

ASN Convention  
Columbia University  
New York  
May 2-4, 2019

## **Divided Resistance: The Response of the Left to the Authoritarian and Radical Right**

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In the debate over the rise of the populism,<sup>1</sup> the phenomenon has been variously characterized as having been born out of historical fascism,<sup>2</sup> as a reaction to contemporary cultural and social insecurities generated by globalized neo-liberal agendas,<sup>3</sup> and as a systemic corrective of a politics that has become too distant from the people.<sup>4</sup> Given these conflicting interpretations, it is not surprising that populism, with its anti-establishment stance, has been seen as holding both a hostile and friendly relationship with democracy.<sup>5</sup> Exclusivist notions of what constitutes the demos have been juxtaposed against those that highlight the redemptive potential of democracy, whereby “the people” should decide their own future

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<sup>1</sup> On populism, see Cas Mudde (ed.), *The Populist Radical Right: A Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017); Mudde and Christóbal Rovira Kaltwasser *Populism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Federico Finchelstein, *From Fascism to Populism in History* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017); Kirk A. Hawkins, Ryan E. Carlin, Levente Littvay, and Kaltwasser (eds.), *The Ideational Approach to Populism: Concept, Theory, and Analysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019); Jan-Werner Müller, *What is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2016); Nadia Urbinati, *Democracy Disfigured: Opinion, Truth, and the People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014); Benjamin Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Style, and Representation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016); John B. Judis, *The Populist Explosion: How the Great Recession Transformed American and European Politics* (New York: Columbia Global Report, 2016); Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* (London and New York: Verso, 2018); Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin, *National Populism: The Revolt against Liberal Democracy*.

<sup>2</sup> See Finchelstein, *From Fascism to Populism in History*.

<sup>3</sup> See Piero Ignazi, *The Extreme Right Parties in Western Europe* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Mudde, “The problem with populism,” *The Guardian*, 17 February 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Mudde and Kaltwasser, pp. 18–20.

through a direct expression of their sovereign will.<sup>6</sup> The association of the Radical Right with populism—which has left-wing historical trajectories of its own—is another complicating factor. Since left-wing and right-wing forms of populism are often antithetical, their conflation leaves out crucial ideological distinctions. The radical Left’s critique of social inequalities and of the identification of liberalism with democracy is based on anti-elitist discourses.<sup>7</sup> While the far-right’s criticism of elites in the name of the people can, in part, be seen as a reaction to anti-democratic technocracy, it is arguably more about anti-politics based on ethno-nationalism and social and cultural conservatism. For this reason, some scholars, such as Jacques Rancière, are reluctant to use the populist label.<sup>8</sup> To him, the moralistic denunciation of populism in all its formations boils down to an elitist attempt to downplay popular democratic expressions. Given the widespread use of the term, it may prove futile to discard it. Yet, the lack of definitional rigor is a constant reminder of the need not only to take into account the ambivalent history of populism as a political category but also how it has been practiced in the past and present.

In this paper, I engage debates on the Left over the response to right-wing populism—and evaluate their influence on politics and party systems in various European national and regional settings. In the first part, I approach the subject matter from a theoretical angle. Within the context of the scholarly literature on populism—especially the works of Ernesto Laclau, Cas Mudde, Christóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Jan-Werner Müller, and Nadia Urbinati—I focus, in particular, on Chantal Mouffe’s recent work on left-wing populism. She advocates a populist democratic strategy, which centers on the “construction of the people” as a legitimizing basis for egalitarian politics. While projecting the Radical Right in adversarial terms, she takes its democratic claims seriously as part of a broader questioning of the

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<sup>6</sup> Margaret Canovan, “Trust the people! Populism an the two faces of democracy,” *Political Studies*, 47,1 (1999), 2–16.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p. 134.

<sup>8</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy* (London: Verso, 2006), pp. 79–80.

normative assumptions about liberal democracy, especially its consensus-based technocratic features. Her case for establishing a left-wing hegemony within liberal democratic systems through transversal alliance-building may hold some promise as a political strategy. But it will be argued here that it is undermined by a lack of a theoretical and historical engagement with the roots, ideology, and behavior of the populist Right.

In the second part, I analyze how mainstream Social Democratic and radical Left formations have confronted the revolt of the Right—a phenomenon that represents, in many cases, a merger between conservative/authoritarian policies and populist far-right agendas. The success of the populist parties has allowed them not only to play a role in setting the political agenda but also to act, paradoxically, both as systemic destabilizers and stabilizers. On the one hand, they are a disrupting anti-elitist force, seeking to reverse mainstream policies on immigration, welfare, multiculturalism, and European integration. On the other, it is an accommodating political vehicle, which is prepared to forge alliances with conservative elites.

