the same as those set out by Laclau in *On Populist Reason*. To begin with, Mouffe straightforwardly reprises the outlook underpinning Laclau's operation (and, earlier still, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*). First, this means that the terrain where objectivity takes shape is always defined by discourse – that is, by "any complex of elements in which relations play the constitutive role"[15]. Second, a hegemonic identity is "something of the order of an empty signifier, its own particularity embodying an unachievable fullness": "it should be clear that the category of totality cannot be eradicated but that, as a failed totality, it is a horizon and not a ground"[16]. Finally, metaphors and rhetorical devices are part of the way the 'social" is constituted. In this sense, the rhetorical device of *catachresis* –a distortion of meaning that answers "the need to express something that the literal term would simply not transmit"– plays a fundamental role. Hegemonic totalisation –and thus the construction of a "people"– can, in fact, be conceived of as a *catachrestic* operation: the naming of something that is "essentially unnameable". The "people" produced by populism therefore do not have "the nature of an ideological expression" but rather appear as "a real relationship between social agents" and as "a way of constituting the unity of the group"[17].

In his most famous work, the Argentine theorist first calls a *popular demand* as "a plurality of demands which, through their equivalential articulation, constitute a broader social subjectivity"[18]. Laclau also illustrates the specificity of the populist articulatory practice by which unification is achieved starting from smaller units. This process begins with a series of isolated demands that can initiate articulation. Formulating demands constitutes the first step in a possible articulatory practice. However, for Laclau, the possible linkage –within an "equivalential chain"– of unmet demands is above all decisive. Therefore, an isolated demand is, for Laclau, a "democratic demand", whereas a popular demand coincides with a plurality of demands that, through equivalential articulation, constitute a broader social subjectivity. Thus, the unmet demands that combine in a chain of equivalences form the basic units of the "people". For Laclau, the populist configuration requires three elements: "the formation of an internal antagonistic frontier separating the "people" from power"; "an equivalential articulation of demands making the

8 See C. Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, London, Verso, 1991; C. Mouffe, *On the Political*, London, Routledge, 2005; C. Mouffe, *Agonistics. Thinking the World Politically*, London, Verso, 2013.

9 See S. Mazzolini, "Post-marxismo, Agonismo, Democrazia-radicale e populismo in Chantal Mouffe. Qual è il nesso?", in C. Mouffe, *Il paradosso democratico. Pluralismo agonistico e democrazia radicale*, Milano, Mimesis, 2024, pp. 9-31.

10 C. Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, *op. cit*., p. 10.

11 *Ibidem*.

12 *Ibidem*, p. 74.

13 C. Mouffe, *Toward a Green Democratic Revolution*, *op. cit*., p. 29.

14 *Ibidem*, p. 49.

15 E. Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, London, Verso, 2005, p. 68.

16 *Ibidem*, p. 71

17 *Ibidem*, p. 73.

18 *Ibidem*, p. 74.

emergence of the "people" from power"; and "the unification of these various demands –whose equivalence, up to that point, had not gone beyond a feeling of solidarity– into a stable system of signification"[19]. In short, it entails "the construction of a popular identity which is something qualitatively more than the simple summation of the equivalential links"[20]. A further step consists of a "radical investment", which belongs to "the order of *affect*"[21]. In fact, affect plays a decisive role in transforming a specific demand into a popular one: "It has to become a nodal point of sublimation; it has to acquire a "breast value"" because it is only then that "the "name" becomes detached from the "concept", the signifier from the signified"[22].

Second, Mouffe sets out her image of the *populist moment*, which is not merely a period in which populist parties succeed, but rather a phase in which the hegemonic formation undergoes a crisis and the conditions for a hegemonic shift therefore arise. In essence, one can speak of a populist moment "when, under the pressure of political or socio-economic transformations, the dominant hegemony is being destabilized by the multiplication of unsatisfied demands"[23]. In such phases, "the historical bloc that provides the social basis of a hegemonic formation is being disarticulated and the possibility arises of constructing a new subject of collective action – the people – capable of reconfiguring a social order experienced as unjust"[24]. More specifically, Mouffe holds that a populist moment opened after the outbreak of the global economic crisis in 2007 and that the 2010s were marked by the crisis of neoliberalism; however, after the Covid-19 interlude, the space for the emergence of populist proposals has partially narrowed[25]. Drawing on the notion of hegemony employed throughout her previous writings, Mouffe points to Margaret Thatcher's authoritarian populism as an emblematic case of constructing a new hegemony. Between the late 1970s and the early 1980s, the British Conservatives, led by Thatcher, were able to capitalise on the erosion of social democratic hegemony to build a new historical bloc that would become the basis of subsequent neoliberal hegemony. According to Mouffe, the left should therefore "learn from Thatcherism", albeit to steer a transition towards a very different settlement namely, "a more democratic hegemonic formation"[26]. This requires, however –just as in the years of the Thatcherite "revolution"– identifying a common adversary capable of fostering the unification of diverse lines of resistance: "To learn from Thatcherism means that in the current conjuncture, the decisive move is to establish a political frontier that breaks with the post-political consensus between centre-right and centre-left" because "without defining an adversary, no hegemonic offensive can be launched"[27].

