Article

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In Defense of Left Populism: Rethinking the Affective Dimension in Politics

Allison Cruyff F. Ladero
University of Santo Tomas, Manila

Abstract: Populism has been denigrated and labelled as damaging and incompatible with democracy. In fact, populism in general has been viewed to be synonymous with demagogy. However, the paper's position is that populism does not have a monolithic character and clear definition; it is not always authoritarian and anti-pluralist in orientation. As the paper will explain, the negative view is oblivious to the real structural flaws of the deliberative democratic model's consensual politics. Following that, the paper aims to reconstruct and explain Chantal Mouffe's defense of left populism as rooted in her notion of the agonistic model of politics that emphasizes the ineradicable role of affects in liberal democratic theory. It argues that left populism is rather compatible with and does not stand as a threat to liberal democracy, especially when the role of affects is clarified. To ground this, the paper is divided int three parts. The first part works with the problem of consensus politics and how it results to the populist turn, particularly to the populist right. The second part extends the discussion by looking into Mouffe's justification of including political affects in contemporary politics. Lastly, the

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paper closes with a discussion on Mouffe's defense of left populism as a radical negation to authoritarian populism with the aim of radicalizing democracy.

Keywords: affects, agonistic democracy, consensus politics, left populism

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INTRODUCTION

This paper is an attempt to present a more elaborate and nuanced discussion of the paper I published in the *Social Ethics Society* journal.[1]In that article, I covered the general reasons behind Mouffe's defense of a left populist strategy in expanding and deepening democracy. This paper delves more into the role of affects as a significant justification for recognizing the value and compatibility of left populism in a liberal democratic framework. I find this necessary given that populism, by and large, has been viewed as a negative concept in political theory and the general public. This helps clarify that populism need not be reduced to demagogy and a political threat as a whole.

Now, there are a number of scholars who have characterized populism as damaging and incompatible with democracy. Jan Muller, for instance, denounces populists' anti-pluralist character in that they espouse the idea that they alone are the true representatives of "the people."[2] In fact, populists, according to Muller, view their political opponents as illegitimate and morally corrupt, which poses a grave danger to democracy insofar as exclusionary ideals are given more premium over having a pluralism of values.[3] Following the same logic, John Dunn also laments the authoritarian tendencies inherent in populism, especially in the threat it poses to liberal democratic institutions and the rule of law in general.[4] Furthermore, Maria Galito characterizes populism as "extremist and anti-systemic,"[5] considering the fundamentalist proclivities of the populist who

[1] Allison Cruyff V F. Ladero, "Recovering Democracy: Chantal Mouffe on Left Populist Strategy," in *Social Ethics Society Journal of Applied Philosophy*, Special Issue (February 2024), 96-119.

[2] Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 2.

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] John Dunn, "The Challenge of Populism: Why Populist Politics Spreads in the World," in *Populism*, 2:1 (May 2019), 65.

[5] Maria Sousa Galito, "Populism as a Political Phenomenon," in *JANUS.NET, e-Journal of International Relations*, 9:1 (2018), 58.

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simply relies on emotion-based manipulation that goes beyond the confines of logic and deliberative rationality.[6] These and more point to the perils of populism, especially as has been observed in recent years, particularly with the rise of right-wing populist figures, movements, and parties. As such, populism in general has been viewed to be synonymous with demagogy.[7]

While I am in agreement to a certain degree with the vilification of populism insofar as it is indeed irresponsible and imperceptive to deny the real perils and threat it potentially carries, considering its complex nature, I surmise, nevertheless, that it is precisely from this intricate character of populism that an alternative reading of it can be located. My position is that populism does not have a monolithic character and clear definition, which implies that it is not always authoritarian and anti-pluralist in orientation. Equally dangerous is dismissing and outright assigning a negative character to populism. As the paper will explain, this negative view is oblivious to the real structural flaws of the deliberative democratic model's consensual politics. Following that, the paper aims to reconstruct and explain Chantal Mouffe's defense of left populism as rooted in her notion of the agonistic model of politics that emphasizes the ineradicable role of affects in liberal democratic theory. Given that, the paper argues that left populism is rather compatible with and does not stand as a threat to liberal democracy, especially when the role of affects is clarified. In doing so, the paper is divided into three parts. The first part works with the problem of consensus politics and how it results in the populist turn, particularly to the populist right. An important point to remember is that the populist appeal seen in recent years clearly exposes the structural failures of a deliberative kind of democracy that despises the role of affects in liberal democratic politics. The second part extends the discussion by looking into Mouffe's justification of including political affects in contemporary politics. For her,

[6] *Ibid.*, 62.

[7] Cristiano Gianolla, "Populism, a Thread and a Chance. Between Demagogy and Participation," in *SocietàMutamentoPolitica*, 8:15 (2017), 328.

