

“The Antinomies of Populist Reason

What Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe Tell Us About Politics and What They Don't Know About Democracy”

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Abstract

☐ Populism is one of the most studied political phenomena of our time. However, what do we mean by this term? Many scholars have attempted to remedy the vagueness and uncertainty of the concept of populism. Among these attempts at theorizing, the one developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe has met with some success. Populism is not just one aspect of their philosophy, but the key to reading all of their work. This article proposes to show how their theory of populism provides an extremely stimulating political ontology but a particularly poor theory of democracy. The Laclau-Mouffian ontology breaks with social contract theorists and then contemporary liberal philosophers. This dominant conception sees politics as a *contract* between *individuals* on a *rational* basis. Conversely, the two theorists of populism view politics as a *conflict* between *collectives* on an *affective* basis. Here we have a triple opposition – between individual and collective, between reason and affects, between consensus and conflict – which testifies to the originality of Laclau and Mouffe's theory of politics. But – this is the paradox – Mouffe and Laclau adopt a sketchy, conventional and unsatisfactory theory of democracy. They associate democracy with political parties, elections, representation, the state and even the existence of a charismatic leader. Doing so, they adhere to the most common ideas of modernity and they miss the true nature of democracy.

keywords

☐ Populist reason, Democracy, Politics, Leadership, Chantal Mouffe, Ernesto Laclau.

Calling a force “populist”, especially in Europe, is often a way of disqualifying it. It is always possible, of course, to reverse the stigma. Thus Marine Le Pen, December 9, 2010, on the set of *France 2*: “Yes, if, as I believe, [populism] is to defend the forgotten against the elite who is in the process of squeezing them the throat, yes, then there, in this case, me, I am populist”. A reverse also operated by Jean-Luc Mélenchon, in an interview with *L’Express* on September 16, 2010: “I no longer want to defend myself against the accusation of populism. This is the loathing of the elites – do they deserve better? Let them all go! I appeal to the energy of the greatest number against the sufficiency of the privileged. Populist, me? I assume!”. To add to the confusion, Emmanuel Macron, who regularly presents himself as the bulwark against the populists, affirmed on November 21, 2018 before the mayors of France: “We are real populists, we are with the people, every day”.

Everyone agrees: populism is a fuzzy notion. Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau attempted to remedy this by giving it specific content. They are not the only ones to have tried to circumscribe the concept. Other theorizations deserve to be taken into account.¹ But, judging by the number of comments their approach has garnered, we can say that this is one of the most exciting leads of recent years. So we have to face it. This article offers a critical assessment of their main arguments. Their theory of populism is condensed in Laclau’s *Populist Reason*² and Mouffe’s *For a Left Populism*,³ but these two books are part of a global economy that goes beyond them; so that attention will be paid here to the work of Laclau and Mouffe in their entirety.⁴ Moreover, to facilitate the discussion, we will amalgamate here the thought of these two authors, even though their approaches are not perfectly superimposable.

Indeed, it should be borne in mind that Mouffe and Laclau have published only one four-handed work,⁵ do not have the same writing style (Laclau is dense, sometimes obscure, Mouffe is didactic, sometimes repetitive), start from distinct political phenomena (South American populism for Laclau, European social democracy for Mouffe), dialogue with different traditions (Marxism is Laclau’s privileged interlocutor, while Mouffe also dialogues with the liberalism and conservatism) and are

1 Among the theorizations of populism that have found a certain echo within the academic community: CANOVAN Margaret, *Populism*, New York, Hartcourt Brace Janovitch, 1981; MUDDE Cas et ROVIRA KALTWASSER Cristobal, *Populism. A Very Short Introduction*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2017; MÜLLER Jan-Werner, *What is populism?*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016.

2 LACLAU Ernesto, *On Populist Reason*, London, Verso, 2005.

3 MOUFFE Chantal, *For a Left Populism*, London, Verso, 2018.

4 Laclau tackles the question of populism in his first book, published in 1977: LACLAU Ernesto, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory. Capitalism, Fascism, Populism*, London, Verso, 1979 [1977].

5 LACLAU Ernesto et MOUFFE Chantal, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, London, Verso, 1985.

not inspired by exactly the same authors (Lacan, Derrida and Foucault for Laclau, Schmitt, Lefort and Wittgenstein for Mouffe). The fact remains that, on the three issues that interest us (populism, politics and democracy), their views converge. This is why we allow ourselves to jointly process their work. The thesis defended here is simple: the theory of *populism* of Mouffe and Laclau presents quite appreciable heuristic gains concerning the conception of *politics* but this theory remains trapped in a narrow conception of *democracy*.

