Competing Populist Manifestos: Chantal Mouffe's Left Populism and Patrick Deneen's Aristopopulism

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Abstract

A common refrain tends to follow elections in which populist candidates have either won or, in losing, have performed unexpectedly well—exhorting journalists and academics to earnestly listen to the claims and grievances of the populists. This essay participates in this project, albeit at a level of remove, by engaging with the work of two self-described populist theorists—Chantal Mouffe on the left and Patrick Deneen on the right. It brings their post-Marxist and post-liberal orientations into conversation with the mainstream, largely liberal-pluralist, literature on populism. Specifically, it reconstructs Mouffe and Deneen's central arguments to explore how they approach the common claims that a) left- and right- populism are fundamentally alike, and b) that both are necessarily anti-pluralist and anti-democratic. It ultimately argues that where pluralists construct their critiques of populism as anti-pluralist and anti-democratic around the *form* of hegemonic claims made by populist movements, engagement with populist theorists instead suggests that the specific *content* of these claims is much more revealing.

Keywords

Introduction

The ongoing 'populist moment'—declared by an assortment of political scientists, theorists, and commentators—is losing its momentary character (Mouffe 2018, 1). Observations about this populist moment are customarily followed by a list of elections in which populists have either won or, in losing, performed unexpectedly well. These lists, even if intended to be illustrative rather than comprehensive, are growing increasingly lengthy—Syriza, Podemos, Brexit, Trump, Sanders, Corbyn, Orban, Bolsonaro, M5S, Salvini, Mélenchon, Le Pen, the AFD, Milei, Wilders, Trump again, and so on (Müller 2016). If the electoral successes of populist movements are becoming less unexpected, so are the reactions of the intellectual classes—whether in the academic literature or in the popular press. Far from seeking to

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categorise the most prominent 'takes' about populism in an exhaustive manner, I pick up on three prominent themes.

First, many of these elections are framed as an irreversible choice between democracy and authoritarian populism (i.e. Mounk 2018; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Przeworski 2019; Norris and Inglehart 2019; Pappas 2019)—regardless of whether the populists are anti-establishment contenders or have been incumbent for some time. Arguably the two most prominent approaches in populism studies today—namely, the orientations adopted by Mudde and Kaltwasser in *Populism: a Very Short Introduction* (2017), and by Müller in *What is Populism?* (2016)—respectively treat populism as an "illiberal democratic response to undemocratic liberalism" and as "blatantly antidemocratic".

Second, populism of the left and of the right are often treated as being closely linked. They are conceptualised as adhering to the same political logic despite distinctions in content, or, following a more laborious route, the left is blamed for right-wing populists' electoral success—either because traditionally left-voting workers deserted to the populist right, or because the left has driven moderates away (Winant 2021). The leftist populism of Jean-Luc Mélenchon and the radical-right populism of Marine Le Pen, for example, are therefore placed into the same analytic category. Despite their vastly different policy platforms, it is argued that they 'do not differ significantly from each other when it comes to their populism' (Rooduijn and Akkerman 2017, 201).

While some researchers insist that populism should not be decontextualised from its 'host ideology' (Huber and Schimpf 2017; March 2017)—whether that be nationalism, agrarianism, environmentalism, socialism, neoliberalism, etc.—others, such as Rooduijn and Akkerman, have argued that 'despite the different ways in which the radical right and radical left color their anti-elitism, the general message is the same: corrupt elites neglect the interests of ordinary people' (2017, 196). Drawing on the narratives of voters switching allegiance between the populist left to the populist right—such as the phenomenon of Bernie Sanders supporters voting for Trump and against Clinton (Macaulay 2022)—it is often suggested that their 'populist' similarities are more telling than the 'ideological' differences between them (i.e. Clark, Bottom, and Copus 2008). Populist politicians themselves echo similar sentiments by arguing that 'the *traditional* left-right divide is no longer valid' (Rama and Santana 2020, 17).

Third, in the wake of these elections, we hear repeated calls to venture into the 'heartland' to listen to the grievances of the populist base (Taggart 2002; Eatwell and Goodwin 2018). Calls to 'listen' to the grievances of the populists have been a prominent theme both in the popular press and the academic literature. In the wake of Donald Trump's 2016 election victory—

having been caught off guard by this outcome—academics and journalists headed in droves to the post-industrial Rust Belt and to former coal-mining regions in Appalachia to document the populist electorate (Halvorson and Reno 2022). While it is common to treat populism as a threat to democracy, many thinkers caution against 'portraying "them" [that is, populists] as "evil" and "foolish"' (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, 124–26). In suggesting that 'populism often asks the right questions but provides the wrong [whether illiberal or anti-democratic] answers', there is a recognition that when citizens feel ignored and abandoned by an unresponsive political system, populist sentiments are likely to flourish. Consequently, it is commonly suggested that that we 'should focus more on the message than the messenger,' and seek to 'understand the claims and grievances of the populist elites and masses' (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, 125).