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this is predicated on the ineradicable and inevitable existence of antagonism in democracy, which cannot be resolved by pure reason alone. This clarifies the necessity of mobilizing the affective dimension in politics in order to re-politicize individuals once more. Lastly, the paper closes with a discussion on Mouffe's defense of left populism as a radical negation of authoritarian populism with the aim of radicalizing democracy. That said, let us begin with a brief sketch of what populism is and the manner in which the deliberative model of democracy has engendered the said political phenomenon.

POPULISM AND THE PROBLEM OF CONSENSUS POLITICS

A huge challenge in defining populism comes from the fact that there really is no precise meaning to the word. As mentioned, the ambiguity that is inherent in the notion of populism makes it susceptible to being labelled as illiberal, undemocratic, demagogical, and fundamentalist. In this case, provisional or tentative definitions can probably help us in comprehending its general features in quite a fair and objective manner. For one, Ernesto Laclau argues that populism does not have a specific ideological assignment—nationalist, socialist, liberal, and what have you.[8] In fact, for him, it is not even an ideology; rather, it is a political logic that constructs "the people" against another collective identity, most often, albeit not always, the elite.[9] Chantal Mouffe adds that "It is not an ideology and cannot be attributed a specific programmatic content. Nor is it a political regime. It is a way of doing politics that can take various ideological forms according to both time and place and is compatible with a variety of institutional frameworks."[10] This suggests that populism does not have a rigid essence and ideology; that is, it does not have a singular operation and character that applies across all social and historical contexts. What they

[8] Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (New York: Verso, 2005), 4.
[9] *Ibid.*, 87.
[10] Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* (Verso, 2018), 1–2.

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both clarify is that populism is neither inherently good nor bad, that is, we cannot assign an essentialist and pure definition to it insofar as its positive or negative identity is contingent on how political parties and movements bring life to it.

Now, because populism may not have an exact definition, important nuances make it even more complex. Writing on its multi-layered character, Hartleb opines:

> Populism is neither a bare style of communication (in the sense of popular) nor a rigid ideology (in the sense of socialism, liberalism, conservatism or even fascism). Its nature is multi-dimensional: technical (as a political style in the anti-elite attitude of "us against them"), content (with the focus on specific themes), medial (special resonance and interaction) and personal (importance of charisma).[11]

Guided by the idea that populism does not have one definite form, it becomes less surprising why the populist explosion across the globe in recent years has come in disparate shapes and expressions. Of course, one ought to recognize their commonalities as well as the historical and social nuances present among the populist variants that set them apart from each other. For sure, the populism of Trump in America differs to a certain degree from that of Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro, India's Narendra Modi, and Duterte's brand of populism in the Philippines. Similarly, populist parties like Germany's Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), Hungary's Fidesz, Syriza in Greece, the Five Star movement in Italy, as well as Spain's Podemos represent and articulate populist rhetoric and character in distinct ways as well. The same can be said about some prominent left-wing populist figures like Bernie Sanders, Hugo Chavez, and Evo Morales, and the like. They

[11] Florian Hartleb, "The rise of new-populism in Europe and Asia," in *Panorama: Insights into Asian and European affairs*, eds. C. Echle, F. Kleim., & M. Sarmah (Singapore: Konrad-AdenauerStiftung, 2018), 10.

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differ from one another, yet they all seem to share an outsider or anti-establishment politics that aim to bring power back to the people.

Now, one may say that we are no longer living in a "hot populist moment,"[12] as most of the names and political parties mentioned above are no longer in positions of power today. However, I contend that the authoritarian populist appeal has not really atrophied after all these years. In fact, a growing mass of individuals continues to move towards the far right despite the latter's noticeable authoritarian populist proclivities. As such, a critical introspection of the structural flaws of modern democracy is crucial.

Mouffe asserts that the rise of right-wing populist parties and the large-scale pivot of individuals toward the right is a symptom of the structural deficiencies and internal contradictions of the kind of democracy perpetuated in the contemporary world. In particular, she criticizes the popular model of political theory called deliberative democracy, espoused in many democratic countries, especially in Western Europe, as the root cause of the maintenance of neoliberal hegemony that has resulted in the populist turn. While deliberative democracy is a massive concept in political theory that has been advocated and remodeled by a number of political thinkers, her critique of the deliberative model of democracy is directed primarily to Jurgen Habermas and John Rawls—two of the most prominent defenders of the said political model.

In a nutshell, deliberative democracy places emphasis on the citizens' role in engaging in public discourse using rational communication done within the confines of an open, inclusive, and pluralistic public sphere.[13] A pluralistic and open deliberation or dialogue matters to Habermas because inclusive rational argumentation allows for civil society

[12] Chantal Mouffe, *Towards A Green Democratic Revolution: Left Populism and the Power of Affects* (Verso, 2022), 3.

[13] Jurgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996), 230.