1. Populism as a reaction to the oligarchic drift of liberal democracy

To understand what populism is, one can start by clarifying what it is not. To Laclau, this is not an ideology.⁶ Populism has no political colour. It can be right, left or centre. It can even escape the lateral structuring of the political field. The Italian Five Star Movement, founded in 2009 by comedian Beppe Grillo, is difficult to classify on the left-right axis. As for the Argentine President Carlos Menem (1989-1999) and his Peruvian counterpart Alberto Fujimori (1990-2000), artisans of an uninhibited and authoritarian neoliberalism, who were accused of populism, they are proof that the latter is not the monopoly of extremes (right and left).

In Laclau's eyes, populism is not either a political regime,⁷ like democracy, dictatorship, or theocracy. In this sense, it is wrong to qualify Venezuela or Bolivia as populist regimes. Because populism is the reverse of a regime, it designates a *moment* of crisis, that is, a situation in which a political regime cracks, a hegemony is contested to its very foundations.⁸ Populism refers to a specific, and relatively rare, historical context in which a certain political regime, in this case liberal democracy, falters.

What is liberal democracy? Empirically, Mouffe and Laclau consider that all the states of law (United States, Belgium, etc.) belong to this category. Theoretically, liberal democracy means, as its name suggests, a mixed regime, an alloy between two elements: democracy and liberalism. However, the alliance between these two elements is far from natural.

6 LACLAU Ernesto, *La raison populiste*, Paris, Seuil, 2008, p. 28.

7 LACLAU Ernesto, *Política e Ideología en la teoría marxista. Capitalismo, fascismo y populismo*, Buenos Aires, siglo XXI editores, 1980.

8 MOUFFE Chantal, *Pour un populisme de gauche*, Paris, Albin Michel, 2018, p. 17.

Why do liberalism and democracy have a tumultuous relationship? Because the liberal's primary concern is to limit power – i.e. to fight against the abuse of power – while the democrat's primary concern is to share power – i.e. to fight against the confiscation of power. A liberal asks himself “*how* is power exercised?” If power is exercised in such a way that it respects individual rights, the liberal is satisfied; whether power is held by the people, a monarch or a clique of oligarchs is a secondary question. The democrat, on the contrary, asks himself “*who* exercises power?” If the power is exercised by the people, the democrat is satisfied; whether this power can infringe the rights of individuals or minorities is a secondary question. The democrat and the liberal therefore do not have the same priorities: equality or freedom, collective or individual, represented or representatives, people or elites. The liberal and the democrat care about the two poles, but they do not put the cursor in the same place.

Liberal democracy holds these pairs of opposites together. Consequently, this political regime is of a paradoxical nature,⁹ explains Chantal Mouffe. It is a precarious, unlikely, fragile and unstable regime. In normal times, liberal democracy manages to curb this instability, to ease the tension between its two components. But liberal democracy sometimes goes into crisis. War is open, tensions are growing between equality and freedom, people and elite, collective and individual. Liberal democracy enters into crisis when its liberal component takes precedence over its democratic component. The balance is upset. The elites sink into corruption, the representatives no longer represent the represented, the freedom becomes the freedom to exploit the weakest, the individual turns into a selfish one.

There is a crisis when the liberal elites stop taking into account the well-being of the popular classes and the respect due to them. Populism arises in these moments in order to restore the initial balance, to counterbalance the liberal tendency with a democratic leap, to stop the oligarchic drift of the regime. Populism is restoring the role of the people in the face of representatives who take themselves for the whole of society. Populism refers to a democratic eruption in a context where liberal democracy turns into pure liberalism.

Hence this decisive point, in the eyes of Laclau and Mouffe: the function of populist parties is not to eliminate liberal democracy but, on the contrary, to save it, by restoring the initial balance between democracy and liberalism. A populist party does not “disengage” the leaders. It is content to put them back in their place, that is, to put them back in the service of the people rather than in the service of finance. The real enemies of liberal democracy are not the populists but the ultra-liberals

⁹ MOUFFE Chantal, *Le paradoxe démocratique*, Paris, Beaux-Arts de Paris Éditions, 2016 [2005], pp. 47-68.

who, having lost their civic sense, are driving a methodical liquidation of democratic gains.

Who is this people that populism is pushing to the forefront of the political scene? The conservatives and part of the liberals assimilate the people to the nation, that is to say to a community united by a language, a history, a culture, values and a territory. Pushed to its ultimate consequences, this doctrine associates the people with the race, united by ethnic and biological criteria. In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Mouffe and Laclau reject these definitions.¹⁰ But they also reject the Marxist approach which equates the people with the popular classes, that is, individuals forced to sell their labour power to meet their needs.¹¹

These three definitions attribute to the people an essence – exploitation, nation, race – whereas, for Mouffe and Laclau, the people are defined on the contrary as a project, open and indeterminate. In addition, all three consider that the unity of the people is given whereas, according to Mouffe and Laclau, this unity is the fruit of a tedious work of unification. At the outset, there was no popular unity but heterogeneous groups with divergent interests and specific demands. The work of political parties is therefore not to reflect an already existing people but to build this people, to fabricate its missing unity, to make it exist by endowing it with homogeneity. Carrying out politics consists in articulating the disparate demands that emerge from the different sectors of the population, that is to say in providing men and women, the unemployed and employees, nationals and foreigners, students and retirees, of a common project.