This political realignment has generated a tension between two streams on the Left, highlighting its fragmentation. Facing direct electoral competition from right-wing populists, Social Democrats have had to defend their traditional social base, with some even having bought into the populist Right's narrative on immigration, asylum, and border control. More radical Left formations differ on whether to define the far-right in democratic or fascist terms. But they, generally, reject any collaboration with Social Democracy because of its complicity with neo-liberal ideology and propagate a democratic renewal strategy, which is based on equality and civic participatory discourses. Thus, in the absence of a perceived “existential” political threat from the Right, akin to that of fascism in the interwar period, there is nothing to suggest that the Left will adopt a “popular front” strategy to counter it.

## Theorizing a Left-Wing Alternative to Right-Wing Populism

Some scholars, such as Mudde and Kaltwasser, argue that populism represents a “thin ideology”<sup>9</sup>—a concept borrowed from Michael Freeden—affiliated with a “host ideology,” which can be situated either on the Left and Right. Such a malleable definition, which suggests an organized, if fleeting, response to different political conditions, runs the risks of stripping the concept of core historical dimensions and conceptual genealogies.<sup>10</sup> In her recent work on populism, Chantal Mouffe, accepts such a dualistic interpretation of populism, but makes a sharp distinction between the two ideological variations. Using Ernesto Laclau’s classic left-wing populist framework,<sup>11</sup> she repackages it as a radical political recipe in the present. Laclau defined populism as a discursive strategy aimed at constructing a political frontier, dividing society into two camps, and at enlisting the “underdog” against the establishment. Mouffe argues that the next central axis of the political conflict in Europe will be between right-wing and left-wing populism.<sup>12</sup>

The current political situation in Europe reflects what she terms a crisis of the neo-liberal hegemony formation, which was established in the 1980s. It has created, she asserts, the conditions for a “populist moment,” making it possible to create a new radical subject of collective action, the “people.” Through a “mobilization of common effects in defense of equality and justice,”<sup>13</sup> this popular construction will be in a position to combat the xenophobic policies of the populist Right and reconfigure the political order.<sup>14</sup> It should be

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<sup>9</sup> See Ben Stanley, “The thin ideology of populism,” *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 13, 1 (2008), 95–110; Cas Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist,” *Government and Opposition*, 39 (2004), 542–563; Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso Books, 2005); Michael Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); idem, “Ideology and Political Theory,” *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 11 (2006), 3–22.

<sup>10</sup> See Finchelstein, *From Fascism to Populism in History*, p. 130.

<sup>11</sup> See Laclau, *On Populist Reason*.

<sup>12</sup> Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, p. 6.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p. 11.

made clear that Mouffe is only concerned with Northern, Western, and Southern Europe. She leaves out Eastern European states on the grounds that they are marked by a specific history under communism and a different political culture.<sup>15</sup> Her choice limits the scope of her analysis and may underestimate the transnational links between right-wing populists in Western Europe and the semi-authoritarian governments in Hungary and Poland. Yet, it is useful because there is a need to make a distinction between the Conservative and Radical Right, which is often downplayed in the literature on populism. Jan-Werner Müller, for example, not only subsumes all right-wing party formations under the same rubric; he makes not attempt to distinguish between authoritarian leaders, such as Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Vladimir Putin or Viktor Orbán or between them and populists like Marine Le Pen or Geert Wilders. To be sure, Orbán and his party the Hungarian Civic Union, Fidesz, have moved sharply to the Right, having borrowed heavily from the far-right populist party Jobbik. Given his ultra-nationalist and natalist agenda, it is even possible that he will eventually leave his traditional conservative base and side with populists such as Matteo Salvini and Le Pen in France. But so far he has pursued a hybrid strategy to enable him to stay in both camps, for he is, at bottom, a right-wing nationalist conservative, like Jarosław Aleksander Kaczyński, the strongman in Poland.<sup>16</sup>

Mouffe believes that it is a mistake to parrot the Center-Left's moralistic characterization of the populist Right as representing a fascist reaction. On the contrary, she claims that many of its demands are democratic to which a "progressive answer must be given."<sup>17</sup> She even credits Jörg Haider, the former head of the populist Austrian Freedom Party, for mobilizing the themes of popular sovereignty to articulate growing resistance to the way Austria was governed by a coalition of elites made up of conservatives and Social

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<sup>15</sup> Mouffe, pp. 9–10.

