

Chantal Mouffe. *For a Left Populism*. Verso, 2018.

For a Left Populism is Chantal Mouffe's latest contribution to the theoretical project first developed with Ernesto Laclau in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985). At the core of this book is the attempt to reinvigorate the agonistic democratic politics that have atrophied after decades of neoliberal governance. Mouffe's contention is that, with the neoliberal order straining to meet unsatisfied popular demands, a left populist strategy is the way to create a new form of radical democratic politics that builds on the principles of liberty and equality.

For Mouffe, liberal democracy is marked by a basic tension between its two constitutive logics: liberal principles like the rule of law, the separation of powers, and individual freedoms on the one hand, and the democratic principles of popular sovereignty and equality on the other. Whereas the history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was largely one of the democratization of liberalism, the neoliberal era is marked by the erosion of these democratic components. Following the Thatcherist turn, social democratic parties, in partnership with the right, became custodians of “post-democracy,” reducing politics to competition among elites on the allegedly neutral terrain of the state.

Against this general de-politicization, Mouffe holds on to *Hegemony's* call for the “‘radicalization’ of the ethico-political principles of liberal-democratic regimes, ‘liberty and equality for all’” (39). She proposes a left populist strategy to unify today's various anti-establishment movements in a common hegemonic project. This entails rearticulating the basic antagonism between “the people” and “the oligarchy” as the frontier on which democracy rests. Importantly, “the people” is not an empirical category, and its demands are too heterogeneous to be captured by the traditional left-right dichotomy. Instead, a left populist strategy requires advancing a new discursive construct of “the people” by leveraging the symbolic values of equality and freedom to create a “we”—the multitude of democratic resistances—against an adversarial “they” made up of the oligarchy.

While she sees this radical democratic project as having an anti-capitalist dimension, the working class does not have any *a priori* privileged role in this conflict. Maintaining that “political identities are not a direct expression of objective positions in the social order” (41), Mouffe argues that the strategic task is to advance left democratic demands for equal rights, the social appropriation of the means of production, and more substantial expressions of

popular sovereignty (44) that are broad enough to create a cross-class hegemonic formation. Mouffe also recognizes that democratic demands are not inherently progressive, and that right-wing mobilizations against neoliberalism can themselves operate according to a democratic logic. Thus national forms of symbolic identification cannot be ceded to the right, requiring the left to strategically build on “affective bonds with a charismatic leader” and “patriotic identification with the best and more egalitarian aspects of the national tradition” (70–71).

Much of this will be familiar to readers of Mouffe’s previous work that draws together Gramsci, Schmitt, and Wittgenstein to advance an anti-essentialist theory of radical democracy. Mouffe’s call for a “hegemonic formation that will foster the recovery and deepening of democracy” (51), in part composed of struggles around the boundaries and substance of citizenship, is timely. However, the analysis and prescriptions presented here are limited by the discourse theory of society that remains the center of her thought.

As many have pointed out, granting Mouffe’s point that identities cannot be directly derived from class or social positions does not mean that they are contingent and malleable enough for the kind of discursive rearticulation that she calls for. At the center of Mouffe’s analysis is the concept of the hegemonic formation, understood as a specific configuration of social (economic, cultural, political, juridical) practices, which are articulated through “key symbolic signifiers” that create the normative reference points for political subjects (43–44). The construction of political subjectivity certainly has a symbolic dimension. But it is equally composed of concrete material practices that reproduce those social relations and create the conditions for those symbolic meanings to gain traction and relative stability over time. By treating all social relations as fundamentally discursive, Mouffe is unable to analyze the specific constellations of power that make some hegemonic projects more durable and successful than others.

This limitation is most apparent in Mouffe’s remarks on the state. Mouffe defines the state as a “crystallization of the relations of forces and as a terrain of struggle”—not a “homogeneous medium but an uneven set of branches and functions, only relatively integrated by the hegemonic practices that take place within it” (46–47). This is indeed a major theoretical breakthrough to come out of the Gramscian revival of the 1970s, and remains a valuable starting point. Nevertheless, Mouffe’s post-Marxism prevents her from pursuing the institutional analysis of those branches and functions through which hegemony is organized, reproduced, and contested. In particular, two aspects of the book would have dramatically benefited from this elaboration.