A populist party is attached to this task. He creates the people by instilling unity where there is multiplicity. It forms a bloc by establishing a chain of equivalence between dispersed claims, which have nothing in common except being dissatisfied. Mouffe and Laclau's theory therefore differs from conservatism, liberalism and Marxism on the following point: it is not the people who make politics but, on the contrary, it is politics that make the people. A party does not express the will of a people that preexisted it; he builds this people by endowing it with the unity that it lacked.

How to create this unity? By emphasizing the common adversary. While the different dominated sections of society do not have the same interests, do not have the same demands and do not have the same values, they still have the same adversary.

10 LACLAU Ernesto et MOUFFE Chantal, *Hégémonie et stratégie socialiste*, Besançon, Les Solitaires Intempestifs, 2009 [1985], pp. 243-259.

11 LACLAU Ernesto, MOUFFE Chantal (coll.), « Post-Marxism Without Apologies », in *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, Londres, Verso, 1990, pp. 97-132.

The making of an “we” involves the designation of a “them”.¹² To engage in politics is to designate the adversary of the people in order to unify it. The adversary takes on a different face according to each political sensibility. The right assimilates the people to the nation by pointing the finger at the immigrant. The liberal equates the people with entrepreneurs by pointing the finger at the lazy. The left equates the people with the workers by pointing the finger at the bankers. Despite their differences, all political families carry out a discursive operation of the same type: appointing those who do not belong to the community (immigrants, lazy people, bankers). In this sense, there are no populist parties and non-populist parties. All parties are populist, since all parties build their people. Populism is not just one political strategy. It is “the ontological constitution” of all political activity, according to Laclau.¹³

At the end of this presentation, we realize that populism exists at two levels in the minds of Mouffe and Laclau. At a first level, it designates the logic specific to any political action: equivalence of disparate demands in order to build a collective identity. At a second level, it designates one rhetoric among others: appeal to the “people” against the “oligarchy”. The first plane of existence of populism can be called *ontological* and the second *strategic*. For Mouffe and Laclau, these two plans are intertwined. But this confusion does not always facilitate the understanding of their theory of populism.

2. The affective texture of politics

The Laclau-Mouffian theory of populism is therefore, beyond its strategic recommendations, an ontology of the political. This ontology breaks with the way social contract theorists and then contemporary liberal philosophers conceive politics. Summarized in the extreme, this dominant conception sees politics as a *contract* between *individuals* on a *rational* basis. Conversely, the two theorists of populism view politics as a *conflict* between *collectives* on an *affective* basis. Here we have a triple opposition – between individual and collective, between reason and affects, between consensus and conflict – which testifies to the originality of Laclau and Mouffe’s approach.

The fact that we are currently in a fragmented, atomized, individualistic society does not change the diagnosis of Mouffe and Laclau: political subjects are not in-

12 MOUFFE Chantal, « La politique et la dynamique des passions », *Politique et Sociétés*, 2003, vol. 22, n° 3, p. 147.

13 LACLAU Ernesto, *La raison populiste*, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

dividuals. Political intervention takes place on the basis of collective identities.¹⁴ When we place ourselves at the level of individual behavior, we remain a prisoner of morality or economics, and we miss the specificity of politics. As Carl Schmitt says, “liberal thought eludes or ignores the State and politics in order to move in the characteristic and ever-renewed polarity of two heterogeneous spheres: morality and economics, mind and business, culture and wealth”.¹⁵ Chantal Mouffe agrees with Schmitt on this point, but she then makes a correction, stressing that modernity has enshrined the importance of “individual freedom” and that it is out of the question to come back to this.¹⁶ In this sense, Mouffe criticizes Schmitt, but also communitarian philosophers such as Michael Sandel, for locking the individual into his home community; what she calls “organicism”.¹⁷

The second point of Mouffe and Laclau’s ontology concerns the agonistic dimension of politics. The collective identities mentioned above are not only plural but contradictory. Building an identity requires establishing a difference and even a hierarchy (eg black / white, male / female, etc.). This is why Laclau and Mouffe borrow from the philosopher Henry Staten the notion of “constitutive exterior”.¹⁸ Starting from the observation that an identity is systematically established in the affirmation of a difference “which makes the other an exterior”,¹⁹ Mouffe comes to reformulate the Schmittian thesis of the friend / enemy.²⁰ If the German jurist had the genius to understand that all social relations are marked by insurmountable antagonisms, Mouffe refuses on the other hand, like Schmitt, to equate political conflict with war-like confrontation. The crucial issue is indeed to establish a We / Them distinction which remains compatible with the principle of pluralism; which does not allow a conception of politics directly modelled on war. “A democratic politics supposes that the others are seen not as enemies to be defeated, but well as adversaries whose ideas can be fought, sometimes with fierceness, without ever, however, their right to defend them to be called into question”.²¹