This essay participates in this symbolic project of *Narodnichestvo*, of 'listening' to the people (Ely 2021)—albeit at a level of remove. Rather than attempting to interpret popular wisdom directly, I look to the writings of self-described 'populist' theorists who have already attempted to interpret popular wisdom—Chantal Mouffe on the left and Patrick Deneen on the right. This deviates from established approaches, which generally look at populist movements through an empirical lens. Much of the research on populism has been carried out by 'scholars who see it as a problem', and tends to study the discourses, electoral strategies, and demographics of populist movements (Urbinati 2017, 571). Alongside this 'mainstream' literature, there is a growing literature of pro-populist scholarship. Specifically, we can identify two broad 'constellations' around which these writers orbit—a broadly radical-democratic populism on the left and an equally broad post-liberalism on the right (el-Ojeili 2020). Left-populism draws on a rich theoretical tradition in post-Marxism, and particularly on the work of the Essex school. By contrast, right-populism is largely under-theorised in the academy—as el-Ojeili (2020) pointed out, much of the theoretical basis of the populist right was developed in online fora. While much has been written on right-populism by its critics, there is a burgeoning movement in the academy seeking to develop theoretical framework for right-populism— represented most prominently by Patrick Deneen, Sohrab Ahmari, and Yoram Hazony (Varga and Buzogány 2022).

Neither of these traditions have received much attention in the mainstream academic literature on populism. The Essex school is often recognised as an important tradition of thought, yet liberal-pluralist theorists rarely engage with its theoretical innovations in significant depth (see, for example: Kaltwasser et al. 2017; Mudde 2018). Outside of liberal-pluralist work on populism, we find significant discussion *within* these populist constellations, but rarely

between them. Critical theorists have written about right-wing or authoritarian populism as a phenomenon, but rarely engage with its theoreticians (Morelock 2018; Gandesha 2018). While left-populist thinkers have grappled with illiberal writers such as Georges Sorel and Carl Schmitt (i.e. Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Mouffe 2018), this has not included post-liberal contemporaries. Similarly, while some post-liberal thinkers have drawn from the history of the left—reaching back, for example, to English Guild Socialism (Milbank and Pabst 2016) or engaging directly with Marx and Engels (Deneen 2023)—contemporary left-wing populists do not make a significant appearance.

This essay attempts to bring the liberal-pluralist, post-Marxist, and post-liberal approaches to populism into conversation with each other. It reconstructs the central arguments put forward by Mouffe and Deneen to explore how self-described populist theorists approach the liberal-pluralist claims that left- and right- populism are fundamentally alike, and that both are necessarily anti-pluralist and anti-democratic. While the post-Marxist and post-liberal traditions both contain significant internal variety and disagreement, and are therefore not easily distilled into a single representative text, Mouffe's *For a Left Populism* (2018) and Deneen's *Regime Change* (2023) stand apart in that they are framed as manifestos for a populist movement. It is similarly difficult to appoint a representative text for the liberal-pluralist approach. Nonetheless, as Stavrakakis and Jäger (2018, 547) note, two approaches in particular can be said to 'represent more than any other the new mainstream in populism studies'—namely, the orientations adopted by Mudde and Kaltwasser in *Populism: a Very Short Introduction* (2017), and by Müller in *What is Populism?* (2016). Given that Mudde and Kaltwasser's work is oriented towards political science while Müller's approach is theoretical, for the purposes of this paper, Müller appears the more appropriate interlocutor.

The paper consists of four sections. Section 1 begins by discussing the ways that the first two key themes—that there is an equivalence between left and right populism, and that populism is necessarily anti-pluralist or anti-democratic—are intertwined with the concept's definition. This section draws heavily on the work of Müller. Sections 2 and 3 take seriously the notion of listening to populists' grievances by working through Mouffe's *For a Left Populism* and Deneen's *Regime Change*. Section 4 brings the findings from the first three sections into conversation with one another, and ultimately argues that where pluralists construct their critiques of populism around the *form* of populist politics, serious engagement with populist theorists suggests that the specific *content* of populist movements is more revealing.