Mouffe treats neoliberalism as a general condition of depoliticization characterized by deregulation, privatization, and austerity. However, she puzzlingly repeats the superficial picture of neoliberalism as entailing a minimalist state concerned with private property rights, free markets, and free trade (12). Missing here is a discussion of how state power was itself reorganized to help implement and reproduce these processes. Mouffe sees Thatcherism as a populist moment that “disarticulated the key elements of the social-democratic hegemony” (29). Yet it also repoliticized the class compromise on which the post-war welfare state was erected, using state power to deploy austerity discipline that reasserted the structural advantages of the capitalist classes. By treating the political as ontologically prior to the state, Mouffe neglects how in the neoliberal era the state was leveraged to redraw the boundaries of the political itself—domestically, via categories of racial and ethnic exclusion, and internationally, through the ongoing subordination of the Global South to the terms set by the North.

Without this investigation of the capitalist state in its neoliberal stage, Mouffe also does not provide more than a sketch of how a left populist hegemonic project could gain a foothold. Naturally, the question of the transformation of the state looms large. Mouffe rejects the idea of a revolutionary break, tracing this position back to *Hegemony*, where “the emancipatory project could not be conceived any longer as the elimination of the state” (3). Instead, the left populist road to power is presented as a “radical reformism” positioned between social liberalism and either insurrectionary mobilization or “horizontalist” movements seeking to organize outside of the state. The left populist project accepts the legitimacy of liberal democracy and the “constitutive principles of the liberal state” (48)—the separation of powers, universal suffrage, multi-party systems, and civil rights—but “attempts to implement a different hegemonic formation” (46) in the midst of that institutional order. Mouffe suggests that although the state is not a neutral terrain, it can nevertheless act as a site for counter-hegemonic struggles through the creation of a multiplicity of agonistic public spaces in which the people can express their demands (68–69).

This is a legitimate and viable strategic position that follows from the view of the state as a relation of forces and terrain of struggle. Yet there is a conceptual blurriness here between state and hegemonic formation, which obscures how the last forty years of neoliberal capitalism have reconstituted the social forces that undergirded the liberal democratic order. What remains undertheorized is how those constitutive principles of the liberal state have been qualitatively transformed during that time, including the insulation of state administration from popular pressure, the weakening of representative insti-

tutions, the empowering of repressive and carceral apparatuses, and the undermining of civil and voting rights. These changes to state institutions—all of them essential to the consolidation of neoliberal “post-democracy”—are today impediments to the radical democratic project and make the task of a “rupture with the existing social formation” (37) all the more challenging. By identifying the state with the hegemonic formation, Mouffe’s discursive approach thus glosses over the problem of the persistence of state apparatuses as nodes of power that cannot simply be rearticulated into a new hegemonic formation as though at will.

By raising the question of how the principles of equality and freedom can be mobilized as the constitutive principles for a new democratic politics, Mouffe focuses on a pressing issue. Her intervention comes after a decade in which left populist movements from Europe to North America to Latin America attempted to step into the void created by the legitimization crisis of neoliberalism, with mixed results. Whether left populism or another political formation can become the movement to reverse the course of de-democratization in this uncertain period remains to be seen.

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Jane Anna Gordon. *Statelessness And Contemporary Enslavement.* Routledge, 2020.

This book is a literary *tour de force* that skillfully navigates two monumental issues—statelessness and enslavement—which have long framed discourses in the social sciences. To say it is only an erudite contribution to the annals of political theory ignores its transdisciplinary value. Jane Anna Gordon’s work spans and coalesces debates in international relations, public law, sociology, economics, Black Studies and Women’s Studies. The result is a throughgoing and weighty evaluation of complex phenomena that have become the mainstay of contemporary scholarship.

The author begins by explicating what she terms “the degrees of statelessness” (19). Statelessness, contends Gordon, refers to the elastic zones of eroded political membership within a state, the effects of which are sometimes visible and intended, but often, implicit and a consequence of Euromodern state