Finally, Mouffe seeks to specify what differentiates left populism from right populism beyond their shared reliance on the same political logic. Here, the first element is a reference to equality: a populist movement should federate "all the democratic struggles against post-democracy" and "try to provide a different vocabulary in order to orientate those demands", typically addressed to right-wing parties, "towards more egalitarian objectives"[28]. The first difference from right-wing populism, therefore, concerns the conception of the people. While right populism aims to preserve the traditional identity of the people, left populism aims to create a more inclusive people. As Mouffe writes,

> Right-wing populism claims that it will bring back popular sovereignty and restore democracy, but this sovereignty is understood as "national sovereignty" and reserved for those deemed to be true "nationals". Right-wing populists do not address the demand for equality and they construct a "people" that excludes numerous categories, usually immigrants, seen as a threat to the identity and the prosperity of the nation. [...] Left populism, on the contrary, wants to recover democracy in order to deepen and extend it. A left-populist strategy aims at federating democratic demands into a collective will to construct a "we", a "people", confronting a common adversary: the oligarchy. This requires establishing a chain of equivalence among the demands of workers, immigrants and the precarious middle class, as well as other democratic demands; such a chain is the creation of a new hegemony that will allow for the radicalization of democracy[29].

When she underscores that right-wing populism is characterised by an exclusionary notion of the people, Mouffe does not diverge much from the prevailing academic debate on populism. Several scholars have distinguished between *exclusive* and *inclusive* populisms with reference to how *the people* is conceived: exclusive populisms (as in most right-wing variants, from the *Front National* to the *Lega Nord*) imagine the people as "closed", as an *ethnos*; inclusive populisms (such as Podemos and *La France Insoumise*, principally) imagine it as "open" one[30]. This criterion – central to the ideational approach –does not seem very far from Mouffe's own. To clarify what characterises right populism, Mouffe, too– although she does not regard populism as an ideology – appeals to how the people is conceived, namely, its greater or lesser tendency to exclude immigrants and minority groups. It is no accident, however, that when she defines the properties of *left populism*, Mouffe does not oppose inclusiveness to exclusiveness; rather, she moves in another direction, referring above all to the *radicalisation of democracy*.

One of Mouffe's frequently reiterated convictions is that every political identity –and therefore every *demos*– necessarily rests on an exclusion. Taking

19 *Ibidem*.

20 *Ibidem*, p. 77.

21 *Ibidem*, p. 110.

22 *Ibidem*, p. 120.

23 C. Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, *op. cit*., p. 10.

24 *Ibidem.*

25 C. Mouffe, *Towards a Green Democratic Revolution*, *op. cit.*

26 C. Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, *op. cit*., p. 36.

27 *Ibidem*.

28 *Ibidem*, p. 22.

29 *Ibidem*, pp. 23-24.

30 See P. Graziano, *Neopopulismi*, *op. cit.*; B. Moffitt, *Populism*, *op. cit*.; C. Mudde and C. Rovira Kaltwasser, *op. cit.*

over this view from Carl Schmitt, she holds that the political "has to do with the formation of a "we" as opposed to a "they"" and that every consensus is "based on an act of exclusion", while a fully inclusive, purely "rational" consensus is impossible[31]. Of course, Mouffe does not endorse Schmitt's proposal wholesale. In particular, she rejects both the claim that democracy and liberalism are structurally incompatible and the thesis that democracy is possible only where the people is "homogeneous". At the same time, however, she accepts Schmitt's critique of liberalism as blind to the necessity of the unity of the *demos* and, consequently, to the exclusion of those who do not belong to it. She writes, "By stressing that the identity of a democratic political community hinges on the possibility of drawing a frontier between "us" and "them", Schmitt highlights the fact that democracy always entails relations of inclusion–exclusion"[32]. "The logic of democracy", in other words, "does indeed imply a moment of closure which is required by the very process of constituting the "people"", and this aspect "cannot be avoided, even in a liberal-democratic model; it can only be negotiated differently"[33]. If theorists of cosmopolitan democracy can imagine a global, borderless people, Mouffe cannot move in that direction. For precisely this reason, she cannot simply identify left populism with an inclusive conception of the people; she must invoke a different element. Rather than characterising left populism through its inclusive view of the people, Mouffe foregrounds an aspect that is, in fact, crucial to her reflection: the radicalisation of democracy. For the Belgian scholar, radicalising democracy does not mean constructing an alternative to representative, institutional democracy but supplementing and strengthening existing institutions by democratising social spaces. This is achieved by leveraging the principle of equality to counter the various forms of subordination present in contemporary society. In this sense, she writes,

> The challenge for a left-populist strategy consists in reasserting the importance of the 'social question", taking account of the increasing fragmentation and diversity of "workers", but also of the specificity of the various democratic demands. This requires the construction of "a people" around a project which addresses the diverse forms of subordination around issues concerning exploitation, domination or discrimination. A special emphasis must also be given to a question that has gained particular relevance in the last thirty years and which is of a special urgency today: the future of the planet. It is impossible to envisage a project of radicalization of democracy in which the "ecological question" is not at the centre of the agenda. It is therefore essential to combine this with the social question[34].