What is Populism?

Before turning to the titular question, Müller begins his book *What is Populism?* by asking 'is everyone a populist?' (2016, 1). He notes that politicians from Marine Le Pen and Geert Wilders, to Podemos and Syriza, to the leaders of the Latin American 'Pink Tide'—Rafael Correa, Evo Morales, and Hugo Chávez—are all commonly described as 'populist'. This claim of equivalence overrides the (not insignificant) differences in the content of their policy-positions, their discursive strategies, the affects they embrace, and the constituencies they represent. He suggests that this conflation of different phenomena constitutes a 'failure of political judgement'—if a concept explains everything, it explains nothing (2016, 2).

Part of this conceptual disarray stems from the fact that, in much of the discourse around populism, 'it is far from obvious that we know what we are talking about' (Müller 2016, 2). As the literature is quick to point out, populism is a deeply contested concept. While many agree that we are in a 'populist moment' or even an 'age of populism' (Krastev 2011)—that there exists something called populism, and that these populists are important to contemporary politics—this is where most agreement ends (Moffitt 2016). What populism *is,* exactly*,* remains contested. As Wiles noted: 'to each his own definition of populism, according to the academic axe he grinds' (Wiles 1969, 166). Despite these differences, most definitions broadly agree that that populism is related to the identity of 'the people'—drawing a societal distinction between the 'pure people' and a 'corrupt elite' (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, 6).

Where Müller agrees that this division is important, he argues that being anti-establishment or being anti-elite is not sufficient for someone to be labelled a populist. Writing in terms of 'Machiavelli's Florence', he argues that 'fighting for the Popolo against the Grandi would not automatically be populism, but saying that the Grandi do not belong in Florence, no matter what they say or do, would be populism'. (2016, 23). In other words, this suggests that only a certain part of the population 'really' belong to 'the people' as a collective identity. For Müller, then, populism entails a *pars-pro-toto* claim whereby a certain segment of society claims to stand in for the population as a whole. As Agamben notes, in both Romance and Germanic languages, the term 'people' signifies both the population in its totality, as well as the 'popular classes'—the downtrodden and the poor (2000, 28). Populists, Müller argues, equate the two, meaning that a) the categories of people and elite are treated as homogenous, and b) the popular classes become the rightful representative of the population in its totality. This totalising logic poses a significant threat to minorities and dissidents. Effectively, it implies that:

'those who do not agree with their ultimately symbolic construction of the people (and hence usually do not support the populists politically) might not properly belong to the people in the first place. After all, the suggestion that there is a "real people" implies that there are some who are not quite real— folks who just pretend to belong, who might actually undermine the polity in some form, or who at best are second-rate citizens'. (Müller 2021, 4)

By contrast, for Müller, the people in a democracy always appear as plural; 'no political actor can claim fully and without remainder to represent or even incarnate the people' (2017, 593). By treating the people as a homogenous totality rather than as a messy, plural, and conflicting association of individuals, populism denies the validity of competing interests and opinions within the public sphere, as well as its institutional constraints designed to protect minorities. Attempting to both determine the identity and speak on behalf of 'the people' effaces the 'fact' of pluralism—reducing society to 'a crowd with one voice, leader, or opinion' (Urbinati 2014, 162).

Its anti-pluralist wholism, Müller argues, makes populism 'blatantly antidemocratic' (2016, 6). The illiberalism and anti-pluralism associated with populism is contrasted to 'the rules of the game and the voting procedures' of a non-populist liberal democracy (Urbinati 2014, 162). Specifically, Müller (2016) argues, populist movements will attempt to colonise the state and begin to close down the 'provisional,' and 'self-limiting' nature of liberal democratic institutions (2016; 2017). Once in power, populist parties seek to undermine the freedom of the press, to alter electoral institutions in their favour, to occupy the bureaucratic institutions of the state with their supporters, and to implement 'discriminatory legalism' (Müller 2016). This makes it increasingly difficult to untangle populist logic from the institutions of the state—*de facto* inscribing them as the foundational principles of the democracy in question and placing them beyond contestation. Any election between populist and non-populist candidates, from this perspective, is reframed as a choice between an authoritarian and a democratic future.