In the eyes of Laclau and Mouffe, politics is therefore not a matter of contracts between insensitive individuals, guided by strict rationality and by calculations of interests. Of course, reason and interest play a role in politics. How could it be

14 LACLAU Ernesto, MOUFFE Chantal, [référence à compléter], *op. cit.*, p. 105.

15 SCHMITT Carl, *La notion de politique*, Paris, Flammarion, 1992 [1933], p. 115.

16 MOUFFE Chantal, *Le politique et ses enjeux*, Paris, La Découverte, 1994, p. 87.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 57.

18 STATEN Henry, *Wittgenstein and Derrida*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1985, pp. 16-24.

19 MOUFFE Chantal, « La politique et la dynamique des passions », *op. cit.*, p. 147.

20 SCHMITT Karl, *La notion de politique*, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

21 MOUFFE Chantal, « La politique et la dynamique des passions », *op. cit.*, p. 149.

otherwise? But these two factors have often been overestimated, to the point of forgetting a third element, just as important, if not more: affects.

Mouffe and Laclau – this is one of their main merits – emphasize the emotional dimension of political life. A people unites itself by its affects, its feeling of belonging to a collective adventure, this carnal thrill that runs through the skin during major collective episodes: a world cup final, a monster event, the national or international anthem that echoes in your bowels, etc. I recognize those of my people by being affected by what affects them. As Ernesto Laclau writes about the texture of the social, which is still politically instituted: “Something of the order of affects plays a primordial role in the discursive construction of the social. Freud already knew it: the social bond is a libidinal bond. Affects are not an optional supplement to signification but are consubstantial with it”.²²

Mouffe and Laclau recognize that this idea – the affective texture of politics – has already been developed by Spinoza²³ and Freud.²⁴ Before being a reflection on the most effective action, politics is a decision, in the most brutal sense: I decide which camp I am on. Decision precedes reflection. I take sides, with my guts, with my body. This commitment to one camp is preceded by another commitment: that of getting involved in politics, because some people stay away from politics all their lives. They take refuge in their backyard and their private pleasures. Others, on the contrary, find meaning in their lives only in collective commitment.

So, no politics without desire. And desires, as we saw above, are carried by conflicting collective identities. As Machiavelli remarks: “In all countries, in fact, we find two opposing moods: on the one hand, the people do not want to be commanded or oppressed by the great; on the other hand, the great desire to command and oppress the people”.²⁵ A strength of Laclau and Mouffe’s ontology is to rehabilitate the role of desire in politics. The desire to give of his person for a cause that is beyond us, the desire to unite with those who share our values, the desire to confront injustice, to confront some of our fellow human beings, not for what they are but for what they do, the desire to be there, to influence the collective destiny, the desire to be an actor and not a spectator, the desire to proclaim loud and clear thoughts that have been stifled for too long in my heart, the desire to be able to say “I was there”, “history was made that day, and I was there”, the desire not to win but to have tried,

22 LACLAU Ernesto, « Atisbando el futuro », in CRITCHLEY Simon et MARCHART Oliver (dir.), *Laclau. Aproximaciones críticas a su obra*, Buenos Aires, Fondo de cultura económica, 2008, p. 402.

23 SPINOZA Baruch, *Ethics*, book III, 1677.

24 FREUD Sigmund, *Le malaise dans la civilisation*, Paris, Seuil, 2010 [1930]; FREUD Sigmund, *Psychologie des masses et analyse du moi*, Paris, Points, 2014 [1921].

25 MACHIAVEL Nicolas, *CŒuvres politiques de Machiavel*, Paris, Carpentier éditeur, 1881, p. 42.

to have tried everything, because if those who fight are not sure of winning, those who do not fight have already lost (Bertolt Brecht).

A political idea – justice, democracy, liberty, equality, the people, the republic, but also race, merit, inequality, election, honour, competition, progress, conservation – is not an idea like any other. It is an idea that arouses an affect in everyone: sympathy, mistrust, understanding, confidence, attraction, hatred, disgust, respect, reverence, hilarity, perplexity, incomprehension, curiosity, devotion, anger, indignation. A political idea never leaves us indifferent. It touches us. Thinking of a screwdriver doesn't make us hot or cold, except perhaps if we are a handyman. But everyone has something to say about democracy, about Nazism, about terrorism. Some may be afraid to say it, they can't find the right words, they don't know how to express themselves, they don't feel qualified. But everyone is affected by politics, because politics is affective.