By identifying the radicalisation of democracy as the element that truly distinguishes left populism, Mouffe manages to avoid some of the thorny problems tied to defining *the left*. As with the debate on populism, the discussion over the meaning of "left" and "right" has not yielded unanimous agreement; scholars have not settled on a single set of values that uniquely characterise either camp. These are, after all, spatial categories that emerged with the French Revolution and have taken on different meanings over time. In other words, over the past two centuries, there have been many different lefts, not unified by a common ideological or value-based inheritance – and the same is true of the right[35]. To identify the left with specific historical objectives (e.g. extending the franchise, reducing working hours, securing women's suffrage, recognising LGBTQ+ rights and extending welfare protections to foreign workers) would risk fixing a definition upon the basis of a particular conjuncture, ignoring the variety of lefts that have appeared across more than two centuries. By positing the radicalisation of democracy as the aim that, in general, qualifies the left –and, more specifically, left populism– Mouffe avoids this risk.

Rather than directing actors towards fixed ends, the principle of equality – intimately connected to democracy and combined with a specific view of liberty – functions as a lever for challenging subordination, which can assume different contours and arise on different terrains at different times. She notes, recalling Claude Lefort's reflections on the French Revolution, that "It is thanks to the democratic discourse, which provides the main political vocabulary in Western societies, that relations of subordination can be put into question"[36]. Hence, Mouffe believes that "many resistances against the post-democratic condition are being expressed in the name of equality and popular sovereignty"[37].

Mouffe deploys the idea of radicalising democracy to differentiate left populism from other variants of the populist logic. This is not a mere suggestion but a crucial component of her proposal. It resumes and develops the project at the centre of her work in the 1980s and 1990s. For this reason, her proposal can be seen as an attempt to bring together, within an overall framework, the key points of the reflection she carried out with Laclau beginning in the 1980s. Although there are certainly stylistic and methodological differences between Mouffe's interventions in left populism and Laclau's theoretical essays, it is not here that the critical issues in their proposal lie. Despite the apparent coherence of Laclau and Mouffe's research trajectory, one can nonetheless discern a rather sharp shift – if not an actual caesura. The turn to a theory of populism and the political proposal of a left populism appear to mark a departure from the premises of their 1980s discourse. As a result, the very elements of originality implied by the project of radicalising democracy are neutralised. Beneath an appearance of coherence, the proposal of left populism – which I will try to show in the pages that follow – thus sets in motion a tendency towards a *monodimensional* narrowing of the project of radicalising democracy. Along with this,

31 C. Mouffe, *On the Political*, *op. cit*., pp. 12–13.

32 C. Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, *op. cit*., p. 42.

33 *Ibidem*, p. 43.

34 C. Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, *op. cit*., pp. 60–61.

35 See for example N. Bobbio, *Destra e sinistra. Ragioni e significati di una distinzione politica*, Roma, Donzelli, 1994; C. Galli, *Perché ancora destra e sinistra*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2010; M. Revelli, *Sinistra Destra. L'identità smarrita*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2015.

36 C. Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, *op. cit*., p. 42.

37 *Ibidem*, p. 40.

there is a paradoxical re-emergence of essentialism. This is the very outlook which Laclau and Mouffe had polemically attributed to the Marxist tradition and from whose critique their exploration of the political began.

2. The Political and Radical Democracy

The very first step in Laclau's discovery of *the political* dates to the period of his gradual break with Althusserian structuralism; in particular, it relates to an article on the debate between Nicos Poulantzas and Ralph Miliband about the autonomy of the state from capital[38]. Although in those years, the role of the state stood at the centre of an intense discussion among Marxist scholars – one that took many different forms – the theoretical confrontation between Poulantzas and Miliband was probably the best-known episode of that dispute. At its core was the question of the role of the state in mature capitalism and whether the state apparatus could be used to achieve the "transition" to socialism, or, at any rate, beyond capitalism. Faced with this problem, Miliband focused mainly on the class background of the senior bureaucracy and the political elite, effectively reducing the problem of state autonomy to the social origins of those who govern. By contrast, Poulantzas's analysis was much more articulated and showed how the state could enjoy relative autonomy. Addressing that discussion, however, Laclau took a different path.