Müller's definition of populism as a pars-pro-toto claim—that is, as a necessarily *anti-elitist*, *anti-pluralist*, and *moral form of identity politics* (2016, 203)—complicates common categorisations of populism. Mudde and Kaltwasser's definition, for example, is intended to capture 'all major past and present manifestations of populism, while still [being] precise enough to exclude clearly non-populist phenomena' (2017, 5). By contrast, rather than seeking to capture all those considered to be populists in common parlance, Müller confesses that his approach will 'end up excluding historical movements and actors who explicitly called

themselves populist' (Müller 2016, 19). This lead Müller to claim that 'the one party in US history that explicitly called itself "populist" [the People's Party of the 1890s] was in fact not populist', as they ultimately embraced pluralism (Müller 2016, 85). Furthermore, as Stravrakakis and Jäger point out, it means 'the whole egalitarian populist tradition, including figures such as Bernie Sanders and South European left-wing populism, is aprioristically disqualified' (Stavrakakis and Jäger 2018, 550). For example, Müller is sceptical that Podemos in Spain can accurately be described as populists, despite the fact that they self-identify as such, and have openly modelled themselves on Mouffe and Laclau's theoretical work on left-populism (Gandesha 2021).

While Müller takes a narrower view of who to include in the category of 'populist', his definition does not go as far to say that leftists cannot be populists—Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro, for example, figure prominently in his discussion of how populists interact with democratic institutions. Consequently, while Müller seeks to curtail the conceptual vagueness which has allowed for over-eager diagnoses of populism, he does not oppose *tout-court* the tendency of equating left and right populism. While it may be more common for populists to articulate the identity of 'the people' along ethnic lines, it is in principle just as possible to construct an 'ideological' definition of 'the people' (Müller 2021, 5). While populism, he writes 'is about making a certain kind of moral claim… the content needed to specify that claim may well come from, for instance, socialist doctrine' (2016, 93).

The relationship between the two key themes identified in the introduction—that there is an equivalence between left and right populism, and that populism is necessarily anti-pluralist or anti-democratic—then, is written tautologically into Müller's definition. Both left and right-wing politicians can, in principle, claim to 'speak for a people in plenitude fully identical and reconciled with itself (and, for that matter, transparent to itself)', yet doing so is necessarily and anti-pluralist and anti-democratic move (2012, 1263). This tautology, however, is the only way of simultaneously holding both claims to be true. Categorising populism as a broad church which includes pluralists or democrats drastically either reduces the concept's power to predict whether populists will behave anti-democratically. This position can be contrasted to Mouffe, whose work will be discussed in the next section, and who argues for a radical-democratic left-populism—a position which from Müller's perspective appears oxymoronic.

For a Left Populism

Chantal Mouffe's opens *For a Left Populism* with impression that we are inhabiting a 'populist moment', which she characterises both as a moment of crisis and of possibility. She writes that

this 'crisis of the neoliberal hegemonic formation… opens the possibility for the construction of a more democratic order' (2018, 1). In the wake of the Global Financial Crisis of 2007-2008, Mouffe argues with reference to Gramsci, a 'great variety of morbid symptoms' made it increasingly evident that the neoliberal consensus was disintegrating—or, following Žižek's translation of Gramsci, 'the old world is dying away, and the new world struggles to come forth: now is the time of monsters' (Gramsci 1971, 276; Žižek 2012, 42–43). Some of these monsters, for Mouffe, include radical-right populists, who are effectively challenging the status-quo, as well as a fractured neoliberalism, looking to shore up its position by implementing ever more austerity measures, punitive welfare policies, and xenophobic immigration policies.

Mouffe intervenes in this crisis with a manifesto for a left-wing populism, as a political project which constructs a frontier between 'the people' and 'the oligarchy'. Her first step is to note that her analysis 'takes its bearing from Machiavelli who… always situated himself "in the conjuncture" instead of reflecting "over the conjuncture"' (2018, 9). She elaborates that this requires not writing as a dispassionate observer but engaging in the crisis as a political actor. She nods towards Machiavelli's realism by noting the importance of the *verita effetuale de la cosa* (the effectual truth of the thing)—of starting with the facts of a social order. Specifically, this appears to refer to Machiavelli's distinction between the *popolo*—the common people— and the *grandi*—the 'most privileged and powerful' citizens—as well as his wariness of the latter's motivations (McCormick 2011, 3).