<sup>16</sup> Orbán is still aligned with conservative parties, including the mainstream Center-Right European People's Party (EPP) group in the European Parliament, even if his membership has been put on probation.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

Democrats.<sup>18</sup> Haider's point about political corruption stemming from the dual governing arrangement institutionalized by the Center-Right and the Center-Left had some validity. Yet, since Mouffe does not dwell on Haider's political program, it should be mentioned that he also pursued neo-liberal policies and spoke in nostalgic terms about interwar fascism. Thus, he did not only praise Margaret Thatcher for striving for a "lean state" but put his anti-immigration rhetoric within the context of Nazi employment policies.<sup>19</sup>

Mouffe is partly correct in describing the emergence of the Radical Right in terms of a post-political revolt. But it is a simplification to reduce it to a condition of a neo-liberal crisis. First, as was the case with Haider, some right-wing populist formations started as protest parties, fighting against statism on the basis of a neo-liberal agenda. Then, they adopted nationalistic anti-immigration politics, coupled with a law and order rhetoric, expressing support for socio-cultural traditional values. This tactical flexibility points to the need to pay close attention to the behavior of the populists within the political system. What stands out, despite their anti-elitist stance, is their willingness to enter into coalitions with conservative elites to satisfy their power and government aspirations.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the Conservative Right has become a major beneficiary of the rise of the populists, providing it with a chance to stabilize a neo-liberal hegemony instead of undermining it. This raises the question of whether Mouffe's heralding of a "populist moment" is warranted at all.

Second, what needs to be stressed is that the far-right parties in Europe are rooted in different political milieus<sup>21</sup>—whether as part of "legacy fascism," neo-fascism or neo-liberal anti-tax revolts.<sup>22</sup> Most of them have been careful not to identify themselves with fascism

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<sup>18</sup> Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, p. 19.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Cohen, "A Haider In Their Future," *The New York Times*, 30 April 2000; "Haider in context: Nazi employment policies," BBC, 11 February 2000, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/639385.stm>.

<sup>20</sup> See Martin Blinkhorn (ed.), *Fascists and conservatives. The radical right and the establishment in twentieth-century Europe* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990); idem, *Fascism and the right in Europe, 1918–1945* (London: Longmans, 2000).

<sup>21</sup> Daphne Halikiopoulou and Sofia Vasilopoulou, "Support for the Far Right in the 2014 European Parliament Elections: A Comparative Perspective," *The Political Quarterly*, 85, 3 (2014), 286.

<sup>22</sup> Richard Griffiths, *Fascism* (London: Continuum, 2006), 150–152.

because of the stigma attached to it and because they realize that any such affiliation would diminish their political clout and threaten their electoral prospects. But Mouffe's silence on the historical dimension of populism leaves out ideological similarities. The same criticism can be directed at Mudde and Kaltwasser who, erroneously, argue that interwar fascism was a form of elitism rather than populism because of the ideological emphasis on the leadership cult and racial policies.<sup>23</sup> Fascists adopted an anti-elitist program, even if it was compromised by their collaboration with conservatives. In Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, there was a fierce competition between the party and state, echoing an inbuilt tension between the old guard and the new or "patrician" and "plebeian" elements. Mudde can also be faulted for excluding racism and xenophobia in his definition of populism because they are forms of nativism. Such an interpretation not only ignores historical precedents and current practices, exposing the limits of his "populist minimum."

Mouffe is open about the populist Right's extreme ethno-centrism, but, like Mudde, she does not engage it in her theoretical account. Apart from an emphasis on radical nationalism, what the contemporary far-right parties have in common with the interwar Radical Right is their refusal to define themselves in terms of traditional right-wing/left-wing terms and to seek support in both camps. Their hostility toward intergovernmental or supranational projects, whether the League of Nations in the interwar period or the European Union in the present, is a defining trait. By attacking the corruption and weaknesses of elites, populists, just like fascists, seek to reinforce their status as saviors and outsiders. Their agenda is directed at marginalized groups in what Jens Rydgren terms a new "master frame," combining nativism with anti-establishment rhetoric.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> See Mudde and Kaltwasser, *Populism*, p. 33.

<sup>24</sup> See Jens Rydgren, "Is extreme right-wing populism contagious? Explaining the emergence of a new party family," *European Journal of Political Research*, 44 (2005), 413–443.

Populists also build on the idea of ethno-pluralism as a counter-narrative to multiculturalism. Instead of focusing on “blood and soil,” as many of the fascist parties did, they refer to essentialist mono-cultural ideas to buttress their case for segregation. Different ethnic groups have to be kept separate because any “mixture” would lead to cultural decay. To some scholars, this argument is not part of a traditional racist discourse because ethno-pluralism does not have to be hierarchical or made up of “superior” or “inferior” ethnic groups.<sup>25</sup> But such an interpretation is misguided. Apart from the anti-Islamic subtext, this ideological strand is clearly part of a racist tradition. “Separate but equal” was, for example, the standard refrain of those in the United States who sought to preserve a segregated South during the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s.

By seeking to “federate” all the democratic struggles against post-democracy, Mouffe makes the case for enlisting the supporters of the right-wing populist parties and channel their demands toward more egalitarian objectives.<sup>26</sup> To be sure, some right-wing populists might be tempted by such a promise. But as a left-wing strategy, the plea for an anti-moralistic acceptance of right-wing populism as a democratic force subject to left-wing conversion can be contested. One wonders whether it is based less on a strategy designed to counter the reification of liberal democratic norms than to lure back working class supporters. If that is the case, the price might be the weakening of the Lefts’ universalist and internationalist aspirations in favor of nationalism, which could run the risk of reproducing, even if in a different language, a chauvinistic agenda.