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to traverse and engage with political institutions in a democratic manner for the public good. As Mouffe notes,

> For Habermas, the process of deliberation is guaranteed to have reasonable outcomes to the extent that it realizes the condition of the "ideal discourse": the more equal and impartial, the more open the process is, and the less the participants are coerced and ready to be guided by the force of the better argument, the more the higher is the likelihood that truly generalizable interests will be accepted by all those relevantly affected.[14]

Rawls also advances a kind of deliberative democracy that centers around the use of public reason or shared political values that perpetuate justice, fairness, and cooperation, among others.[15] He writes: "… reasonable persons are ready to propose, or to acknowledge when proposed by others, the principles needed to specify what can be seen by all as fair terms of cooperation."[16]

Both Habermas and Rawls share the idea that institutions of liberal democracy are spaces of rational deliberation capable of arriving at impartial and reasonable consensus. To be sure, Mouffe acknowledges that deliberative democracy is not some kind of model that is rotten and futile to its core. In fact, she agrees that deliberation in a democratic society is necessary for the full functioning of the institutions and the society at large. Nevertheless, she finds faults in the model and problematizes them, especially as symptoms of the problem have resulted in some of the most disastrous political outcomes in the status quo.

[14] Chantal Mouffe, "Deliberative democracy or agonistic pluralism," in *Political Science Series, 72* (2000), 6.

[15] John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, 2nd ed., ed. Erin Kelly (Belknap Press: An Imprint of Harvard University Press, 2001), 26.

[16] *Ibid*., 6-7.

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What Habermas and Rawls fail to take into account, according to Mouffe, is that while humans are deeply rational and capable of arriving at agreements in the political sphere, they are not solely rational; humans also feel, that is, they have affects as well. She posits that the overemphasis on rational deliberation and its denigration of affects in liberal democratic theory fails to grasp the conflictual nature of democracy that has resulted in people turning to the populist right. Her stance is that no amount or level of rational argumentation is capable of reconciling political issues outright. It is impossible to arrive at a rational consensus where some level of exclusion is utterly eradicated.[17] In fact, it is the very nature and condition of any democracy to be exclusionary to some extent, whether we like it or not.[18] To ground this, we must refer to what Mouffe calls post-politics, which promotes consensual politics.

Because proponents of deliberative democracy believe that rational consensus is possible so long as critical debate and rational deliberation in public spaces are governed by democratic institutions that ensure fairness, impartiality, and equality through the use of reason alone, conflicts in society are reduced to a matter of proper management and technocratic administration. When neoliberalism was introduced in the 80s, for example, it cemented the idea that while conflicts continue to exist, democratic societies can now be organized through putting the right technocratic administrators and leaders in place capable of managing such administrative concerns of society, may it be on the market, politics, the environment, and what have you without the need for partisan politics between the left and right. This alludes to the idea that technical experts are capable of fixing and finding solutions to democratic conflicts, and citizens ought to trust that proper governance is possible in their expert hands. In this post-political moment, Mouffe laments the claim "that the adversarial model of politics has become obsolete and that we have entered a new phase of reflexive modernity, one in which an inclusive consensus

[17] Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (New York: Verso, 2000), 45.
[18] *Ibid.*

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can be built around a 'radical centre'."[19] This centre, of course, points to neoliberal consensus. Unfortunately, this deliberative democracy aiming at reaching neoliberal consensus produces a kind of politics that is non-conflictual and non-partisan. In a sense, it propounds what is commonly called "third way politics":

> No doubt this type of theory chimes with 'third way' politics and its pretensions to be located 'beyond left and right'... it is precisely this post-political perspective which makes us incapable of thinking politically, of asking political questions, and of offering political answers.[20]

Mouffe takes issue with this kind of ethos because, as the antagonistic or conflictual character of politics is removed in deliberative democracy, the neoliberal system triumphs effortlessly in maintaining its hegemony. This happens as clear ideological gaps and divisions among parties and movements are erased in order to realign themselves in the neoliberal order. According to Mouffe, the blurring of the right and left divide in politics, in service of the illusion of unity or non-partisan politics, merely consolidates consensus around the neoliberal agenda. On paper, the right and the left still exist, but their difference is not based on a clear and legitimate political distinction. Take the US Republicans and Democrats, for example. There is strong empirical evidence that both are simply a duopoly of corporate and neoliberal parties. Regardless of whether a Republican or a Democrat sits in power, it is clear that either of the two takes the interest of neoliberal values and simply varies in the more cultural issues like gay marriage, abortion, legalization of marijuana, among others. In the Philippines, the same phenomenon can be observed. Being a country with a multiparty system, it has become very difficult to determine which

[19] Chantal Mouffe, "Politics and Passions: The Stakes of Democracy," in *CSD Perspectives* (2002), 1.
[20] *Ibid*., 3.

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ones are left-wing or right-wing. In fact, there are no clear ideological lines and differences, so that any politician can simply jump from one party to another without any impediments. This goes to show that strong ideological differences and the partisan and conflictual nature of politics that would have promoted contestation or antagonism are lost.