This Machiavellian orientation culminates in the example Mouffe uses to develop her critique of neoliberal hegemony, as well as, ironically, the model on which her left populism is based— namely, Margaret Thatcher. Mouffe's theoretical project—and that of the Essex school more generally—has grown out of her collaboration with Ernesto Laclau in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985), which theorised the crisis of the post-war welfare state, and its challenge by new social movements on the left and Thatcher and Reagan's neoliberalism on the right. Mouffe's *on the Political* (2005), as well as Laclau's *on Populist Reason* (2005), were written after neoliberalism successfully established itself as hegemonic. In constructing a strategic framework for a left-populism to follow, she returns to the success of the Thatcherite project described in this earlier work.

For Mouffe, populism functions to disarticulate the key signifiers of a hegemonic formation, and to establish a new hegemony or 'common sense'. Following Stuart Hall's understanding of Thatcherism as a form of authoritarian populism (1988), Mouffe (2018, 29) argues that:

'[Thatcher's] strategy was clearly a populist one. It consisted in drawing a political frontier between, on one side, the 'forces of the establishment', identified with the oppressive state bureaucrats, the trade unions and those who benefited from state handouts, and, on the other, the industrious 'people' who were the victims of the various bureaucratic forces and their different allies'.

In Thatcher's wake, neoliberalism has 'become hegemonic as a mode of discourse' (Harvey 2005, 3). Hegemony, drawing on Gramsci—and akin to Müller's notion of a populism as a *pars-pro-toto* claim—refers to the 'operation of taking up, by a particularity, of an incommensurable universal signification' (Laclau 2005, 70). In other words, hegemony describes the process whereby the worldview and institutional interests of one particular class come to stand in for society as a whole. Hegemonic neoliberalism, then, has replaced almost entirely the social-democratic Keynesian orthodoxy that preceded it—becoming so 'embedded in common sense as to be taken for granted and not open to question' (Harvey 2005, 5). This is best characterised, for Mouffe, by Thatcher's answer to the question of what she considers her greatest achievement: 'Tony Blair and New Labour. We forced our opponents to change their minds' (Thatcher, quoted in: Mouffe 2018, 32).

The social-democratic left, Mouffe (2018, 17) writes, has essentially 'accepted the diktats of financial capitalism and the limits they imposed to state interventions and their redistributive policies'. Instead of confrontation between competing ideological blocs, this consensus between centre-left and centre-right left us with the 'non-ideological' management of the political order by experts. For Mouffe, hegemonic neoliberalism has led to a 'post-political', or even a 'post-democratic', situation, which has effectively undermined the institutions which allow citizens to have a voice. 'Elections no longer offer any opportunity to decide on real alternatives', she writes. 'The only thing that post-politics allows is a bipartisan alternation of power between centre-right and centre-left parties', both of which accept Thatcher's claim that *There Is No Alternative* to neoliberal capitalism (Mouffe 2018, 17).

For Mouffe and Laclau, however, society cannot be represented as a unified totality without remainder. From their post-structuralist perspective, hegemony is revealed as 'nothing more than the investment, in a partial object, of a fullness which will always evade us because it is purely mythical' (Laclau 2005, 125). The neoliberal order is no exception here—if anything, the very existence of a 'populist moment' suggests that a sizeable part of the population felt excluded from its supposed universality. It is at this point that we return to the collapsing of

left-wing and right-wing politics into a single category, and the subsequent claim that populism is necessarily anti-pluralist.

In part, Mouffe blames the centre-left for the rise of far-right populism. The demands of the popular sectors come from their grievances with the neoliberal project which social-democratic parties, in many countries, have continued to uphold. As 'prisoners of their post-political dogmas, and reluctant to admit their mistakes', many on the centre-left criticised populist sentiments on an ethical dimension as anti-pluralist and anti-democratic (Mouffe 2018, 21). The correct response, she argues, is a political one which rejects the policies of right-wing populism while re-orienting populist sentiments 'towards more egalitarian objectives' (Mouffe 2018, 22). She uses Mélenchon as an example, describing how he won over Le Pen voters to his left-wing La France Insoumise, as well as Corbyn, who managed to swing UKIP voters to the Labour Party (Mouffe 2018, 23).

With Laclau, Mouffe argues that populist politics is characterised by the formal logic of 'constructing a political frontier dividing society into two camps and calling for the mobilisation of the "underdog" against "those in power"'. The 'specific programmatic content' of this project, however—in terms of the policies it embraces or how it delineates the categories of 'the people' and 'the elite'—is not given, and can therefore be reframed (Mouffe 2018, 10–11; Laclau 2005). The particular characteristics of a populist movement are historically contingent, and depend on how discontent is articulated by political actors. The xenophobic and illiberal policies of right-wing populists, she suggests, must be confronted by reformulating disaffection in an egalitarian discourse.