Mouffe is adamant, however, about one thing: that the construction of a more democratic hegemonic formation—which would, inevitably, lead to fundamental changes in power relations—does not require a revolutionary break. Borrowing a page from the neo-

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<sup>25</sup> Gabriella Elgenius and Jens Rydgren, “Frames of nostalgia and belonging: the resurgence of ethno-nationalism in Sweden,” *European Societies* (July 2018 online) DOI: 10.1080/14616696.2018.1494297.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*



liberal arch-enemy of the Left, she claims that the experience of Thatcherism shows that the possibility exists in Europe to bring about a transformation of the existing order without destroying liberal institutions.<sup>27</sup> Yet, as she has theorized in the past, the success of such a hegemonic offensive is contingent on antagonistic politics. This explains why the Social Democratic Left cannot be included in a populist Left coalition. Having been converted to neo-liberalism, it views democracy as a process to reach a consensus and believes that politics without an adversary is a viable option.<sup>28</sup>

Irrespective of her polemics, Mouffe's intervention—with its roots in Laclau's theory—is relevant in the academic debate over populism. What forms the basis of most mainstream scholarly approaches toward the phenomenon is the hostile relationship between the “people” and elites. Mudde and Kaltwasser, for example, include discourse in their “ideational” definition of populism, which as a political strategy can both have positive or negative effects. Thus, it can be seen as a potential corrective as well as a threat to democracy, depending on the context.<sup>29</sup> As a democratizing force, populism defends the principle of popular sovereignty with the aim of empowering groups that do not feel represented by the political establishment. This is perfectly consistent with Mouffe's argument. On the other hand, they stress that populism can also lead to authoritarian aberrations and undermine liberal democracy because of its rejection of pluralism, including minority rights.<sup>30</sup>

Needless to say, Mouffe does not subscribe to an anti-democratic program or use a Left populist strategy to undercut the interests of vulnerable groups. Her approach, further, exposes the ambiguity of Mudde and Kaltwasser's definition. It is not only about a vertical dichotomy, involving the underprivileged and the privileged, but also about defining pluralism—with its variety of partly overlapping social groups with different ideas and

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p. 36.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p. 79.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p. 79.

<sup>30</sup> Mudde and Kaltwasser, *Populism*, pp. 18–20.

interests—as the anti-thesis of populism. The question arises whether populism can be democratic if it opposes pluralistic forms defined in broad terms and not solely reduced to interest politics. Mouffe’s project may well fit into their schema on the grounds that it is not directed at liberal democracy per se. But it is about a new hegemonic form of power within the existing system—a constellation that is absent in Mudde and Kaltwasser’s “thin” and protean definition of populism.

In his polemical work on populism, Jan-Werner Müller, who focuses almost exclusively on its right-wing variant, dismisses its redemptive possibilities and characterizes it as being fundamentally antithetical to democracy. He stresses that populism can never improve a political system that has become too elite-driven. For Müller, the populist distinction between “the pure people” and “corrupt elite” involves a particular moralistic imagination of politics, which rejects interest-based politics. The “people” do not exist in the real world, for they are an imaginary construct created for anti-democratic purposes. Therefore, populism can never become a political corrective. While he concedes that the practice of liberal democracy leaves much to be desired in some countries, it should be defended against populism’s false promises of democratic regeneration.<sup>31</sup> Such a moralistic and defensive stance is what Mouffe seeks to counter on the grounds that it disqualifies all those who oppose the status quo. Müller does not engage with critical theorists, such as Yannis Stavrakakis and Anton Jäger, who, like Mouffe, argue that—in an age of increasing social inequalities and technocracy—elites are mostly responsible for divorcing liberalism from democracy, returning the former to its oligarchic roots and annulling the dynamic of their cross-fertilization.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Müller, *What is Populism?* pp. 6, 10–11, 76.

<sup>32</sup> See Yannis Stavrakakis and Anton Jäger, “Accomplishments and limitations of the ‘new’ mainstream in contemporary populism studies,” *European Journal of Social Studies*, 21, 4 (2018), 547–565.