Examining Poulantzas's and Miliband's positions, the Argentine theorist did not hide his preference for the former, but he dwelled on the notion of the state's "relative autonomy" advanced by the Greek scholar. Laclau drew particular attention to Poulantzas's view of the "mode of production" and, more generally, to that of the entire Althusserian school. In his critique, Althusserians, in conceptualising modes of production, tended to overlook the fact that the distinction between the "economic" and the "extra-economic" made little sense in the feudal mode of production. This was only the premise for a more radical revision that would assign to the political a constitutive function in the social order. Whereas for Althusser, Balibar and Poulantzas the political was one of the "regions" identifiable within a mode of production, for Laclau – beginning with his post-Marxist phase – it would become the element capable of structuring society. As Laclau himself notes, recalling that passage in his intellectual trajectory, "If the articulation between the social [...] and the political was itself going to be political, the classical triad of levels – economic, political, ideological – had to be drastically rethought"[39]. More generally, for him, it was a matter of rethinking the political – conceived by Althusserian Marxism as "a *level* of the social formation" – in relation to hegemony, as "the process of instituting the social"[40]. The political thus becomes the element capable of "instituting" society itself in all its dimensions[41].

The critique directed at Poulantzas and Althusser was, in fact, the first step in an attack that, some years later in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, would be extended to the entire Marxist tradition. The principal limitation Laclau and Mouffe attributed to Marxism was its "essentialism", namely, the belief that class characteristics are defined by the economic structure of society and that their interests therefore depend on the position they occupy within that economic structure. According to Laclau and Mouffe, this conception rests on three distinct assumptions: first, the economic "laws of motion must be strictly endogenous and exclude all indeterminacy resulting from political or other external interventions"; second, "the unity and homogeneity of the social agents, constituted at the economic level, must result from the very laws of motion of this level"; and third, "the position of these agents in the relations of production must endow them with "historical interests", so that the presence of such agents at other social levels – through mechanisms of "representation" or "articulation" – must ultimately be explained on the basis of economic interests"[42]. If such assumptions are maintained – or at least not fully questioned – no discourse on hegemony can reach the results that Laclau and Mouffe seek: the "real" identity of subjects cannot be understood as the effect of political overdetermination or as the result of a *political* intervention of articulation, but it always points back to the structural level. In short, an economistic framework yields an essentialist conception of social identities and conflict.

The critique of economism in the Marxist tradition is the premise for their attack on essentialism. More importantly, it is the starting point for the further development of their theory which, renouncing any "material" foundation, comes to regard social identities fundamentally as the outcome of social interaction and political conflict. First, since identities are not determined by any "objective" level, they must be conceived not as crystallised, immutable essences but as mutable products. "Unfixity", they observe, "has become the condition of every social identity"[43]. Since a class cannot have a task necessarily determined by the economic structure, "its identity is given to it solely by its articulation within a hegemonic formation" and is therefore "purely relational"[44]. The possibility of a "final suture" – at some point in the future – is excluded.

Second, since any objective determination has fallen away, the symbolic dimension can be fully recognised; that is, hegemony can be grasped as the outcome of an exclusively political articulation. This recognition has several consequences. On the one hand, it implies that the socialist "collective will" is not *necessarily* the product of working-class

38 E. Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory. Capitalism – Fascism – Populism*, London, Verso, 1979.

39 E. Laclau, *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society*, London, Verso, 2014, p. 6.

40 *Ibidem*, p. 7.

41 See also E. Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, London, Verso, 1990.

42 E. Laclau and C. Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, London, Verso, 2000 (Second Edition), p. 76.

43 *Ibidem*, p. 85.

44 *Ibidem*, p. 86.

hegemony but depends on the forms of articulation that take shape within a given hegemonic context. On the other, it entails that 'socialist political practice" is a possible result of a "collective will" constructed from different points; its "meaning", far from being predetermined, reflects the outcomes of hegemonic articulation in relation to particular struggles and claims.

Consistent with their critique of essentialism, when Laclau and Mouffe speak of "antagonisms", they do not think antagonistic lines are determined by structural elements. Nor do they conceive antagonism as the reflection of a contradictory relation between two poles. Within their discourse, antagonism is the effect of a discursive practice that succeeds in dividing social space into two opposing camps. One of these camps is qualified – through the equivalence of its differential moments – as a negative identity. As they write, in this sense, "*certain discursive forms, through equivalence, annul all positivity of the object and give real existence to negativity as such*"[45]. In other words, antagonism implies that an existing system of differences is overturned by the constitution of an identity that can only remain negative – that is, defined in antagonistic terms with respect to the existing system. Moreover, the idea of antagonism certainly does not imply that there exists only one antagonistic division within a society; nor does it mean that antagonism must emerge at a specific point in society because "any position in a system of differences, insofar as it is negated, can become the locus of an antagonism"[46]. If antagonisms are neither structurally determined nor presuppose an actually contradictory relation, hegemonic practice takes shape both as the construction of chains of equivalence among differential positions and as the (partial) fixation of a frontier. In light of Laclau and Mouffe's redefinition, Gramsci's *historical bloc* can thus be understood as a specific hegemonic discursive formation, while the "war of position" fixes the idea of a frontier capable of dividing the social into two opposing camps. But, of course, Laclau and Mouffe – rejecting any trace of Gramscian essentialism – must also refuse the idea that a "political space" with predefined contours exists as a *necessary* terrain on which antagonism takes shape. For this reason, they distinguish between two different configurations of political space, depending on whether antagonisms are multiple or whether a confrontation emerges between two principal camps:

We will thus retain from the Gramscian view the logic of articulation and the political centrality of frontier effects, but we will eliminate the assumption of a single political space as the *necessary* framework for those phenomena to arise. We will therefore speak of *democratic* struggles where these imply a plurality of political spaces, and of *popular* struggles where certain discourses *tendencially* construct the division of a single political space into two opposed fields. But it is clear that the fundamental concept is that of "democratic struggle", and that popular struggles are merely specific conjunctures resulting from the multiplication of the equivalence effects among democratic struggles[47].

The project of radical democracy emerged within this critique of Marxist essentialism. The emphasis on the democratic element is no accident in their discourse; however, for Laclau and Mouffe, *democracy* does not coincide only with the representative–electoral system. More importantly, it aligns with what Claude Lefort called the "Democratic Revolution", which inaugurates – at the onset of the French Revolution – a new kind of institution of the social. In essence, the "democratic revolution" coincides with the affirmation of a new social imaginary, according to which "the logic of equivalence was transformed into the fundamental instrument of the production of the social"[48].

Workers" struggles themselves fall within the logic of the democratic revolution, in that they extend the denunciation of inequality from the political terrain to the economic one. However, the socialist tradition has often obscured this link. The new social movements, with their egalitarian and anti-hierarchical imaginary, instead retrieve the core of democratic discourse; this very element allows one to identify the terrain that "makes possible a new extension of egalitarian equivalences, and thereby the expansion of the democratic revolution in new directions"[49]. The new movements revitalise the nineteenth-century democratic imaginary because they brandish the banner of equality to challenge relations of subordination that are largely recent and are products of postwar capitalism's transformation. The crucial point, however, is that the democratic imaginary allows relations of subordination to be transformed into relations of oppression so that a series of antagonisms take shape. Unlike certain neo-Marxist theorists, however, Laclau and Mouffe hold that one must recognise the pluralism of these antagonisms arising from different subjective positions. They argue that it is precisely this path that makes it truly possible to conceive of a "radical and plural democracy".

In Laclau and Mouffe's account, the idea that new antagonisms might not spontaneously take a progressive direction was not merely a theoretical hypothesis. In the midst of Thatcherism, the neoliberal turn and the attempt to "redefine" the meaning of democracy were understood precisely as attempts to domesticate and neutralise the potential of the democratic revolution[50]. By contrast, the "hegemonic left alternative", towards which the two theorists" entire effort was oriented, can result

45 *Ibidem*, pp. 128–129, italics in the original text.

46 *Ibidem*, p. 131.

47 *Ibidem*, p. 137.

48 *Ibidem*, p. 155.

49 *Ibidem*, p. 158

50 Laclau and Mouffe wrote about neoliberal revolution: "The conservative reaction thus has a clearly hegemonic character. It seeks a profound transformation of the terms of political discourse and the creation of a new "definition of reality", which under the cover of the defence of individual liberty would legitimize in equalities and restore the hierarchical relations which the struggles of previous decades had destroyed. What is at stake here is in fact the creation of a new historic bloc" (*ibidem*, p. 176). See also C. Mouffe, "Il Thatcherismo: un populismo conservatore", *Quaderni piacentini* n.s. 13, 1984, pp. 169-183.

only "from a complex process of convergence and political construction, to which none of the hegemonic articulations constructed in any area of social reality can be of indifference"[51]. The crucial aspect of the project was the abandonment of the idea that a "central" conflictual subject exists and that the surfaces of conflict are defined by society's "objective" structure:

just as there are no surfaces which are privileged *a priori* for the emergence of antagonisms, no are there discursive regions which the programme of a radical democracy should exclude *a priori* as possible spheres of struggle. Juridical institutions, the educational system, labour relations, [and] the discourses of resistance of marginal populations construct original and irreducible forms of social protest, and thereby contribute to the entire discursive complexity and richness on which the programme of a radical democracy should be founded[52].

In other words, the political project of radical democracy cannot presuppose the existence of conflictual terrains "determined" by the economic structure; rather, it must be configured as the continual generation of new conflictual planes in which relations of subordination can become relations of oppression as antagonisms develop. Since a complete 'suturing" of society remains an unreachable goal, the multiplication of antagonisms across society must likewise be regarded as a potentially unending process. It cannot be recomposed either within a unitary synthesis or within a hierarchy of claims distinguishing between "central" and "peripheral" positions.