If politics has a link with the idea of truth, it is therefore less a question of a factual truth or a logical truth than of an existential, sensitive truth, that is to say of a capacity to identify what I feel then to stick to it. In politics, truth denotes lucidity and loyalty to oneself. It is a mistake to believe that politics is outside of us, in ministers' offices, in political party headquarters or in Parliament. Politics is housed within us, deep within our being. It circulates in our bowels. Aristotle said that man is a political animal to emphasize his social nature: I access humanity only through the collectivity. But his thesis can also be understood in the following sense: institutions are not the only home of politics, which is also housed in each individuality. Politics is about intimacy, about the subjective relationship to oneself.

To engage in politics by addressing the vested interests of voters is to doom oneself to defeat. Examples: the left addresses workers who vote for the right, explaining that they are acting "against their own interests"; the right addresses executives who vote on the left with the same speech. This rhetoric is ineffective because it ignores the fundamental springs of electoral choice, which rests on the affective part of our being.

The great political movements, which were able to unite millions of souls behind them and secure their loyalty, addressed human aspirations far deeper than the individual inconveniences of each and every one. There was in Christianity the promise of a hereafter, of a redemption that would give meaning to the sacrifices made here below. There was in fascism a promise of order and purity, an exaltation of greatness and strength, a national mystique. There was in communism a project of emancipation, a quest for social justice, a project of equality. There was in capitalism a promise of prosperity, an ideal of individual fulfillment through leisure and consumption. Capitalism, fascism and communism sold dreams, in tune with

popular anger. They were far from the accounting arrangements, technical proposals and esoteric controversies that now fuel partisan competition.

Politics is fueled by affect, and every recent successful candidate has understood this truth. Whatever their ideological differences, Trump, Obama, Macron, Chavez, Morales, Correa, Netanyahu and Orban play the same score. The only one that works. We may disagree with them, but we must recognize their ability to resonate with popular aspirations, an ability that their rivals sorely lack. Has anyone ever thrilled while listening to a speech by Hilary Clinton, Manuel Valls, Ed Miliband or Martin Schultz? Their respective defeats are due less to their political ideas than to the way they are packaged: arguments, figures, reasoning, restraint, coldness, expertise, which prove to be powerless in the face of frenzied projects and enchanting promises carried by populists. There is no intrinsic strength of the true idea, said Spinoza: a lie fervently asserted is more convincing than a well-argued truth.

A populist is one who grasps the emotional nature of politics and conforms to it. Populists are re-enchanting politics at a time when it has lost its charms by allowing itself to be contaminated by technocratic vocabulary, the economic imaginary and the pragmatic imperative. Politics is no longer a dream because it has denied itself. She left the monopoly of transcendence to the religious. She left the monopoly of fiction to television series. She left the monopoly of greatness to traders. She left sports competitions a monopoly on emotion. Politics has become a small, stunted, shrunken, petty, outdated thing. Something subject to other spheres of human activity. Politics has lost its primacy. She has swallowed up her ambitions. She has become a boring profession as a chartered accountant.

Populism, Laclau and Mouffe explain, is a reaction to this (de)monetization of politics. It lowers abstention, it arouses vocations, it revives democratic fervor. It reactivates conflicts in a world that is bogged down in the soft, honeyed and gelatinous consensus of liberal doxa. It encourages collective engagement in a world plagued by solipsistic withdrawal. This is why, say Mouffe and Laclau, lovers of politics can only rejoice in the rise of populism.

3. The impoverishment of democracy

On the one hand, populism offers a stimulating conception of politics. On the other hand, as we will see now, it offers a narrow conception of democracy. This ambivalence of populism – re-enchantment of politics, impoverishment of democracy – is perceptible on two levels: *in the practice* of populist leaders, who often revive politics while abusing democracy; and *in the theory* of populism developed by

Mouffe and Laclau. Let us focus on this theory, which in fact constitutes the political matrix of several populist left forces.

Mouffe and Laclau propose a sophisticated, original and convincing political ontology. By showing that politics is about conflict (not consensus), collective identity (not individuals), and affects (not interests), they reverse dominant representations. Yet – this is the paradox – Mouffe and Laclau adopt a sketchy, conventional and unsatisfactory theory of democracy. They adhere to the most common philosophemes of modernity. And as modernity is mistaken about the nature of democracy, Mouffe and Laclau renew this error, itself renewed by the populist candidates who draw from Mouffe and Laclau their theoretical substrate.

We have to explain what philosophemes these are, what commonplaces the populists are renewing. This point – the renewal of commonplaces – is crucial: populists abuse democracy because they adhere to the prejudices of our time and that this time is itself undemocratic. In other words, the populists are no more undemocratic than their political rivals. They are just as important, and they are for failing to stand out from their rivals. If one wanted to be provocative, one could say that populist reason understood everything about politics and nothing about democracy. Therein lies its antinomy.

