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Precarity, Populism and the Chances for a Green Democratic Transformation

openDemocracy, 18 January 2021;

rethinking populism series (with Chantal Mouffe, Didier Fassin, and James Schneider)

Albena Azmanova

Green is in. The European Commission, that infamously undemocratic executive arm of the European Union has made the [European Green Deal](#) its flagship policy, which comes at the back of a renewed commitment to ‘social Europe’ with the inauguration of the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#) in 2017. Most recently, Chantal Mouffe has [urged](#) the Left to rally around a *Green democratic transformation*, along the lines of the [Green New Deal](#) policy project advanced by the radical wing of the US Democratic party. This indicates the emergence of a broad societal consensus for an epochal paradigm shift, akin to the shifts that enabled the post-WWII welfare state and that of neoliberal capitalism in the late 20th century.

Undoing the neoliberal hegemony

The anti-establishment insurgencies (aka ‘populism’) in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis did not uproot neoliberal capitalism, but they dealt a blow to its hegemony by lifting the veil of apparent inevitability that had covered the policy commitments to free markets and open economies over the past four decades. Efforts to cope with the coronavirus pandemic made significant reversals to the ‘profits over people’ policy logic. This has opened what Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe have called a “space of indeterminacy” – the possibility for change without a preset direction.

As we stand in this nascent space of indeterminacy, we are facing a historical tipping point. Progressive politics could be reactivated through the synergy between social and environmental justice. In Mouffe’s vision, such a synergy would be able to fire up hearts and minds, prompting a leftist overhaul of the anti-establishment rebellions. Left populism, thus

recast, would finally be able to eclipse the xenophobic, exclusionary right-wing populism, and offer a constructive alternative to neoliberal capitalism.

The logic of such a transformation engages two conceptual moves, detailed in Mouffe's *For a Left Populism* (2019). First, the Left must construct a 'common will' by drawing a frontier between, on the one hand, the various losers of the neoliberal configuration of global capitalism and, on the other, the elites who promote that model and profit from it. These fault-lines, Mouffe rightly observes, do not align with the capital-labour divide as grievances of oppression surpass those of exploitation. In this sense she advocates a 'populist' (a broadly democratic) rather than a class-based mode of mobilisation. Second, in its struggle for justice, the heterogeneous people should be animated politically by a commitment to radical democracy. The radicalization of democracy consists in the "extension of the democratic principles of liberty and equality to a wider set of social relations" (ibid, 28); social justice is therefore to be obtained by fighting all inequalities – economic, political and cultural. To the fight for liberty and equality is added the struggle for environmental justice.

As Mouffe notes, such a recasting of the Left project in terms of radical and plural democracy, rather than Socialism, is in tune with prevailing visions of justice: "It is no doubt significant that the main targets of the 'movement of the squares' were the shortcomings of the political system and of the democratic institutions and that they did not call for 'socialism' but for a 'real democracy'" (ibid. 41). Democracy, rather than Socialism, is the proper banner of the struggle against oppression in our century, she claims.

This formula of progressive politics is both ambitious and realistic -- it captures well the climate of our era. Yet, I will address some tensions between the *ambitions* of this strategy and its *realism*, in order to bring to the fore overlooked components of progressive politics which are indispensable for achieving the desired synergy between social and environmental justice. Finally, I will advance a bit further on the path articulated by Mouffe and will suggest that the proper Left alternative to the class struggle is not that of a Left populism understood as radicalization of democracy, but subverting capitalism by mobilizing an even wider and more diverse anti-capitalist front.

The three stumbling stones of progressive politics

1/ The great Green deal and its little Red social problem

Bridging environmental and social justice is undoubtedly a worthy cause. But this cannot happen by pledging, as most self-identified 'progressive' political formations now do, a parallel commitment to environmental preservation and economic equality. The struggles for ecological and social justice have not only taken place on separate battlefields, they have been in conflict with each other. Advocates for a grand Green transition have always had [a little 'red' problem](#). In the famous [words](#) of one Yellow Vest protester: "The elites talk about the end of the world; we talk about the end of the month". There are solid reasons why social and ecological justice have been political 'frenemies'. The political economy of neoliberal capitalism has made livelihoods strongly dependent on employment in polluting industries, and consumers' purchasing power has been dependent on cheap imports. This has engendered a powerful capital-labour alliance that has been opposing environmental policy ever since ecological concerns gained public attention in the 1970s. Reassurances that the Green transition would create *in the future* more jobs than it will eliminate are not compelling when livelihoods are at stake *now*. We cannot expect working people to be impassioned about a Green transition when their livelihoods – here and now – are threatened by such a transition.