Politics becoming too managerial and technocratic under the post-political moment is precisely what moves people to the far right. The belief in the rational consensus of managing things under neoliberal values inevitably results in depoliticization, disenchantment, disillusionment, disengagement, and frustration among the vast majority of individuals. When income and wealth inequality perpetually push more and more people towards poverty, when more and more cases of climate-related cataclysms hit the world's poor thanks to overproduction and overconsumption, or when immigrants, racial and gender minorities continue to face oppressive and discriminatory policies, yet democratic deliberation still circles around conventional "rational" solutions or consensus, people would naturally search for better alternatives. Unfortunately, it has mainly been the far right that has managed to understand that politics is not only a rational game but also an arena where affects matter—mobilizing people's anger, frustration, disappointment, and fear. The surge of right-wing populism truly exposes the structural deficiencies of the neoliberal logic that has held contemporary democracies hostage. What denying the role of conflict does—pretending that societal issues only entail rational remedies through consensus politics—is to open the space for the right to bring back the antagonistic nature of democracy that has been lost by the third-way, post-political politics, which makes democracy interesting once more to the aggrieved people. The populist right becomes appealing in this case precisely in their "outsider to the system" or anti-establishment front, which gives some level of hope that a way out of the system exists.

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AFFECTS AND AGONISTIC MODEL OF POLITICS

In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Mouffe and Laclau opine that society is constructed through hegemony. Inspired by Gramsci, they both appropriate the idea of hegemony in order to argue that any social formation is nothing but a product of a hegemonic articulation. The conditions and normative claims embedded in a given society are results of hegemonic formations that provide some level of temporary stability and social and political order. As such, any given society rests on a contingent and contestable interpretation of that society.[21] It is founded on values and principles that have prevailed against other political projects and have since been perpetuated through social acceptability. Indeed, Mouffe and Laclau are coming from the vantage point that society is never fixed or rigid. Again, social structures and values articulated, endorsed, and practiced in a society are nothing but outcomes of a hegemonic political project—a project accepted by a community that cements certain forms of ideological, social, and political structure. They claim:

> … the present conjuncture, far from being the only natural or possible societal order, is the expression of a certain configuration of power relations. It is the result of hegemonic moves on the part of specific social forces which have been able to implement a profound transformation in the relations between capitalist corporations and the nation-states. This hegemony can be challenged.[22]

Any hegemonic project that comes to life through political articulation is an incomplete and open field that can be challenged by surrounding counter-hegemonic projects. Yet, while social formations are

[21] Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985), 85.
[22] *Ibid*., xvi-xvii.

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provisional, they can be difficult to challenge, especially because once they are crystallized, they assume finality, familiarity, and a common-sense appeal. An example of a hegemonic project that espouses certain temporary standards and values but appears to have been "common sense" and natural in society today, which is why it is widely accepted and endorsed in many democratic societies, is neoliberalism. According to Mouffe:

> … having accepted the hegemonic terrain established by Margaret Thatcher around the dogma that there was no alternative to neoliberal globalization, her famous 'TINA', the new centre-left government ended up implementing what Stuart Hall has called a 'social-democratic version of neoliberalism'.[23]

This neoliberal hegemony, which first made waves in the 80s, has since penetrated the world and remains a commanding force at present. In fact, its ideals, to a large degree, have become inseparable from democratic values espoused today. Additionally, "… we are dealing with a social formation that articulates a particular form of liberal democracy with financial capitalism."[24]

Our discussion of Mouffe's concept of hegemony goes back to the heart of her critique of deliberative democracy. Because she affirms that social formations are contingent on a hegemonic project prevailing over other counter-hegemonic projects, the possibility of dislodging the neoliberal logic becomes clear. This can only happen if contestation in politics, as opposed to post-politics that inevitably emerges from

[23] Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, 2.

[24] *Ibid.*, 6. As discussed in the previous section, there are clear structural problems with neoliberal logic. One notable point in particular is its propensity to depoliticize the public in favor of protecting the liberal agenda of freedom of choice in the market and the unregulated financial market that propagate profit maximization, productivity, extraction, inter alia. So long as the illusion of individual freedom is present and offered by the market, the system will continue to seduce more and more individuals—successfully anesthetizing militant resistance or oppositional forces.

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deliberative democracy's consensus politics, is reactivated. The reason why neoliberalism has worked well and has been growing since the 80s is that deliberations in the public sphere are not open to real antagonism. As such, Mouffe proposes a new model she calls the agonistic model of democracy (or agonistic pluralism).