Where Müller treated the *form* of populism as anti-pluralist, Mouffe highlights the *content* of specific populist parties as more revealing about their relationship to democracy. Despite the formal parallels in the respective projects of left- and right-populism—both discursively constructing a hegemonic bloc by expressing the grievances of excluded communities— Mouffe argues that right-populism is likely to restrict democracy (in the name of recovering it) while left-populism wants to deepen and extend democracy. In claiming to restore democracy, Mouffe (2018, 23–24) argues, right-wing populists seek to restore 'national sovereignty', prioritising 'true nationals' at the expense of immigrants, the queer community, and other minorities. The left-populist project, by contrast, has sought to embrace feminist, queer, environmentalist, and anti-racist struggles into a broader socialist movement calling for a break with the neoliberal hegemonic formation, albeit without looking for a similar break with liberal democratic structures.

For Mouffe, the example of Thatcherism highlights that it is possible for a populist movement to be anti-hegemonic without being anti-systemic. Thatcher transformed the post-war social-democratic hegemony without destroying liberal democracy—disentangling notions of democracy and equality, and re-articulating them in relation to the free market (Mouffe 2018, 36). A left-populist project seeks, in turn, to disentangle democracy from the free market. We see this embodied in the movements around Podemos, Syriza, Jeremy Corbyn, Jean-Luc Melenchon, and the 'pink tide' across South America. Their counter-hegemonic project is mobilised 'around proposals for the return of social democracy, with arguments for a stronger welfare state; the re-nationalization of utilities and industries; and soft Keynesian growth stimulus projects to ensure high levels of employment' (Bell 2017, 56).

Mouffe (2018, 62) pushes back against the objections that a left populist strategy, by bringing together 'democratic demands in the creation of a "people", will produce a homogeneous subject… that negates plurality'. Rather than a single, totalising image, Mouffe's understanding of the people can be characterised with reference to William Connolly's (1995) notion of a 'majority assemblage'. Where some members of the coalition making up this imagined community will find that its aesthetics and its political orientations 'resonate deeply with their own identities… others will connect to it in more attenuated ways' (Connolly 1995, 95). The identity of the people, then, is never entirely homogenous—as a discursive construction bringing together different identities which are excluded from the neoliberal 'market's people', it can contain seemingly contradictory groups and positions (Brandes 2020). At the same time, it is never entirely inclusive either, as it is always constructed in opposition to a 'constitutive outside'—in this case, the elite (Mouffe 2018, 39).

Importantly, the left-populist 'people' as a collective subject 'does not exist previously to its performative articulation', and it is precisely because it is constructed, rather than pointing to something primordial, that it can be re-constructed differently (Mouffe 2018, 62). Furthermore, this possibility of reconstructing the hegemonic 'common sense' is crucial to '[challenging] post-democracy and [restoring] the centrality of the democratic values of equality and popular sovereignty' (Mouffe 2018, 39). At the core of the post-Marxist claim that left populism can reinvigorate democracy, then, lies a recognition of the ultimate impossibility of the 'people' being fully reconciled with, and transparent to, itself. By contrast, as this next section discusses with a focus on Deneen, for right-populism 'the people' refers to a distinct, bounded, empirically identifiable, and 'natural' sociological category.

Regime Change

Deneen opens *Regime Change* with a pessimistic impression of current political and economic conditions. He writes that it is hard to look at the United States and 'think it is flourishing'—illustrating this with a list of observations which are not all that dissimilar from those which motivate left-populism, including growing poverty and economic inequality, a mental health crisis, 'deaths of despair', and younger generations being burdened with 'unconscionable levels of debt' (2023, 1). However, this list of 'morbid symptoms'—which finds echoes in the post-Marxist literature—does not end here (Gramsci 1971, 276). Deneen goes on to include the 'sexual revolution and its attendant effort to displace "traditional" forms of marriage, family, and sexual identity based in nature' (2023, 2).

Deneen, like Mouffe, regards the current conjuncture as a moment both of crisis and of possibility—reprising arguments from his earlier work in *Why Liberalism Failed* (2018). In contrast to 'normal politics', we are 'witnessing an increasingly systemic failure, due to the bankruptcy of its underlying political philosophy' (Deneen 2018, 4). Specifically, this system he considers to be failing is one which can be characterised as an undemocratic liberalism. He writes (2018, 180–81):

> 'Contemporary liberalism will increasingly resort to imposing the liberal order by fiat— especially in the form of the administrative state run by a small minority who increasingly disdain democracy. End runs around democratic and populist discontent have become the norm, and backstopping the liberal order is the ever more visible power of a massive "deep state," with extensive powers of surveillance, legal mandate, police power, and administrative control'.