In other words, the “revolt of the elites”—or, in Mouffe’s words—the crisis of neo-liberalism has created the conditions for the “populist moment.” While this interpretation is certainly contestable, Müller does not really allow for what Margaret Canovan’s termed the two faces of democracy—one redemptive and the other pragmatic—which may be opposed but are interdependent.<sup>33</sup> Democratic redemption involves public participation and a loss of authority of representative organizations, such as political parties. But, it does not represent a revolutionary challenge because it is not about the creation a people sovereignty but operates within the system. Nadia Urbinati has, however, warned against another destructive tendency of populism—whether on the Right or Left—to make a democracy more intensely majoritarian and less liberal. To her, populism disfigures democratic institutions because it makes the dialectics between minority and majority opinions hard to manage.<sup>34</sup> If successful, it could lead to an exit from representative and constitutional democracy, for it “fosters a homogenous unification of the “people,” preferably under one leader or one ideology or both.”<sup>35</sup>

Urbinati emphasizes the key role of “intermediary bodies” in liberal democracies, which are capable of communicating political demands from a party base to an elite without the direct embodiment put forward by populist demagogues or the unrestrained demophobia of elitist technocrats.<sup>36</sup> Laclau saw populism as being more egalitarian and democratic politics than that obtained through representative procedures, which was its true adversary. By polarizing society through the creation of fronts of confrontation, a new unification of the people through hegemonic politics could be produced. But Urbinati argues that a strategy embracing hegemonic politics, like that advocated by Laclau, would be dangerously prone to

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<sup>33</sup> Margaret Canovan, “Trust the people! Populism and the two faces of democracy,” *Political Studies*, 47,1 (1999), 2–16; see also Stavrakakis and Jäger, “Accomplishments and limitations of the ‘new’ mainstream in contemporary populism studies,” 561.

<sup>34</sup> Nadia Urbinati, *Democracy Disfigured: Opinion, Truth, and the People*, p. 149.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>36</sup> Urbinati, “A revolt against intermediary bodies,” *Constellations* 22 (2015), 484–485.

becoming a vehicle for a reactionary Caesarism that uses populism to make itself victorious.<sup>37</sup> Laclau responded to such criticism by arguing that personalization was not what characterized populism, even if the identification of a movement under a leader might make polarization successful. Urbinati's counter-argument is that such a reading opens up the possibility of a dictatorship and does not make populism the same as democratic politics.<sup>38</sup> Urbinati's intervention raises serious questions about the need to maintain checks and balances in any democratic system. Yet, what is absent in her account is any discussion of the flaws of liberal democracies, such as the power and influence of interest groups that can serve anti-democratic aims.

Mouffe is aware of the critique of hegemonic populist politics, even if she does not target democratic representative institutions in her work. Yet, she rejects any automatic links between a charismatic or "strong leadership" with authoritarianism. Right-wing populism can involve an authoritarian bond between the leader and the people with no real grassroots participation. But the leader, she claims, can also be conceived of as a *primus inter pares*—as part of a left-wing populist movement—whereby a less vertical relationship with the flock can be established. And since a collective will cannot be constructed without some form of crystallization of common affects, she argues that a charismatic leader can play an important role in this process.<sup>39</sup> In other words, Mouffe sees no need to engage the possibility that a democratic left-wing populist strategy can turn into some kind of an authoritarian regime. Urbinati may think that Mouffe underestimates such a temptation. But given that Mouffe is advocating a reversed Thatcherite hegemonic strategy, she can hardly be blamed for entrusting the leader with a meaningful role within a liberal democratic system.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid, pp. 137, 153.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, p. 158.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, p. 70.

## **A Left-Wing Populism in Practice?**

What these different theoretical approaches have in common is to ascribe to populism the goal of reducing the distance between “the people” and their representatives. While some view its redemptive potential in breaking a post-political deadlock; others see it as a danger to democratic politics. Yet, the dominant scholarly tendency to define populism exclusively in “ideational” terms—as a discourse, an ideology, or a world-view—can obscure the relationship with political practice. Since the 2008 financial crisis, the European populist Right has taken advantage of a broader trend of “dealignment” or the dislocation between personal identities and political party affiliation in European liberal democracies. With the erosion of the dominant position of Social Democratic parties and some “big tent” Center-Right parties—a trend that has been accompanied by the general weakening of liberal parties—far-right parties have, in many countries, become the second or third largest political force. In 2018, moderate left-wing parties were swept from power in the Czech Republic, Austria, France, Italy, and the Netherlands, adding to a string of electoral losses since 2010. The only European countries currently under Social Democratic or Socialist leadership are Malta, Romania, Sweden, Portugal, Greece, and Iceland.

Several explanations have been offered to explain the Left’s retrenchment, such as the embracement of a globalist neo-liberal agenda—as symbolized by the Third Way—an increasing detachment from the labor movement, and a lack of commitment to fight social inequalities. The populist Right has exploited these weaknesses, especially after shifting its emphasis, in many instances, from neo-liberal policies toward the social state and by portraying foreigners as competitors in labor markets. In addition, it has adopted welfare chauvinistic positions, combining a pro-social stance with anti-elite and anti-immigrant rhetoric. Finally, the refugee influx provided populist parties with a political weapon to drive

home their point that immigrants and asylum seekers pose a threat to national identity and culture.