2/ Fighting inequality as a neoliberal fallacy

The second weakness of the Green democratic transformation project is its narrow understanding of social justice in terms of fighting inequalities. Since pundits and academics drew public attention to the spectacular growth of inequalities in the West, social justice has been approached as a matter of fighting inequality via wealth redistribution. Although this is often presented as a radical opposition to neoliberal capitalism, the departure from neoliberal convention is only apparent. Thinking in terms of inequality engages a logic of comparison between individuals and presents the idea of social justice in individualistic terms – as a matter of personal circumstances, of private wealth. Such focus on individual circumstances is a trademark of the neoliberal mentality. Thus, even as we engage in the worthy struggle against inequality and exclusion, we in fact remain captive of the neoliberal imaginary, which views society as composed by individuals in charge of their lives. This eliminates the notion of collective wellbeing that has always been fundamental for Socialism as it espoused a *solidaristic* economy without emphasizing neither equality nor prosperity.

(It might be worth remembering that Marx did not advocate economic equality in his vision of a just social order and that the totalitarian regimes in Eastern Europe created societies that were egalitarian but not solidaristic). A privately wealthy society, even if fairly equal, can still be publicly poor if essential public services are missing or deficient of funds (something that John Galbraith [observed](#) back in 1958).

Typically, pledges to fighting inequality invoke the policy formula of growth-and-redistribution that had ensured the (relative) equality and prosperity of the post-WWII welfare state. However, this prosperity – obtained via intensified production and consumption -- proved toxic for the environment. That is why it is implausible to promise both meaningful action on the Green transition and ‘unprecedented prosperity’-- as the Green New Deal vouches. We should not count on working people’s credulity to ‘buy’ facile political promises for prosperity *and* ecological action. Even when people are ideologically misguided, they are not stupid – and it is a grave political error to assume so.

3/ Democracy as a neoliberal fantasy

The third weakness of the Green Democratic Transition platform concerns the status of democracy: it relies on democratization as a strategy of progressive politics. However, in the context of neoliberal capitalism the economization of society is so thorough that, as Wendy Brown [observes](#), the demos itself has disintegrated into bits of human capital, while the state actively produces voters as economic actors. As people’s dependence on the health of global capitalism is translated into policy preferences through the rituals of democratic representation, democracy becomes [a neoliberal fantasy](#); democracy is increasingly being deployed as a tool for perpetuating neoliberal capitalism.

The strong capital-labour alliance against the Green transition, the narrow interpretation of social justice as countering inequality, and the erosion of the democratic foundation of politics combine to generate a condition I have called a ‘[meta-crisis](#)’ (crisis of the crisis) of democratic capitalism: even as the neoliberal hegemony has entered a crisis, transformation does not take place. Society is trapped in a state of inflammation and engaged in perpetual crisis-management. Is there a way out of this unfortunate conundrum? To reboot progressive politics, we need to adjust our diagnosis of the current historical conjuncture.

The social question of our time: the massification of precarity

The outrage against inequality has been the rallying cry for the Left. However, this strategy, as the [U.S. presidential elections](#) in 2016 and 2020 revealed, has been based on a diagnostic error. Tellingly, the states where Trump made inroads among the working class (Alaska, Oklahoma, Wyoming, Iowa, Utah, and Michigan), had seen the smallest increases in inequality nationwide since 1989, but their troubled economies have not generated good and stable employment. The Republican Party has been especially successful in Rust Belt states such as Michigan and Ohio, where poverty is not a result of skewed distribution of wealth, but of a broader industrial decay caused by automation and the offshoring of manufacturing to countries with cheaper labor, which has led to urban decay and rising criminality.

