

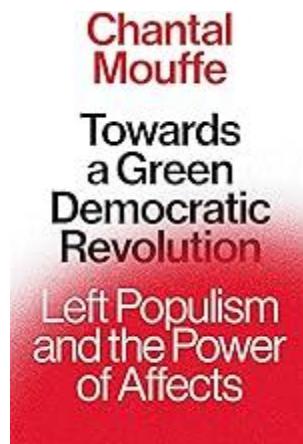
Towards a Green Democratic Revolution: Left Populism and the Power of Affects

Chantal Mouffe

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In *Towards a Green Democratic Revolution*, Chantal Mouffe provides a brief (and hopefully not final) coda to a lifetime in scholarship in the arena of political discourse. In one of her more influential works, “Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?” (1999), she outlines one of the great dangers of the contemporary world, which is that so many people in the developed world now seem to have tired of the promise of democracy and are becoming increasingly willing to consider authoritarian alternatives as a means of actually getting things done. The problem, of course, is rooted in neoliberalism and its ability, as she explains in the current book, “... capacity to adopt in different situations and respond to changing regulations of capitalism has been revealed by the way it incorporates aspects of new countercultural movements (p.9).” She draws here on Gramsci’s concept of ‘hegemony through neutralization,’ which is “... a situation where demands and affects that challenge a hegemonic order are recuperated and satisfied in a way neutralizes their subversive appeal (p.10).” My mind goes to John Lydon, who was once the face of destructive anarchistic republicanism but who has now become better known for his TV advertisements for butter and for parroting tedious right-wing misogyny.

Many people would quibble with whether this actually matters: should one not be concentrating on what Tony Benn called ‘the issues?’ When people hear the truth in open debate, of course they will realise the superiority of leftist arguments and the battle will be won? It is a seductive idea but one which, alas, may be shown to be untrue. It was the logic of the failed remain campaign against Brexit. It has long been one of Mouffe’s most characteristic arguments that politics, to be successful, must recognize the need for emotions, for passion and for affects. The affect is based on the work of Spinoza, who provides one epigraph claiming that people are more commonly

controlled by emotion than reason and another that an affect can only be challenged by one of a contrary nature which proves to be more powerful. Working through the implications of these ideas forms the basis of the book.

Completed shortly before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, as revealed in an endnote, the book focuses on the two great dangers currently facing humanity, which are authoritarianism and the climate emergency. She draws upon the work of Freud and Lacan, in addition to Spinoza, to describe people as being motivated by a combination conatus-libido-affect model which is at the root of understanding our nature. The move towards psychology to explain human behaviour has been a regular feature of leftist thinking since it became evident that most working people were not going to overthrow the bourgeoisie even though the causes of the ruins of their lives had been explained to them by Marx. Lenin realised that Marx's beliefs would never be made concrete without a vanguard organization unafraid to break a few eggs. Mouffe, writing in a different age, would bring about transformational change through a democratic process in which the importance of the behavioural model remains central. She refers to the relative success of Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn when they have campaigned on hope and the failure of the latter, in particular, in a subsequent election against Boris Johnson, who had no policies but popular and powerful slogans. It is certainly true that one of the seminal moments in the most recent presidential election in the USA was an interview given by Kamala Harris, who was asked how things would change should she succeed Joe Biden. Alas for the world, motivated perhaps by loyalty to her ex-boss or just suffering from a catastrophic failure of understanding, she replied that nothing would change. By permitting Trump to be seen as the agent of change, she sealed her electoral failure (although it might be argued that her defeat was overdetermined in this case).

Embracing the use of affects and deploying them effectively is certainly an important way of achieving political success but it is clearly not sufficient. Palestinian people were able to console themselves that if the world only knew the suffering they were forced to endure the outrage of the rest of the world would bring about an end to it. However, the genocide in Gaza is widely available to view in real-time, owing to the omnipresence of the internet and its ability to slip through the mesh of censorship.

Towards the end of the book (p.70 – I said it was a short book), Mouffe observes that: "Intense moments of crisis provide an occasion to choose between clearly defined alternatives." This is where the left is currently failing, in part because of neoliberalism's ability to neutralize threats as previously noted but also because of the difficulty in building broad political alliances on the one hand and identifying a single, coherent vision on the other hand. We must, nevertheless, try.

Reference

Mouffe, C. (1999). Deliberative democracy or agonistic pluralism? *Social Research*, 66(3), 745-58.

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