It is not only Mouffe that has criticized the Social Democratic Left for diabolizing right-wing populists and for not heeding the concerns and anxieties they express. A growing chorus of center-left politicians and intellectuals have urged Social Democrats to stop equating a critical discussion on immigration with xenophobia and to admit that right-wing populist success reflects deep-seated economic and social insecurities. What needs to be admitted, they argue, is that the gap between winners and losers of globalization is growing—a gap that neither the Center-Left nor the Center-Right have been able to bridge. This has enabled right-wing populists adversaries to recruit from those who are threatened by social decline due to foreign competition and the ideological offensive waged by neo-liberalism. A Social Democratic counter-strategy—French Socialist politician Laurent Baumel—asserts cannot be based on moral judgements of right-wing populist voters, for it only exacerbates the divide between the “elitist do-gooders” and the “allegedly racist masses.”<sup>40</sup> Similarly, Ernest Hillebrand believes that the populist adversaries needs to be taken seriously, because they are not anti-democratic, with many of them are rooted in left-wing milieus.<sup>41</sup>

Most critics think that the key to Social Democracy’s regeneration is a return to the social question accompanied by a new critical engagement with international trade or neo-liberal globalization.<sup>42</sup> But in contrast to the radical Left, they continue to frame Social Democratic solutions aimed at overcoming the opposition between the “elites and ordinary people” in terms of “positive social conflictuality,” requiring a “constructive dialogue” between capital and labor.<sup>43</sup> Hence, Social Democrats do not espouse a coalition-building

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<sup>40</sup> Laurent Bauman, “How to Reinvigorate Social Democracy to Fight Populism in Europe,” in Ernst Hillebrand (ed.), *Right Wing Populism in Europe – How do we Respond* (Berlin: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, May 2014), p. 3.

<sup>41</sup> Hillebrand, “Populism: The Errors of the Left,” in Hillebrand, *Right Wing Populism Europe*, pp. 8–9.

<sup>42</sup> See, for example, Marius Müller Henning (ed), *Political fragmentation on the left... alongside a global renaissance of right-wing populism* (Berlin: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, January 2018).

<sup>43</sup> Bauman, “How to Reinvigorate Social Democracy,” p. 3.

strategy with the radical Left against the rise of right-wing populism. They are confident that the populist Right does not threaten the established order in Western Europe. This also partly explains their attitude toward the European Union and their response to the criticism that it is undemocratic, bureaucratic and unresponsive to popular demands.<sup>44</sup> There have certainly been Social Democratic calls for acknowledging that technocratic de-politicization is not a sustainable approach toward the European project in an anti-EU political environment and that deeper integration may not be the answer. But, again, such critique is not about making transformative changes in how the EU is governed.

In practice, Social Democratic parties, in some European countries, have tried to reclaim a lost ideological turf by focusing on social issues. Thus, the SPD in Germany, whose electoral support has plunged to an all-time low, is pushing for a Europe-wide minimum wage in its election campaign for the 2019 European elections.<sup>45</sup> But as long as it is locked in a deeply unpopular coalition government with the Christian Democratic Center-Right, one wonders whether such attempts makes any difference. Moreover, there is also a counter-trend at work here. The Social Democrats may want to rediscover their domestic labor roots, but, at the same time, they seem to be distancing themselves, in some cases, from their international ideological traditions. By “legitimizing” ethno-nationalist populism on the grounds it reflects democratic aspirations, they have also begun parroting its policies in some areas. The Danish Social Democrats have revised their immigration policy in such a radical way that it echoes many of the core tenets of the right-wing Danish People’s Party. Moreover, they have refused to rule out a coalition government with the populists or leading a minority government, with their support.

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<sup>44</sup> See Anthony Painter, “Honesty, Statecraft and Engagement: Three Remedies Against Right Wing Populism in Europe,” in Hillebrand, *Right Wing Populism in Europe*, p. 4.

<sup>45</sup> See “Kommt zusammen und macht Europa stark! Wahlprogramm für die Europawahl am 26. Mai 2019,” <https://www.spd.de/europa-ist-die-antwort/unsere-ziele/unsere-europaprogramm/>.

This accommodation strategy, which is resisted by some other Social Democratic parties, such as the Swedish one, highlights a vulnerability on the European Left. Having downplayed or abandoned a neo-liberal economic agenda, which characterized the party platforms prior to the 2008 financial crisis, the right-wing populist parties have put increased emphasis on promoting social and welfare issues targeted at the majority national populations. They are competing with the Socialist Democratic Left, hoping to win over its traditional social base in cities. The Austrian Freedom Party is, for example, vying for the same urban voters—often among the secular working and lower middle classes—as the Social Democrats, while the conservative Austrian People’s Party has largely retained its rural, religious electoral base. The decision by the Austrian Social Democrats to negotiate at the regional level in Carinthia, a coalition deal with the populist Freedom Party shows that it has accepted the latter as a legitimate political force. What this means is that the far-right populist parties have, partly at least, succeeded in getting the ideological message across that they belong neither to the Right nor Left. For the Social Democratic Left, just the suggestion of forging coalitions, on the national level, with the populist Right under certain political circumstances could, of course, have highly negative consequences. It could not only exacerbate the confusion about ideological identities and policies of Social Democratic parties but also drive a further wedge between it and the radical Left and Green parties in Europe.