The agonistic model goes back to the real essence of democracy—it is a site or a dimension of never-ending conflict, a space for hegemonic struggles. In her view, antagonism cannot be eradicated precisely because it is the very condition of existence in any democracy that is comprised of a pluralism of identities, groups, and thoughts.[25] Indeed, a well-functioning democracy requires contestation or confrontation of plural ideals and values. This is one of the things deliberative democracy fails to take into account, that is, the rational consensus it so badly wants to maintain disregards the very idea that any "rational solution based on consensus and deliberation" is never final and is still subject to antagonism. Clearly, what neoliberalism welcomes in terms of contestation is simply how to manage conflicting and different approaches to neoliberalism, not projects that actually aim to replace it.

The point being driven is that the conflictual politics Mouffe emphasizes in her agonistic model of democracy is necessary in order to restore what she calls the political. This notion points to the dimension of an ever-present possibility and potential for conflict, disagreement, or contestation regarding values, views, and ways of organizing society as a whole.[26] She writes:

> To take account of 'the political' as the ever present possibility of antagonism requires coming to terms with the lack of a final ground and acknowledging the dimension of undecidability which pervades every order. It requires in

[25] Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (New York: Verso, 2013), xi.

[26] *Ibid*., 2.

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> other words recognizing the hegemonic nature of every kind of social order and the fact that every society is the product of a series of practices attempting to establish order in a context of contingency.[27]

Retrieving the political, that is, the conflictual nature of politics, is necessary in order to re-politicize individuals instead of simply putting all their trust in technical experts in figuring out the "consensus" necessary for effective democratic management of society. To be sure, Mouffe's defense of antagonistic or conflictual democracy is not a defense of civil war or total anarchy. Rather, she argues that this antagonism must still be managed within the confines of democratic institutions, rules, and laws. For her, this antagonism must be transformed into agonistic pluralism in order to welcome conflict without having to decimate and contradict the very values of democracy in the first place. She writes:

> What is important is that conflict when it arises does not take the form of an 'antagonism' (struggle between enemies) but of an 'agonism' (struggle between adversaries). The agonistic confrontation is different from the antagonistic one, not because it allows for a possible consensus, but because the opponent is not considered an enemy to be destroyed but an adversary whose existence is perceived as legitimate. Her ideas will be fought with vigour but her right to defend them will never be questioned.[28]

Naturally, conflicts and disagreements can feel extremely personal, offensive, exclusionary, or divisive. Yet, if we run away from conflict, democracy becomes a mere conversation on how to administer society based on existing logics. The honesty coming from Mouffe is that she

[27] Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (Routledge, 2005), 17.
[28] Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, 37.

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understands the difficulty, especially that exclusions will be inevitable in any democratic conflict, but she urges us to confront it in a way where political opponents view each other as legitimate adversaries who struggle against each other without resorting to suppression or violent actions—constructive instead of destructive struggle.

Part of the reason why Mouffe recognizes the inevitability of conflict and advocates for agonistic pluralism is that she acknowledges the role of affects in politics, an important facet of politics that drives conflict. She asserts that liberal democratic theory, which valorizes pure rationalist framing, operates under the assumption that doing politics is merely about rational and deliberative engagements, which she sees as dismissive of the role that affects play. Affects are decisive and crucial in political life as opposed to considering it as based on reason alone.

As far as my research goes, Mouffe did not really spend a considerable amount of time defining and delineating these terms. However, borrowing from philosophers who have touched on affects such as Freud and Spinoza, she contends that affects or desires move human beings in certain directions.[29] Moreover, she distinguishes between emotions and passions and says:

> In the political domain, we are always dealing with collective identities—something that the term 'emotions' does not adequately convey because emotions are usually attached to individuals … I use 'passions' because it allows me to underline the dimension of conflict and to suggest a confrontation between collective political identities.[30]

Ruth Tietjen argues that because Mouffe and Laclau did not really substantiate the important nuances of the affective categories in a broader

[29] Chantal Mouffe, "The Affects of Democracy," in *Eurozine* (23 November 2018), <https://www.eurozine.com/the-affects-of-democracy/>.
[30] *Ibid.*

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picture, affects can perhaps be used as an "umbrella term to denote all different kinds of affective phenomena such as (bodily) feelings, emotions, moods, passions, and the like."[31] Despite this, what is clear is the fact that affects denote a dimension of undecidability in politics. This dimension goes beyond rational argumentation and procedures of deliberation.

Mouffe links her discussion of affects to the broader discussion of the value of collective identities. Her argument is that politics, far from being a space only for rational discourse, is also about passions and how the latter shape the very engagement and participation of the populace in the polis. Obviously, people have feelings, and the manner in which their feelings are affected in the public sphere cannot simply be ignored. For example, the anger or rage that people feel about structural problems, such as wealth and income inequality, oligarchy, racism, and climate injustice, to name a few, matters in the grand scheme of things. To brush off this individual and collective rage is to be blind to the actual material realities on the ground. It is precisely from this standpoint that Mouffe thinks that treating political subjects as mere rational thinkers is problematic in that the solutions generated then become too technocratic and administrative and dismissive of the collective affects.

