

Chantal Mouffe: Which Path for Democracy in a Post-Political Age?

Report by **Allison Carpenter**, written for Euroskop

What are the underlying causes for the success of right wing populist movements? Why have social democratic parties largely failed to rise to the challenge presented by these emerging movements? Ms. Mouffe took this talk as an opportunity to discuss her thesis that the best and only way to combat these emerging parties is to present left wing populist alternatives.

“Today we are in a post-political age.” What exactly does that mean? On its face, it appears to be a rather odd statement when juxtaposed against the slew of articles and scholarly entries that assert the left-right political gap is as wide as it has ever been. However, for Ms. Mouffe, this statement is an obvious fact.

Modern western democracies are merely “maintaining a façade” – increasingly, they are controlled “by political elites and collectivizing the state.” Ms. Mouffe defended this claim by pointing to the steady movement towards the center of the political spectrum that both left and right wing parties have experienced since the post-War era, and particularly after the fall of Communism.

This is explicitly apparent in most if not all European countries, which are governed either by a centre-left or centre-right party – not by a left or right wing party. This paradigm, which Ms. Mouffe asserts is a “framework established by neoliberals,” has introduced us to the “post-political age” – an age in which policies between parties are negligibly different. This over time has led to the erosion of real democratic choice and contributed to popular unrest, and led to anti-establishment political movements in recent years.

For Ms. Mouffe, “politics are inherently partisan.” Today, we are suffering from a lack of “agonistic debate; democratic politics requires debate between real options.” The response? A rise in populism – which Ms. Mouffe views as a testament that “citizens feel they cannot have a say in political questions due to the institutional structure.”

Right now elections are seen as little more than a “rubber stamp” for the status quo – the real and perceived “hollowness of democratic institutions... contributes to their legitimacy crisis.” This is the state of liberal democracy today – but what is the ideal system Ms. Mouffe hopes can be reinstituted in the West?

The Origins of Liberal Democracy and the Populist Challenge

Ms. Mouffe traces the origins of liberal democracy to the 19th century, when two competing ideologies (liberalism and democracy) merged into a single system. The former brought with it the traditions of the “rule of law, the separation of powers, and political rights;” the latter brought with it the ideas of “equality” and justice.

These two competing aspects of western politics are supposed to be locked in a perpetual struggle for dominance; retaining the “tension” of this dynamic is what “provides for the emergence of a left and right political wing, and allows for pluralism.” The issue faced by liberal democracies today is that “the liberal aspect has become so dominant that the democratic aspect has almost disappeared.” Thus, a class of individuals who resist political elitism are serving as the voice of the people – hence the current prominence of populism.

“A group is [always] held together by a power of some kind... the individual gives up his distinctiveness and accepts the influence of other members of the group by suggestion because he needs to be in harmony with them rather than in opposition to them.” – Sigmund Freud

Populists’ most ardent critique of the current system is that “popular sovereignty is [being treated as] a necessary mask for people to feel they have a voice,” without giving them a legitimate vote at all. This “displacement of the democratic tradition,” Ms. Mouffe argued, has led to the “neoliberal hegemony” which is a “main feature of the post-political” age.

Critically for Ms. Mouffe’s theory is her assertion that populist movements can take either a progressive (American President FDR’s New Deal) or a regressive form (fascism). Fundamentally for Ms. Mouffe, populism is a “strategy of construction of the political frontier between the people below and the people above.” The task of political parties now is to channel the populist movement into a sustained, progressive direction, thereby restoring the agonistic landscape of politics.

Providing a Possible Solution

Ms. Mouffe implores social democratic parties across Europe to stop dismissing populists as merely “uneducated and xenophobic.” To successfully combat the rising dominance of right wing populism, more established parties need to first recognize the “underlying democratic needs” of the populist platform, and second, to begin “articulating a more productive and inclusive vocabulary” by which to address the democratic deficits of the post-political age.

“Creating a new vocabulary,” is key to neutralizing the threat of a sustained regressive populist movement because the “process of articulation” via a “chain of equivalence is how demands receive legitimization.” If a left wing populist movement were to create equivalent rhetoric with a progressive slant, preferably centered on an inherently inclusive issue, like the environment, then the current populist platform could be purged of its “authoritarian” tendencies.

The populist regime represents the “legitimization and standardization of a struggle to reestablish and reinstitute democracy.” To create a sustainable “populist party,” the movement must represent not just traditional working class demands, but also embrace new social issues.

The populist movement is a “challenge designed to reestablish political tension.” The left wing must “ensure that this turn doesn’t become authoritarian; rather, this is an opportunity to deepen [western] democratic values.” To “successfully and responsibly engage in this struggle,” however, more established political parties must first understand the whole picture.

By understanding the whole picture, political parties can not only successfully address the populist challenge of today, but also fortify liberal democracy against future challenges.

Speaker: Chantal Mouffe

Ms. Mouffe is a Visiting Fellow at the University of Westminster in London, where she is also the leader of the Center for the Study of Democracy (CSD). She has taught at many universities in Europe, North America, and Latin America, and has research positions at Harvard, Cornell, the University of California, the Princeton Institute for Advanced Study, and the Recherche Scientifique Center in Paris.

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