This leads back to Mouffe’s description of the current political condition as a “populist moment.” Having excluded the Center Left for its complicity with neo-liberalism, she singles out Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s La France Insoumise, Jeremy Corbyn’s Labor Party in Britain, Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain, Bloco de Esquerda in Portugal, and Die Linke in Germany as the potential standard-bearers of a Left populism. Thus, Syriza managed to articulate, in a collective will, a variety of democratic demands, which allowed it to come to power. Podemos forged a strategy, pitting elites against the people, to enter parliament and



become a serious political contender on the Left. Die Linke is mentioned as another example of such an accomplishment. And Mouffe believes that Mélenchon and Corbyn have shown that they can win at the ballot box, citing their successes in parliamentary elections.<sup>46</sup>

Mouffe may, however, have overestimated the potential and strength of the parties she champions. While they have, to some degrees, sought to promote a radical Left agenda, their ability to produce new hegemonial constellations in the foreseeable future seem to be limited. Of all those parties, British Labor Party is the only one, which has a real chance of coming to power, providing it with the means to dismantle, at least, parts of the Thatcherite neoliberal order. Mélenchon's party has replaced the Socialists, which were almost wiped out in the last elections, as the largest left-wing opposition party in France. But with the centrist, conservative, and Radical Right forces dominating French politics, the Left has been sidelined. It is true that it has supported some of the democratic demands of the *Mouvement des gilets jaunes*. But the protest movement is also being courted by the populist Right.

Having lost dissident left-wingers, Syriza has turned into a reformist Social Democratic Party, which will probably lose the next parliamentary elections. Podemos has been seriously weakened, mostly by a leadership split. It has allowed the Socialists to regain their dominant position on the Left, which, in turn, has upset Podemo's left-wing populist strategy of forming transversal coalitions against austerity and corruption. Similarly, enjoying the support of less than 10% of the electorate, die Linke is divided between an internationalist and a nationalist wing and between a minority that want to forge broad coalitions on the Left (Wach Auf!) and a majority that reject the idea. The Bloco de Esquerda plays an important functional role by supporting the minority Portuguese Socialist government in parliament, but its electoral support is similar to that of Die Linke. Interestingly enough, it is the only radical left party in Europe, which is aligned with a Social Democratic Party minority government as

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<sup>46</sup> Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, pp. 20–21.

part of a strategy to fight austerity policies. But this political experiment has not been tried elsewhere.

There are other radical left-wing formations that have sprung up, such as the transnational Democracy in Europe movement (DiEM 25) led by former Greek Finance Minister Yanis Varoufakis,<sup>47</sup> who has also joined forces with former U.S. presidential candidate, Bernie Sanders, to form a Progressive International to advocate egalitarian politics and counter the rise of the authoritarian Radical Right.<sup>48</sup> In contrast to Mouffe, Varoufakis firmly rejects the strategy of disassociating the contemporary populist and authoritarian Right from historical fascism. He has also stressed the need to resist populist notions about the “people” and attempts to delegitimize those who do not share restricted conceptions of what constitutes a nation. Yet, just like Mouffe, he rules out collaboration with traditional Social Democratic parties because of their support for austerity policies and neo-liberal politics. It is too early to tell whether Varoufakis, who enjoys some standing on the Left because of his daring attempts to defy the EU during the height of the Greek financial crisis, will succeed. But his Diem25 movements has so far not registered in the polls for the 2019 European parliamentary elections.

All these radical Left parties and movements are sharply critical of the EU’s neo-liberal policies, especially how they were applied in response to the financial crisis, and demand wide-ranging institutional reforms of its institutions. They generally do not favor abandoning the EU, even if Mélenchon has castigated the Franco-German alliance and called for the rejection of what he terms “foolish Brussels treaties.”<sup>49</sup> What stands out is the reluctance of the radical Left to form broad coalitions to resist, not only the Radical Right but

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<sup>47</sup> See the manifesto of DiEM25, <https://diem25.org/manifesto-long/>.

<sup>48</sup> See Yanis Varoufakis, “Our new international movement will fight rising fascism and globalists,” *The Guardian*, 13 September 2018; Bernie Sanders, “A new authoritarian axis demands an international progressive front,” *The Guardian*, 13 September 2018.