Mouffe recognizes collective identities as emanating from affects, particularly from passions that have been mobilized in their construction. This is important for her because a huge part of why antagonism or conflict is ever-present as the very condition of democratic existence is that democracy is always constituted by a pluralism of groups and values that do not always agree with each other. Now, these collective identities are never predetermined or fixed; instead, they are constructed socially. Oftentimes, they are constructed through discursive articulation of a *we vs they*. This alludes to the fact that no universal rational consensus can ever be established; they are always provisional, as these expressions of "consensus" are exclusionary in nature. The exclusion is inevitable in that

[31] Ruth Rebecca Tietjen, "The Affects of Populism," in *Journal of the American Philosophical Association*, 9:2 (2023), 289, <https://doi.org/doi:10.1017/apa.2021.56>.

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collective identities propound competing claims and visions of their ideal society. This supports the claim established earlier that democracy, in Mouffe's view, is inevitably a dimension of antagonism, which is why, whether we like it or not, no rational consensus is sufficient that make everyone happy. Unfortunately, some level of exclusion comes out of any decision made. The challenge is determining which trade-offs are worthwhile since not everyone gets what they want.

These collective identities, of course, are not mobilized by reason alone, but rather chiefly by passions. People do not associate themselves with collective identities that do not share the same emotions of anger, solidarity, hope, or pride as they do. The wave of mass protests in Nepal, Indonesia, and the Philippines in 2025, for example, demonstrates this point to a certain extent. To be very clear, these protests are much more nuanced and ought to be analyzed more meticulously within their respective domestic realities; however, one thing they all share is their demonstration of mass anger or rage against their corrupt government. The passions that they channel through mass protests, despite their difference in political orientation, socio-economic backgrounds, among others, speak of the people, the *we*, who have become exhausted with a rigged system that only favors the elite, the *they*, who plunder enormous amounts of public funds for their vested interests. The debate on what these protests mean and how they can potentially change the landscape of their respective politics remains open; what it clearly demonstrates is that individuals engage in politics through the construction of collective identities that are mobilized by passions and not pure reason alone.

Thus far, what Mouffe shows us is that because collective identities like the "working class," "feminism," "the people," and the like cannot be formed by pure rationality alone, affect is the mobilizing driver. Moreover, affects are not inherently dangerous in politics; what is dangerous is neglecting their legitimacy in politics. When used positively, it can drive affirmative affective energies that aim towards transformative change. Again, the point is not to run away from conflict, but to confront it head-on

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by channeling affects to more democratic means and ends. Taming affects and managing political subjects as mere spectators, instead of looking for outlets that can direct affective energies and passions positively, only radicalizes them. The populist right clearly does a good job of taking advantage of these affects much more than the left.

The challenge now for the left is to take on the same mantle as the right in terms of rejecting the over-valorization of rational and deliberative procedures and begin mobilizing affects and passion in the construction of collective forms of identity. Equally and importantly, it must diverge from it in relation to the actual strategy, especially in reworking the antagonistic dimension into an agonistic one. This we shall explore in the last part of the paper.

DEFENDING LEFT POPULISM

Mouffe does not shy away from explicitly pronouncing her partisan support for the left. In fact, she is very clear and direct in saying that the left needs to rework its strategy if it wants its counter-hegemonic project and vision of a just and humane society to be taken seriously in the public sphere. Her claim rests on the premise that the left needs to learn a thing or two from what the right gets right. To be sure, she remains critical of right-wing populism, especially as it pertains to the authoritarian proclivities present in such parties, which has exacted a negative reputation for populism. However, instead of making fun of or denying the legitimacy behind right-wing populist support, she contends that the appeal is an "expression of legitimate democratic aspirations."[32] The challenge at this point is for the left, in Mouffe's words, to bifurcate collective identities that go beyond rationalistic deliberation and instead mobilize people's passions toward a more democratic direction.[33]

[32] Mouffe, "The Affects of Democracy."
[33] *Ibid.*

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While right-wing populist movements across the world are not the same, a salient feature they have in common, along with left-wing populism, is their tendency to bifurcate society into two camps, "the people" and "the enemies," often tied to an exclusionary and homogenous character. It tends to frame the "we" or the "people" in a more essentialist tone—a group of people that share the same ethnicity, culture, and nationality—against the enemies who are often the minorities, immigrants, and establishment elites.[34] As such, while the populist logic of Trump, Bolsonaro, or even of Duterte differ from each other, they all frame the conversation between the people they articulate as the underdog who need saving against the elites, immigrants, drug addicts, and others for the protection of their national sovereignty or maybe for peace and order in general. Indeed, they successfully advance their populist logic of mobilizing affects and passions against the consensus-driven and liberal rationalist politics.