At the risk of ruminating: populism is a threat to democracy, but it is only one component of a larger and older threat: the elitist conception of democracy, developed and promoted by liberal thinkers two centuries ago. Populism, as theorized by Laclau and Mouffe, remains entangled in elitist prejudices.

“The *sine qua non* for an effective practice of democracy” is, according to Chantal Mouffe, the existence of a “real choice”, “clearly differentiated options”, that is to say the reactivation of the left-right cleavage.²⁶ A democracy is healthy when the right is right (it usually is) and the left is left (it is less often the case). Democracy weakens when opponents reconcile around the liberal consensus. Jacques Rancière refuses this assimilation between choice and democracy: “Democracy must be brought back to the side of action, of decision, out of this frenzy of choosing such and such a program”.²⁷ Because choosing who has to choose is no longer choosing. It is to surrender its power to the representatives. To delegate is to dispossess, as Pierre Bourdieu has shown.²⁸

26 MOUFFE Chantal, *L'illusion du consensus*, Paris, Albin Michel, 2016, pp. 10-11.

27 RANCIÈRE Jacques on *France Culture*, at *La grande table* on May 3, 2017: <https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/la-grande-table-2eme-partie/revaloriser-la-democratie-avec-jacques-ranciere>.

28 BOURDIEU Pierre, « La délégation et le fétichisme politique », in *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 1984, vol. 52-53, pp. 49-55.

For populists, “democracy necessarily has a partisan character”. Chantal Mouffe explains: “Without Podemos, who managed to capitalize all the energy of the Indignados, this movement would not have given anything at all. It would have drifted into a sort of skepticism and cynicism which would have led to abandoning the field and leaving it free to the reactionaries. This is why it seems essential to me to channel these protest movements in a direction whose objective is to enter the institutions, in order to transform them. The protest explosion is a first step, and the second step must lead to channeling the protest, otherwise this movement can take a non-progressive turn”.²⁹

Chantal Mouffe addresses only one criticism of the social democratic parties: having converted to social liberal ideology. This criticism is valid, but insufficient. It passes over in silence the essential evils. Because it says nothing about the oligarchic functioning of parties, known and deciphered for more than a century.³⁰ It says nothing about the capture of leadership and elected office by the upper classes.³¹ It does not say anything about the dispossession of activists for the benefit of leaders who are dubbed with simple sympathizers.³² It says nothing about the divide between civil society and state-funded political parties.³³ Finally, it says nothing about the de-ideologization of political parties, which are reducing their doctrinal base in order to broaden their electoral base.³⁴

Mouffe and Laclau ultimately have little to say about political parties. Populist movements generally adopt this form of collective organization, ignoring the damage parties cause to democracy. Populists would be wise to re-read Simone Weil’s plea for the general suppression of political parties. This 1940 text, several passages of which may seem outrageous today if we forget that, in writing it, Weil had in mind two totalitarian parties (CPSU and NSDAP), contains truths that can hardly be denied: “A man who joins a party has likely seen things in that party’s action and propaganda that he thinks is right and good. But he never studied the party’s position on all issues in public life. By joining the party, he accepts positions he ignores. Thus he submits his thought to the authority of the party. When, little by

29 MOUFFE Chantal, *Construire pueblo*, Madrid, Icaria, 2015, p. 96 et p. 62.

30 MICHELS Robert, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy*, London, Hearst’s International Library Co., 1915.

31 BOELAERT Julien, MICHON Sébastien, OLLION Étienne, *Métier : député. Enquête sur la professionnalisation de la politique en France*, Paris, Raisons d’agir, 2017.

32 LEFEBVRE Rémi, *Les primaires socialistes. La fin du parti militant*, Paris, Raisons d’agir, 2011.

33 KATZ Richard, MAIR Peter, « Changing Models of Party Organization and Party Democracy: The Emergence of the Cartel Party », *Party politics*, 1995, vol. 1, n° 1.

34 KIRCHHEIMER Otto, « The Transformation of Western European Party Systems », in LA PALOMBARA Joseph, WEINER Myron (dir.), *Political Parties and Political Development*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1966, pp. 177-200.

little, he comes to know these positions, he will admit them without examination. This is exactly the situation of one who adheres to Catholic orthodoxy conceived as St. Thomas does".³⁵

The fact that populist reason conveys an impoverished conception of democracy is perceptible through a second symptom: the fate of the anti-austerity mobilizations that have spread after the crisis of 2008. Since the Arab Spring of 2011, via Occupy Wall Street, the Spanish Indignados, Maïdan, Taksim Square, the Umbrella Revolution and until Nuit debout, citizens in search of democracy have occupied the public squares of planetary metropolises. These movements were marked by multiple limits: they brought together a minority of activists while the majority of the population followed the events behind his television station, they did not always succeed in bringing down the hated regime, they sometimes led to a further more dramatic situation than the initial situation, they were put to the test by the phenomena of alcoholism, sexism and racism which crossed their ranks, they were divided on the attitude to be taken towards the media and the police, as well as on the relationship to violence and institutions. But, in spite of these difficulties, the movements of places constitute a powerful democratic manifestation since they established – in an admittedly limited space-time – a government of the people, by the people and for the people, resuscitating forms of organization which at other times, in other places, were called soviets, communes or councils. These movements refused political representation, which is the tomb of democracy.