Despite these initial, superficial, similarities with Mouffe, Deneen draws the boundaries of the crisis-ridden hegemonic order in a different manner and using a different vocabulary—using the Straussian 'regime' instead of the Gramscian 'hegemony'. In contrast to Mouffe's critique of a *neo*liberal orthodoxy, for Deneen, the problem is liberalism fully reconciled with itself. He argues that since the 1980s—broadly speaking, since Thatcher—progressive liberalism's focus on social rights has increasingly coalesced with classical liberalism's free-market economics in the form of 'Woke Capitalism' (2018, 4). Elsewhere he describes this hegemony as 'the wedding of John Locke and John Stuart Mill' (2023, 59)—with his open scepticism about marriage equality providing the subtext. Deneen argues that this liberal regime is deeply ideological—using the term 'ideology' to refer to a distorted understanding of 'real' conditions

(Freeden 2017, 2). Consequently, with liberalism having become 'more fully itself' over the previous decades, it has also become increasingly unsustainable. It is 'among the few iron laws of politics', Deneen writes, that ideology cannot survive as 'it is based on falsehood about human nature' (2023, 6).

The populist response to this 'ideological' liberalism, for Deneen, should 'avoid the temptation to replace one ideology with another' (2018, 188). Mouffe's work, as we have seen, is grounded in the groundlessness of identity, and consequently, for her, reimagining 'the people' involved replacing one hegemonic claim with another. Given the admission that the 'fullness' of this identity is 'purely mythical' (Laclau 2005, 125), for Deneen this amounts to a mere exchange of ideologies. Deneen, instead, treats the populist project not as constructing a contingent, fictional, and fragmentary identity, but as reconciling the people with their own nature.

The populist backlash to the liberal regime, Deneen argues, stands in contrast both to its economic and social pillars. In contrast to neoliberal free markets, 'it is pro-worker, [favouring] policies that protect jobs and industries within nations, urging more controlled immigration policies, supporting private sector unions, and calling upon the power of the state to secure social safety nets targeted at supporting middle-class security' (Deneen 2023, 90). At the same time, it opposes the 'identity politics' and 'libertinism' of progressive liberalism by 'preferring "traditional" marriage, rejecting the idea that gender is elastic,' and opposing 'the sexualization rampant in modern culture', as well as by supporting 'distinct national identities and cultures, [and] rejecting the ethos of cosmopolitanism' and globalisation (Deneen 2023, 90). The right-populist solution, thus, lies with 'reinforced calls for the restoration of (national) borders and (societal) orders', which are considered 'natural' and non-ideological (Varga and Buzogány 2022, 1090).

In contrast to the post-Marxists, populism for Deneen is *always* pro-worker and socially conservative: 'the many,' he writes 'are achieving class consciousness—not as Marxists, but as left-economic and social-conservative populists' (2023, 5). This development, he argues, is not contingent—it is the direct consequence of the 'instinctual conservatism' of the common people, of 'their yearning for stability, tradition, and custom' (2023, 2, 89). By treating 'the people' as an empirically-identifiable social category, Deneen's distinction between 'the people' and 'the elite' is less focused than Mouffe's on class positions within capitalist social relations. Instead, these categories are defined by their relation to liberal commitments to 'placelessness, timelessness, and separation from cultural forms and practice' (Deneen 2023, 33). 'The "elites" are not merely the wealthy, though many are; they are those who possess social status' due to their social and educational standing within a world 'rendered unstable by

the relentless pursuit of progressive change' (2023, 33). 'The people', by contrast, are rooted in a distinct place and tied to established cultural and religious traditions. Excluded from this notion of the people, with their ties to the land, are immigrants and refugees who allegedly undermine the wages and working conditions of the autochthonous working class, and who are described as politically aligned with the elite (Deneen 2023, 39). From this perspective, the 'placelessness… and separation from cultural forms and practice' Deneen (2023, 33) ascribes to both immigrants and financial elites are associated with 'duplicity, insincerity, and cultural alienation'—bearing some resemblance to the figure of the rootless 'wandering Jew' of classical antisemitism (Hammerschlag 2010, 74).