It should be clear at this point that while they are correct in mobilizing people's passions in a political conjuncture that prioritizes rational deliberation, which truly energizes and politicizes the public effectively, they do it in more authoritarian and exclusionary ways. When Trump shifts the blame and pins the problem of structural economic inequality and matters of peace and order on immigrants, he articulates an anti-immigrant sentiment that consolidates a base of voters who have felt left out by the elite system. Because he is successful in articulating people's frustrations and resentments, he comes out as their champion with the veneer of raising their voices once and for all. His political messaging resonates with people's affects, particularly because the latter have legitimately been excluded and powerless by the neoliberal system that screams no alternative. Yet, the solution he offers is very nativist, exclusionary, and anti-pluralist, which Mouffe finds threatening to the very ideals of democracy. Crucially, it treads on authoritarian tendencies. They

[34] Mouffe, *Towards A Green Democratic Revolution*, 2.

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disregard the necessity of addressing the demand for equality and equity and the resolve, more critically, to dismantle and replace neoliberalism with a logic that is more inclusive and democratic. It hides cunningly behind the veneer of championing the people's voice and ends up exacerbating the structural problems by disregarding and violating the rule of law, civil and political liberties, and democratic institutions in general. Mouffe opines that it often results in nationalistic authoritarian forms of neoliberalism, that use democracy as a pretext, only to restrict it.[35]

Markedly, the political field has been open chiefly for right-wing populist movements, parties, and figures, as the left has consistently dismissed the affective dimension of liberal democratic politics. As a matter of fact, confronted by the surge of right-wing populist movements and parties, the left has mainly relied on vilifying the right instead of confronting their shortcomings and taking accountability for losing time and again against the radical right in recent years. Look at the United States of America, Western Europe, the Philippines, and others, where the political shift to the right is very evident. The response from the left has been to frame the antagonism in a moral sense rather than a political one. This reveals that there is antagonism today, but contained in a moral sense, which is concerning for Mouffe because antagonism, she claims, must be more political than moral.

Deliberate democracy experts insist that consensus is possible since moral questions are reconcilable using reason. "This trend of political theory of conflating politics with morality—understood in rationalistic and universalistic terms—tries to eradicate an aspect of politics that cannot, in fact, be eradicated: antagonism."[36] By conflating political questions with moral questions, deliberative democracy assumes that we are closer to reaching rational agreements so long as a democratic society is able to frame deliberative procedures that guarantee impartiality and fairness for

[35] Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, 10.
[36] Mouffe, "Politics and Passions: The Stakes of Democracy," 3.

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everyone involved.[37] By using the grammar of morality, politics becomes a question, not of right or left, but of right or wrong.[38] She posits, "… the favored type of democracy is consensual and depoliticized. Nowadays, the key terms of political discourse are 'good governance' and 'partisan free democracy'.[39] In my view, this is evident when Clinton ran against Trump in 2016, claiming that Trump is the morally bad guy, and the Democrats are the good ones. The Philippines, likewise, saw this when Leni Robredo's advocacy for good governance was situated as the antithesis of the Marcos-Duterte "axis of evil."[40]

Instead of moralizing politics and pretending that they hold the moral superiority over the "evil" right, which only leads to blaming the voters for bringing authoritarian leaders to power instead of taking accountability for their incompetence, Mouffe defends a left populist strategy to in order to, firstly, offer a counter populist narrative against the right that equally re-politicizes the people, but secondly, to bring back the political or the antagonistic dimension in democracy but within the confines of agonistic pluralism.

In *For a Left Populism*, Mouffe defines a left populist strategy as one that infuses the logic of populism with general left or progressive values. This suggests that the populist logic of bifurcating society into two camps, "the people" and the "they," be articulated in relation to broad progressive values of democracy, equality, liberty, and social justice, to name a few. As such, she diverges from the orthodox or scientific Marxist notion of the proletariat or the working class as the sole agents of the left. Guided by the principles of populism, the aim then of the left for Mouffe is to radicalize democracy, which I'll characterize very succinctly in a short while.

[37] *Ibid.*, 2.
[38] *Ibid.*, 1.
[39] *Ibid.*, 12.
[40] Ashley Smith, "Taking on the Philippine Axis of Evil: An Interview with Walden Bello," in *Tempest* (8 February 2022), <https://tempestmag.org/2022/02/taking-on-the-philippines-axis-of-evil/>.

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In keeping with the populist logic of constructing a political frontier between the people (us) and a "them," mobilizing passions like what the right does well becomes necessary insofar as political subjects, as mentioned time and again, are not moved solely by reason. This bifurcation ought to be articulated and discursively constructed insofar as the collective identities are not predetermined or pre-packaged but rather are results of political articulation. "The people" in left populism, according to Mouffe, must embody diverse and plural categories of identities, unlike the homogeneity advocated by the populist right, to ensure a more inclusive and democratic base against the adversary that is the neoliberal forces, like the establishment elites, oligarchy, moneyed interests, and corporate power in general. Given that oppression today is no longer confined solely in the factory, but is rather dispersed across social relations: women, the LGBT, black people, immigrants, indigenous peoples, the working class, Muslims, and minorities in general, "the people" must then be discursively articulated to include as much collective identities as possible in order to establish a progressive populist brand that unites several marginalized and disenfranchised communities. The challenge, however, is how to go about such plural and diverse backgrounds of "the people" as the left in a way that works effectively.