But populist reason condescendingly views these movements of places, as evidenced by the sentence of Chantal Mouffe quoted above about the Indignados who would have given nothing without the irruption of Podemos. For the populists, the movements of places are at best the first step towards political maturity, namely the transformation into a political party. At worst, these movements are deluded. Illusion of horizontality, which leads the protagonists to boycott the elections. Populists regard this boycott as an admission of helplessness and a mark of cowardice. And the illusion of homogeneity because, by deciding by consensus, these movements would reject the principle of majority proper to democracy.

By adopting the liberal thesis of a "tyranny of the majority", populist reason abuses the conception of democracy in a third way. Liberalism maintains a natural distrust of democracy, suspected of undermining individual freedoms. This idea is in the pen of all eminent liberals. John Stuart Mill, for example: "The will of the people means in practice the will of the many. [...] It is therefore possible that the 'common people' are tempted to oppress some of their own; it is also an abuse of power which

³⁵ WEIL Simone, *Note sur la suppression générale des partis politiques*, Paris, Climats, 2006 [1950], p. 60.

must be guarded against in the same way as any other. That is why it remains essential to limit the power of government over individuals. [...] Thus we rank today, in political speculations, the tyranny of the majority among those evils against which society must protect itself".³⁶ Alexis de Tocqueville, two decades earlier, already equated democracy with "the despotism of the majority".³⁷

While the populists are generally opposed to the liberals, the former nevertheless take up this idea dear to the latter. Chantal Mouffe seriously doubts the compatibility between democracy and freedom: "Does democracy guarantee individual freedom? In order to be able to guarantee it, is it not necessary to have, alongside democratic institutions, other institutions that would rather have to do with what I will call the question of pluralism? And so, basically, that's why, for me, the best regime is always a mixed regime".³⁸

To curb the liberticidal drift of democracy, a dose of liberalism must be introduced into it: "Pluralism, and this is a crucial point, is in no way intrinsic to the democratic idea, as it is identified with popular sovereignty. On the other hand, it is at the centre of the vision of the world which can be qualified as 'liberal', and this is why it is necessary to recognize that what characterizes modern democracy, as a new political form of society (regime), it is the link between liberalism and democracy".³⁹ Chantal Mouffe and John Stuart Mill are right on one point: democracy can undermine fundamental freedoms. It is not immune to error, aberration or crime. The majority can guillotine opponents, place unwanted people under house arrest, restore the death penalty, incarcerate undocumented migrants or prevent journalists and judges from practicing their profession.

But possibility is not fatality. And, even more, where Mouffe and Mill's argument is incomplete, it is that neither shows how liberalism guarantees individual freedoms *better* than democracy. As far as we know, liberal regimes have committed monstrosities – colonization, slave trade, extermination of American Indians, atomic bomb, overthrow of democracies in favor of subservient dictators in Latin America and Africa, military invasions, environmental devastation – which the democratic regimes – ancient Athens, France in 1793 and 1871, the Russian Soviets of 1917 and Germany of 1918, the Hungarian councils of 1958 – have never matched.

36 MILL John Stuart, *De la liberté*, Paris, Gallimard, 1990 [1859], pp. 65-66.

37 DE TOCQUEVILLE Alexis, *De la démocratie en Amérique*, Paris, Flammarion, 1981 (1835), p. 230.

38 MOUFFE Chantal, in CASTORIADIS Cornelius, *Démocratie et relativisme*, Paris, Mille et une nuits, 2010, pp. 109-110.

39 MOUFFE Chantal, « Penser la démocratie avec, et contre, Carl Schmitt », *Revue française de science politique*, 1992, vol. 42, n° 1, p. 87.

As Cornelius Castoriadis notes, “There is no way to eliminate the risks of a collective hubris. No one can protect humanity from insanity or suicide”.⁴⁰ Not democracy. But neither is liberalism, which, basically, is a rather banal recommendation: to entrust power to the representatives rather than to the people. However, explains Castoriadis, “it is not the representatives who guarantee individual freedoms, it is the constitutional provisions. And if the Constitution is valid, if we are certain that, for example, in the United States or in France the restoration of slavery is impossible or – there is nothing impossible – extremely improbable, it is not because the Constitution says so, we would be morons; it is because we know that if there was a proposal for the restoration of slavery, an overwhelming majority of the people will be ready to fight for that restoration not to take place”.⁴¹ Ultimately, therefore, it is the action of the people, that is to say democracy, that protects freedom. While populists and liberals argue about the tyranny of the majority, a minority oppresses the rest of society with impunity. The art of distracting attention.