As I have argued in [Capitalism on Edge](#), a distinctive feature of current-day capitalism is the massification of economic and social insecurity – a condition of ‘precarity for all’ that has been politically induced. Four decades of ‘structural adjustment’ and ‘austerity policy’ — reducing job security and slashing public spending on essential services, including health care — have dramatically weakened our societies and diminished their governing capacity. The combination of automation, globalization, and cuts in social provision has generated massive economic instability for ordinary citizens — for men and women, young and old, Black and white, skilled and unskilled, middle classes and the poor alike. This is becoming true also for the labour-market insiders (the envied ‘winners’ of globalization), as the competitive pressures of global capitalism are imposing a high price for their success: work-related stress, poor mental health, and a pathological work-life balance. The resulting precarity, more so than inequality, is what is ailing the 99 per cent. This is what has been fuelling right-wing populism beyond the ranks of the impoverished blue-collar working class (globalisation’s ‘losers’).

It might be useful to remember that, while the rise of populism is usually a consequence of economic malaise and political turmoil (as in Nazi Germany of the 1930s), the most recent populist mobilizations emerged in the “roaring 1990s” -- in conditions of robust growth (except in Germany), rising living standards, and low unemployment. It was particularly spread in affluent and egalitarian societies such as France, the Netherlands, Austria, Finland, and Switzerland. The 1990s were the decade when the social consequences

of neoliberal globalisation began to be felt in terms of economic instability within, and despite, affluence.

Thus, since the close of the twentieth century, a widespread anxiety in affluent Western societies emerged, based on perceptions that policies of open borders have brought in physical insecurity, political disorder, cultural estrangement, and employment insecurity due to employment flexibilization, job outsourcing, or loss of jobs to immigrants. These became the four ingredients of a new order-and-security public agenda that has dramatically reshaped the ideological landscape of liberal democracies. What has been mislabeled as “populism” are in fact mobilizations around this new public agenda of social concerns.

A distinctive feature of populism is what Max Weber called “negative politics”— a hostile confrontation without a coherent programmatic stance and with no credible ambition to govern. However, the massification of economic insecurity brought about not just the negative politics of an anti-establishment protest (populism), it fostered the emergence of a substantive *order-and-security* agenda of public concerns. ‘Populist’ parties and movements are expressing a distinct set of public demands related to this order-and-security agenda (from restrictive immigration policy to reforming trade agreements), and are persistently making their way into parliaments and governments.

Precairety fosters conservative and even reactionary instincts. It nurtures an aversion to change, hence the shift to the right amidst the economic recession of 2008-2018, disappointing the Left’s expectations that the crisis would radicalise voters into an anti-capitalist upheaval. Without significant reform of the political economy, without changes explicitly addressing the issue of economic precarity, our impassioned calls for a Green democratic transformation would be fruitless. For people to embrace the radical politics of a Green Democratic Transformation they first need to feel secure about their livelihoods. The challenge, therefore, is to build a more stable, secure, and sustainable society, by explicitly addressing the roots of precarity. The outdated and pernicious growth-and-redistribution idea of social justice should be replaced with a strategy for fighting economic insecurity. This will make the social justice agenda compatible with environmental justice – the only way to secure broad societal support for the Green New Deal we so urgently need. By appeasing the toxic anxieties that have been besetting our societies, the alleviation of precarity, in

turn, is likely to foster the solidaristic ethos that is needed for effective redistributive policies.

This diagnosis of the social problem brings to light a path for radical progressive politics alternative to both the 'class struggle' formula of the old Left and the 'Left populism' formula of deepening democracy. Because precarity is generated by the core dynamics of capitalism, namely the pursuit of profit, and because precarisation is afflicting all (including the purported 'winners' of neoliberal globalisation) there is an unprecedented opportunity for engaging a broad of alliance of forces in an anti-capitalist insurgency. Unglamorous policy reforms countering the competitive pursuit of profit (from social enterprises to universal and unconditional welfare) would amount to subverting capitalism without the crutches of a terminal crisis, a revolutionary break, or a guiding utopia.

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