3. The Flattening of the Political

Paradoxically, this is precisely the aspect that the *flattening* of the political, triggered by Laclau and Mouffe's populist turn, seems to call into question and, in doing so, undermines the very element that, in their view, defines left populism. A first critical hinge concerns the very nature of the surface on which conflict unfolds. In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Laclau and Mouffe affirmed that no terrain is predetermined, yet in the reconstruction of the genesis of political identities proposed in *On Populist Reason*, the terrain appears pre-given. Although Laclau often states that the terrain is shaped by conflict itself, the logical premises of his argument tend to move in a different direction. In other words, Laclau always seems to assume the existence of an instance capable of responding to social demands; such existence does not depend on political conflict, even if political conflict may affect how that instance responds to different social demands.

When, for example, Laclau sets out the logical sequence leading to the genesis of a political identity, the starting point lies in the emergence of demands that remain unmet. This is crucial for grasping the logic of populism, since Laclau believes that the difference between social logics and strictly political logics is to be found precisely here. In social logics, in fact, there is always "a rarefied system of statements – that is to say, a system of rules drawing a horizon within which some objects are representable and others excluded"[53], whereas political logics fix that system of rules. In short, "While social logics consist in rule-following, political logics are related to the institution of the social", an institution which "proceeds out of social demands and is, in that sense, inherent to any process of social change"[54]. As noted, for the process of change to proceed, demands must go unanswered, and an equivalential moment capable of bringing together the partiality of particular demands must be defined. What is most significant for reconstructing the logical structure of Laclau's model, however, is not so much that demands go unmet as they are *formulated*. The fact that particular demands are made presupposes minimally structured social identities that prompt subjects to formulate claims. Above all, it implies the existence of a subject to whom such demands can be addressed and who can provide or withhold an answer. In essence, the initial phase in Laclau's genetic schema of political identities presupposes that, at the very moment initial demands are formulated (by subjects still at a germinal stage of structuration), a playing field already exists[55]. This field not only allows which claims are advanced but also includes a set of well-defined roles that establish who asks and who answers (or, better, who is called upon to answer).

Although Laclau often asserts that the terrain is shaped by conflict, the logical premises of his theory of populism and the historical examples he invokes point in another direction. He seems to take for granted an instance capable of answering social demands – an instance whose existence does not depend on political conflict, even if conflict may shape its responses. The logical scheme on which Laclau builds his hypothesis about the genesis of political identities essentially envisages that, starting from individual demands, one arrives at a tendentially universal aggregation which affects the balance between two antagonistic equivalential chains.

However abstractly formulated, such a causal connection can function only if certain indispensable conditions are obtained. First, one must assume a surface, a terrain, on which differences can confront one another. Second, one must presuppose that these differences can be 'summed" with others or structured within an equivalential chain. Third, one must hold that equivalential chains can clash with one another on a common playing field and that, acting on that terrain, they are at least potentially capable of reversing or modifying existing power relations. Finally, one must assume that the results of the conflict that modifies power relations on a given terrain "cascade" into everyday social relations, altering power relations there as well.

Of course, such conditions may appear in some cases, but it is rather unlikely that they do so routinely in contemporary societies. In general, the

51 E. Laclau and C. Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, *op. cit*., p. 174.

52 *Ibidem*, p. 192.

53 E. Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, *op. cit*., p. 117.

54 *Ibidem*, p. 117.

55 See T. Zicman de Barros, "Desire and Collective Identities: Decomposing Ernesto Laclau's notion of demand", *Constellations* 28(4), 2021, pp. 511-521

idea of a single plane on which different differences can face off is questionable, since differences are not at all standardizable on a smooth, "horizontal" space. This is not only because differences are potentially infinite (depending on political processes of subjectivation), but also because each potential difference is constituted within a power relation that may be entirely autonomous from other power relations and may thus cut across them. To be sure, every power relation can be "politicised". It is also possible to imagine an empty signifier capable of fixing dispersed elements into an equivalential chain where they find a place. One can hypothesise that all these components manage to construct a people large and strong enough to shift the balance with respect to the hegemonic chain. However, it is fairly clear that such a conflict always takes place on the terrain of representations and, as such, cannot have a *necessary* effect on all the different power relations. The only way to envision such a solution is to posit the existence of a terrain on which, at one and the same time, all demands can, in fact, be aggregated and from which one can act upon all power relations. Implicitly, Laclau seems to rely on just such an image; he appears to hypothesise that antagonisms can converge on a terrain with predetermined dimensions in which the stake is, above all, the conquest of the nation-state. In this way, however, the political – which Laclau and Mouffe in the 1980s located at the origin of a multiplicity of antagonisms spread across different surfaces – ends up being *flattened* onto a single dimension: the struggle to conquer institutional representation[56].