<sup>49</sup> Jean-Luc Mélenchon, “Europe must abandon these foolish Brussels treaties,” *The Guardian*, 10 March 2019.

the growing trend of conservative and far-right alliances. The idea associated with a populist Left strategy to forge intersectional domestic, and transnational solidarities, combining various “progressive forces” to contest elections, such as to the EU parliament, may sound promising in theory. But no attempts have been made to translate it into practice because radical left-wing parties have been reluctant to build bridges with other smaller parties on the Left or green parties. And since the Social Democratic Left and radical Left are locked in a mutually antagonistic relationship, any powerful counter-strategy against populism is not emerging.

## **Conclusion**

There may be some truth in Mouffe’s view that the ascendancy of the populist Right has reintroduced adversarial politics in Europe and that a reversed Thatcherite power strategy is the key to a future left-wing hegemony. Yet, the notion of a “populist moment”—with a chance of engaging in transformative populist left-wing politics on the basis of organizational solidarity—looks premature. The Left is not only divided between Social Democratic and more radical formations but there is also fragmentation within parties and movements. The rise of an authoritarian populist threat is obviously not seen as being serious enough to warrant such a strategy.

The links that have been forged between the Conservative and radical Right seem to be getting stronger. It has been argued here that the dominant approach toward populism, which defines it as being “thin” and explains it solely in terms of a strategy or an idea has underestimated it as a practice and led to a tendency to de-historicize its right-wing variant and to valorize it as a political corrective. Thus, Mouffe’s portrayal of right-wing populism as a form of democracy downplays its racist features and ignores the contradiction between the

populists' anti-elitist agenda and its collaboration with conservative elites. Similarly, it sidesteps right-wing populist support for neo-liberalism despite its anti-globalization rhetoric. Instead of destabilizing the neo-liberal system, the populists can actually be part of a conservative restorative alliance.

Another problem with her approach is how easily the “people” can be “constructed” as well as converted. Mouffe puts much emphasis on the need to lure back working class voters from the right-wing populists, citing statistics to show that Mélenchon was successful in attracting some support of former Rassemblement National/Front National voters and that a quarter of former UKIP backers voted for Corbyn in the last parliamentary elections. But one wonders whether it is not too optimistic to assume that voters, who have voted for nationalist and anti-immigration parties, will suddenly turn to left-wing radical parties on the promise of egalitarianism. The obvious risk is that the Left will have to compromise its “progressive,” internationalist ideology to cater to those voters on nationalistic grounds. There are concrete examples of such an approach. The Danish Social Democrats have, as noted, embraced the anti-immigration and anti-refugee stance of the populist Right; a faction within the Die Linke in Germany has advocated a similar tactic, even if it has led to changes in the party's policy. The trend is certainly not universal, but highlights differences on the Left over how to respond to right-wing populism, with some wanting to accept it as democratically legitimate, while others warning against the potential return of fascism.

Despite the resurgence of the Radical Right all over Europe, no populist party has managed to monopolize power or form a government of its own. As noted, Fidesz and Law and Justice do not fit that category because they are better described as being nationalist and conservative. But while the populist parties have had to dilute their radical agendas in exchange for direct or indirect government responsibility,<sup>50</sup> they have managed to set the

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<sup>50</sup>Ann-Cathrine Jungar and Anders Ravik Jupskås, “Populist Radical Right in the Nordic Region: A New and Distinct Party Family?” *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 37, 3 (2014), 215–238.

political agenda on many issues.<sup>51</sup> To be sure, they do not represent a straightforward revival of historical fascism, even if a lurch toward authoritarianism cannot be ruled out, in the case they become powerful enough. But It has been stressed here that the right-wing populist phenomenon has various historical roots, including fascist ones, and that it should not be defined exclusively as a contemporary phenomenon associated with the establishment of a specific party formation. As Roger Griffin pointed out some time ago, the rejection of multiculturalism by the populist parties, their longing for “purity, their nostalgia for a mythical world of racial homogeneity” and for “clearly demarcated boundaries of cultural differentiation,” and their use of history represent a repackaged version of the same basic myth.<sup>52</sup> Thus, the current populist surge evokes a memory—a historical trace—not only with respect to traditional right–wing ideologies, but, more importantly, to their practices. And what the Left is perhaps underestimating is that some conservative parties have adopted key ideological elements of the populist Right’s agenda. It is this fact that can pose the biggest threat to any future hegemonic left-wing populist aspirations.

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<sup>51</sup> See Linnéa Lindsköld, “Contradicting Cultural Policy: A Comparative Study of the Cultural Policy of the Scandinavian Radical Right,” *Nordisk kulturpolitisk tidskrift*, 1 (August 2015), 8–26.

<sup>52</sup> Roger Griffin, “Interregnum or endgame? The radical right in the ‘post-fascist’ era,” *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 5, 2 (2000), 163–178.