She responds to the challenge by bringing our attention to what she terms the "chain of equivalence." Establishing a chain of equivalence of "the people" is significant in order to maintain the diversity of political projects within such groups, but done in a way where their plural and diverse demands are tied and grouped together against a common adversary, the neoliberal elites. She argues that individual struggles against their perceived oppressors can make the resistance too herculean, considering the leverage and dominance of the latter. This is why a chain of equivalence may be necessary, as it allows different militant and resistance groups to come together, with their specific progressive struggles, and rally around common, shared, collective, and popular democratic demands. To be sure, Mouffe does not suggest that feminist, environmental, anti-racial

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discrimination struggles, for example, be collapsed or reduced into one political issue. Rather, she maintains that these plural endeavors be respected but gathered together and linked to a broader critique of neoliberalism, a threat they all share in common. This solidarity around common democratic concerns and interests, despite "the people's" diversity, makes it so that the struggle becomes more fortified, formidable, and dynamic.

Again, the articulation of this political frontier, and by extension the construction of a chain of equivalence, only works if the left starts mobilizing people's affects and passions—their anger, resentment, disappointment, frustration, and even hope—in the first place. Indeed, Mouffe sees the return of the political as contingent on the redirection of these affects toward solidarity in struggling for a more humane and equal society. Attempts of progressive populism in contemporary politics can be seen in the politics of Bernie Sanders in America, Lula Da Silva in Brazil, Evo Morales in Bolivia, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, the UK's Jeremy Corbyn, among others. Of course, there are nuances in their brand of left populism. What is certain is that these figures and their movements have demonstrated the possibility of a counter-narrative to the popularity of the populist right.

The said left populist attempts probably have different motivations, which go beyond the scope of this paper. The way Mouffe sees it though is that left populism must ultimately be directed toward the radicalization of democracy. In the interest of brevity, I wish to briefly characterize its general features under Mouffe's framework in order to crystallize the fundamental political aims of such a hegemonic project.

Mouffe, together with Laclau, first introduced the idea of radical democracy in their seminal work *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. As an upshot of the failed and disastrous socialist experiments in the 20th century, Mouffe and Laclau called for a reworking of the socialist project, that is, to radicalize democracy. This does not advocate a violent overthrow of the system and institution of a new one from scratch. Instead, radical

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democracy operates well within the bounds of liberal democracy. In fact, it maintains the respect for the rule of law, liberal democratic institutions, and the democratic process as a whole.[41] Electoral politics, for instance, remains legitimate. It is only radical insofar as it aims to deepen and extend the pillars or ideals of liberal democracy—equality and liberty—to more social relations.[42] What this counters is the current disposition of confining equality and liberty within the neoliberal market. The illusion so prevalent among liberal democracies captured by neoliberal logic is that there is massive freedom conferred to individuals as they are given substantial access and choices in the market. What it fails to address is the reality that, amidst the abundance of choices in the market, the world continues to wrestle with consequential issues like climate change, racial discrimination, gender inequality, inhumane labor structures, unnecessary wars, wealth and income inequality, and others. Thus, the call of radical democracy is to respond to these concerns. Far from being simply about individual rights, political and democratic rights geared toward an egalitarian and just society must also be taken seriously, where social, ecological, and racial justice, for example, are materially experienced across social relations.

Opening such a possibility is contingent on the activation of the political, or of conflictual politics, where adversaries' competing political and hegemonic projects transpire without wanting or having to destroy one another. They are seen as legitimate rivals advancing political stances that may potentially influence the landscape of how things operate in a given social order. Again, this conflict among hegemonic projects is legitimate because any social order is never final or eternal but is rather simply a product of hegemonic articulation—much like how the neoliberal project that has pervaded the contemporary world did not always exist until the global consensus around it in the 1980s came into fruition. So, because no

[41] Mouffe and Laclau, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, 176.

[42] *Ibid.*

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consensus is ever permanent, and because social order is contingent on hegemonic and political articulations, the legitimacy of contestation stands and perpetual agonistic relations among the center right, center left, far right, far left, and what have you have a place in a radicalized democracy.

Guided by the analysis above, radical democracy then is not geared toward a socialist utopia, where everything is resolved, as though radical democracy will no longer be faced with corruption, bureaucracy, discrimination, and a host of problems. As such, even with the left populist strategy that Mouffe defends, granting that it succeeds in championing the pluralistic and democratic demands of the "people," is never final because there is no final stage. Excluded counterhegemonic projects will persist, and the antagonism will remain at the heart of democracy.

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