This one-dimensional flattening entails a series of distortions relative to the operation carried out by Laclau and Mouffe in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. First, the terrain on which political conflict unfolds appears predetermined and thus exists prior to the formation of political identities and the aggregation of equivalential chains, simply because it coincides with the terrain of the state's representative institutions. Second, the flattening also affects power relations themselves, since the specificity of the different levels at which relations of subordination should be contested is simply forgotten in view of constructing the equivalential chain on the institutional terrain. Third, the notion of hegemony is impoverished. It no longer appears as an action capable of shaping the social order, but only as a communicative operation able to aggregate social sectors by opposing those who occupy the summits of state institutions. Moreover, the flattening touches the very concept of the political because – relative to the multiplicity of levels at which the formation of collective identities was originally envisaged – it paradoxically comes to coincide with the state (or, at any rate, with the attempt to seize the levers of state power). Finally, in addition to resting on an overestimation of the state's capacity to affect power relations in society, the path taken by Laclau and Mouffe inevitably forces political conflict within the perimeter of the nation-state (with rather paradoxical effects in a world shaped by global commercial, financial and communicative flows)[57].

Although Laclau and Mouffe do not acknowledge these limits, many indications suggest that, for Laclau, the space in which conflict is represented coincides with national space – the arena in which actors compete to conquer the state. First, all the examples he cites in *On Populist Reason* – from the struggle against Russian Tsarism to Peronism, from Mao's Long March to Togliatti's Italian Communist Party – concern movements whose objective is to conquer the state, whether by democratic or revolutionary means, and which succeed in aggregating highly heterogeneous social demands to that end. This is not to say the state is conceived purely instrumentally, but it means that the state – or at least an institutional instance – is removed entirely from political contention; it becomes a playing field where different contenders face off, sometimes opposing different options, yet ultimately without questioning the basic rules constituting the terrain of the contest itself. Second, the discussion of heterogeneous demands makes sense only if one presupposes the existence of a space that coincides with the operational space of the nation-state. This is not because it is impossible to imagine a force that is truly heterogeneous in relation to a given conflict. Rather, strictly speaking, any demand can be heterogeneous with respect to something. The only way to consider it homogeneous is to privilege one conflictual space over others. Conversely, acknowledging the plurality of spaces in which demands can confront one another renders any discourse about heterogeneity irrelevant. However, the element of heterogeneity cannot be set aside by Laclau and Mouffe because in their view, a position becomes salient only when it turns into a demand – that is, only when it is addressed to someone, namely, to the subject occupying the hegemonic role in society. The consequence is a flattening of the complexity of power relations onto the smooth space of a theatre of political representation.

For example, one might posit an equivalential chain aggregating workers" claims, those of discriminated ethnic minorities, and feminist demands – or, as in *Lotta Continua's* slogan in 1970s Italy, the claims of "workers, students, Sardinian shepherds and neighborhood people". In Laclau's account, it is unclear whether the conditions for the success of such an aggregation depend solely on the investment in an empty signifier that is efficacious enough to strike the right balance between cohesion and amplitude in the chain. Beyond this, however, Laclau seems to assume that the clash between such a chain and the hegemonic one takes place on the representational terrain. He also assumes that communicative and persuasive effectiveness will directly translate into effects on the

56 See: V. Gago and S. Mezzadra, "In the wake of the plebeian revolt: Social movements, "progressive" governments, and the politics of autonomy in Latin America", *Anthropological Theory* 17(4), 2017, pp. 474-496; S. Visentin, "Populismo como contrapoder. El final de la democracia liberal y la política de los gobernados", in A.D. Fernández Peychaux and D. Scalzo (eds.), *Pueblos, derechos y estados. Ensayos.entre Europa y América Latina,* Buenos Aires, Edunpaz, 2018, pp. 173-194.

57 On the relationship between populism and institutions, see F. Ramírez Gallegos and S. Stoessel, "El incómodo lugar de las instituciones en la ""populismología"" latinoamericana", *Estudios Políticos* 52, 2018, pp. 106-127.

material structuration of social relations. However, it is evident that once the balance has shifted (or even once the new chain is sketched), it takes considerable imagination to suppose automatic consequences for power relations. If Gramsci's metaphor of the "war of position" suggests a long-term conflict, it nevertheless remains difficult to think of a transformation acting simultaneously upon such different types of relations[58]. This is especially true, as neither Laclau nor Mouffe, while defining the contours of populism, assigns a significant role to the party or political organisation – those very actors who, in Gramsci's view, should operate within civil society prior to conquering the state. Both also criticise the excess of "horizontalism" in twenty-first-century protest movements (Occupy Wall Street, the piqueteros, the *indignados*, etc.), insisting on the importance of the "vertical dimension of "hegemony"", but here hegemony tends to coincide only with "a radical transformation of the state"[59].