4. Conclusion: the deficient people of populists

In conclusion, one cannot avoid the controversial question of the status of the leader in populist theory and practice. If this question is controversial, it is precisely because it reveals how little populist reason takes democracy and the power of the people seriously. Populist movements are often embodied in a charismatic leader. Ernesto Laclau, moreover, establishes the existence of such a leader as a general law of the functioning of human societies, a law from which we can no more escape than the law of universal gravitation: “The need for a leader always exists. – for structural reasons”.⁴²

What are these structural reasons? Laclau does not say a word about it. He confers on a simple personal belief the status of objective truth. The existence – or rather the urgent necessity – of the leader constitutes the bedrock of populist theory. A people can only be born by having a Chavez, a Morales, a Sanders, an Iglesias or a Corbyn. Laclau: “The symbolic unification of the group around an individuality – and on

40 CASTORIADIS Cornelius, *Domaines de l’homme*, Paris, Seuil, 1986, p. 371.

41 CASTORIADIS Cornelius, *Démocratie et relativisme*, *op. cit.*, pp. 116-117.

42 LACLAU Ernesto, *La raison populiste*, Paris, Seuil, 2008 [2005], p. 76.

this point I agree with Freud – is inherent in the formation of a ‘people’”.⁴³ Mouffe: “I don’t think there can be a populist moment without a leader, that’s obvious”.⁴⁴ In fact, as Laclau admits, populist theory is “in a situation comparable to that of the sovereign of Hobbes”:⁴⁵ it is the representative who constitutes the represented, and not the represented who obtains a representative.

In liberal theory as in populist theory, the people suffer from an ontological deficiency. These two philosophical paradigms challenge the idea of self-constitution of the people. The latter only exists through its representative or leader. For Laclau, it is always a minority that brings about the people, through a metonymic type of operation (the part becomes the whole). “The person represented depends on the representative for the constitution of his identity”.⁴⁶ Concretely, this means that the people is the product of the action of a vanguard or a party. It cannot be the fruit of its own *praxis*. Populist reason is a negation of popular self-government.

In Laclau and Mouffe, the people is not only stricken with ontological deficiency, but he is also stricken with rational deficiency. We stressed, above, that their ontology had the advantage of putting affects back at the centre of politics. But we must now underline a blind spot in their approach. It seems that Laclau and Mouffe do not treat all political actors the same. In their eyes, the people move mainly under the effect of passions, while rationality is monopolized by the leader – who uses his charisma to mobilize the people – and by the philosopher – who describes the functioning of space. Politics. This inequitable distribution of political rationality can only lead the people to be submitted to the leader and the philosopher.

According to Laclau and Mouffe, the presence of a leader is an inherent characteristic of any populist movement. However, history allows us to refute this thesis of the inevitability of the leader. Populism is a phenomenon whose origins date back to the end of the 19th century in the United States. In the 1880s, faced with the accentuation of economic inequalities, peasants from the southern plains of the United States – especially Texas and Kansas – gathered in purchasing, production and sales cooperatives, in order to fight against the banks and the big railroad companies. In 1886, this movement of smallholder farmers joined forces with an industrial union, the Knights of Labor, which brought together 20% of the American working class, or more than 800,000 members. The two main parties – Republican and Democrats – opposed the demands of this vast popular movement, which ended up creating a new party, the People’s Party. The members of this party are

43 *Ibid.*, p. 123.

44 MOUFFE Chantal, ERREJON Iñigo, *Construir pueblo*, Madrid, Icaria, 2015, p. 98.

45 LACLAU Ernesto, [référence à compléter], *op. cit.*, p. 122.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 187.

described as “populist” by an American journalist and, quickly, they take up this term to their account by endowing it with a positive content. American populists defend the nationalization of the railways and the post office, the use of the popular referendum, the right to vote for women and the limitation of the number of terms. They put forward a candidate for the presidential election of 1892 (James Weaver), but this movement was not led by a charismatic leader.

At the same time, in Russia, the second historical root of populism emerges: the narodniki, a movement of young revolutionary intellectuals, from the bourgeoisie, opposed to the tsarist regime and in favor of a kind of agrarian communism inspired by the mir, a traditional common property. Russian populists, like American populists, do not submit to a leader. They advocate a form of egalitarian and democratic organization. The experiences of the People’s Party and the Narodniki thus show that a popular movement can do without a leader, and that not all populism is caesarist. In fact, it was not until the second third of the twentieth century to witness the personalization of the populist phenomenon, with Juan Perón in Argentina (1946-1955) and Getúlio Vargas in Brazil (1930-1945). The South American caudillos, often from the military, proceed to industrialize their countries, siding with the lower classes against the traditional social elites. It was during this time that populism became associated with the figure of a providential man; proof that this link is contingent in nature.