A further paradoxical effect of the flattening of the political is a kind of return to forms of economism not far removed from those that Laclau and Mouffe reproached in orthodox Marxism. Although neither Laclau nor Mouffe dealt specifically with the 2008 global economic crisis and its consequences, when they refer to the crisis of neoliberalism, they tend to depict it as the outcome of "exogenous" factors external to political conflicts. This strategy notably differs from what one would expect from the authors of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. When Mouffe reconstructs the genesis of Margaret Thatcher's "neoliberal revolution", she underlines how the aggregation of a historical bloc around the proposal of authoritarian populism played a decisive role in overturning hegemony. The crisis of neoliberalism, however, appears entirely detached from conflicts, as if it were an "external trigger" of the populist moment. In this way, Mouffe seems to replicate the basic limit of economism attributed to orthodox Marxism[60]. Since the space of the political has been flattened onto the single dimension of institutional conflict, and since the micro-conflicts dispersed across the networks of global society have thus been excluded from view, it is inevitable that the economic crisis should appear as the result of more or less deterministic laws. These laws are substantially independent of the conflicts and resistances that can develop in workplaces, in global production chains and in value chains.

The one-dimensional flattening of the political also revives the very question debated by Miliband and Poulantzas in the 1970s – one to which Laclau had provided an answer that, in many respects, took an alternative direction. Flattening the political onto the dimension of institutions brings back the question of the state's effective autonomy from capitalist accumulation. This is not a purely theoretical question; it has crucial practical implications for the strategy of left populism formulated by Laclau and Mouffe. The populist logic, as analytically described by Laclau and rendered in more militant terms by Mouffe, can indeed be a winning card in the competition for institutional power, as many cases – particularly on the right but also on the left – have shown. However, since the strategy of left populism presupposes, more or less explicitly, that the lever of state institutions can be used to affect existing inequalities in society, its success depends on a key prerequisite: the autonomy of the state from capital (and not only from the political class and administrative personnel). The question that Miliband and Poulantzas confronted – and which Laclau largely sidestepped – remains unresolved. Only by answering this question can we truly assess the scope of effectiveness of the left populism described by Mouffe.

Conclusions

In this article, I have considered the political proposal of a left populism outlined by Chantal Mouffe in the footsteps of Ernesto Laclau, together with the reflection on radical democracy that the two authors developed in the 1980s. I first focused on the profile that, according to Mouffe, left populism should assume, and showed how the Belgian scholar locates the "left" element of left populism in the ambition to radicalise democracy. This point – which reprises one of the principal theoretical motifs of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* – nonetheless conflicts subtly with the image of populism proposed by the two scholars over the past two decades. In the 1980s, Laclau and Mouffe assigned centrality to the political, showing that political identities are not "determined" by society's "objective" structure and that the democratic principle of equality makes it possible to generate a multiplicity of antagonisms by instituting ever-new conflictual surfaces. Their project of radical democracy took this datum on board and aimed at deepening democracy by progressively extending lines of antagonism, thus tending towards the democratisation of every sphere of society.

Today, when Mouffe revives the idea of radicalising democracy to qualify left populism, she aligns that proposal with a conception of the populist logic that – as we have seen – ends up flattening the political onto a single dimension. With the turn taken above all in *On Populist Reason*, Laclau – and consequently Mouffe – focus conflict solely on the single surface of the state's representative institutions. By flattening the political onto the terrain of institutions, Laclau and Mouffe uniformise conflict, homologating diverse conflictual relations onto a 'smoothed" space in which the complexity of power relations is inevitably lost. This transforms the conception of hegemony into effective, performative communication. By collapsing the political into the dimension of the state and overlooking the complexity of power relations and antagonisms in society, their theoretical framework inevitably allows traces of the essentialism they had opposed in the 1980s to reappear. Above all, the very idea of radicalising democracy – which should rest on the multiplication of antagonisms across a plurality of conflictual surfaces – is likely to remain *only a symbolic gesture*. This will be the case unless one embraces a *hyper-statist* profession of faith, according to which the state is capable of altering power relations at every level of society and is entirely autonomous from

58 See S. Mazzolini, *Laclau, lo stratega*, *op. cit*., pp. 67-121.

59 E. Laclau, *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society*, *op. cit*., p. 9.

60 See B. Arditi, "Il populismo come egemonia e come politica? La teoria del populismo di Ernesto Laclau", *Il Ponte* 8-9, 2016, pp. 34-35.

the logics of capitalist accumulation. Since such a profession of faith is bound to collide with reality, the left populism outlined by Mouffe is left substantially without the very component that renders it "left" and differentiates it from other populisms. The populist prince, whom Laclau and Mouffe invite us to see as the architect of a renewal of the left, ends up revealing himself as only a very small prince – far too small for the immense task assigned to him.

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