Not only are immigrants and refugees associated with a 'placeless' elite, but some members of the elite are in turn associated with the people. Deneen writes that 'the answer is not the elimination of the elite (as Marx once envisioned), but its replacement with a better set of elites' (2023, 62). The people, he notes, are unlikely to bring down the regime without the support of 'some number of "class traitors"'. Specifically, he envisions an 'elite cadre skilled at directing and elevating popular resentments'—a vanguard, if you will—which is attuned to and aligned with the values of the people, and can guide their political aspirations (2023, 7). This alignment of the people and the elite with the aim of bringing about 'regime change'—that is, 'the peaceful but vigorous overthrow of a corrupt and corrupting liberal ruling class and the creation of a postliberal order'—he names 'aristopopulism' (2023, 5, 173).

Drawing on the classical tradition—and particularly Aristotle, whose name as much as the aristocracy provides the prefix to the term aristopopulism—Deneen describes the post-liberal regime as one which reconciles society with nature and with itself. Regime change requires undoing both the 'ideological' detachment of 'man' from 'his' nature, as well as the 'division of society—many against the few, elites against the people'—encouraged by classical liberalism, progressive liberalism, and Marxism (Deneen 2023, 174, 68). In response to liberal (and post-Marxist) claims that '"the common good" is ultimately nothing more than a preference disguised as a universal ideal', he equates liberal (and post-Marxist) resistance to wholism with overtly selfish intentions to favour certain sectors of society over others (2023, 212). With reference to the British traditions of one-nation conservatism and Tory Socialism, he suggests that a post-liberal regime can enable 'the flourishing of people of all classes' through the alignment between the elite and the people in defence of traditionalist values and national unity (2023, 91, 155).

At this point, Deneen betrays that his valorisation of a conservative populism is entangled with a distrust of actually-existing populism. Because the people's politics 'reflects their condition

of despair and resentment', he notes that they have embraced demagogic leaders 'whose main attraction is their brusqueness, a willingness to say and do anything if it agitates or "trolls" the elites' (2023, 23). He is not the only right-populist theorist despairing that the 'nominal champion' of the people in the United States is 'a deeply flawed narcissist' (Deneen 2023, 142). Ahmari, too, criticises Trump's 'right-wing neo-populism' as mirroring the 'identity politics' of 'lifestyle leftism' (Ahmari 2023). Deneen sees actually-existing populism—such as Trump and the MAGA movement—as an understandable and well-intentioned reaction against the liberal regime, but is sceptical that it will ultimately be successful.

Regime change for Deneen requires both the 'aristocratic' and the 'populist' elements of aristo-populism. Despite his apprehensions regarding how the populist movement is currently led, he finds hope in the people's continued desire for change—a disposition which is emphasised by their support for populist leaders, no matter how flawed, as well as their willingness to embrace popular violence. It is on this note that Deneen invokes Machiavelli. Where Mouffe opened with Machiavelli's 'realism', Deneen instead draws on him to describe how the *popolo* respond to the *grandi's* machinations against popular freedom. Writing in the wake of the January 6th attack on the US Capitol, he quotes Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy* at length (2023, 154–55):

> 'If someone were to argue the methods employed were extralegal and almost bestial—the people in a mob shouting abuse at the senate, the senate replying in kind, mobs running through the streets, shops boarded up, the entire populace of Rome leaving the city—I would reply such things only frighten those who read about them… The demands of a free people are rarely harmful to the cause of liberty, for they are a response either to oppression or to the prospect of oppression'.

In the face of an un-democratic liberalism, Deneen argues, the establishment of a post-liberal regime requires a visceral display of political power. In other words, 'what is needed is the application of Machiavellian means to achieve Aristotelian ends' (2023, 156).

Discussion

In the wake of elections in which populists have performed (unexpectedly) well, a common theme has been that the populist vote is a symptom of underlying discontent, and that 'we' need to listen to these grievances. This essay has participated in this project, albeit not by going to the populist-voting masses. Instead, it engaged with the work of two self-described 'populist'

theorists—Mouffe on the left and Deneen on the right. Most research on populism has approached the phenomenon empirically, and given that the actions of populist movements have a more immediate impact than the words of academics who sympathise with these movements, this is undoubtedly an important endeavour. If anything, many populist 'leaders do not want to be constrained by intellectuals who might criticise them for failing to implement ideas properly' (Müller 2021, 11). Nonetheless, the theoretical work of populist scholars can be revealing. Mouffe and Deneen's manifestos problematise certain themes which resonate throughout the mainstream literature on populism—namely, that left- and right- populism are fundamentally alike, and that both are necessarily anti-pluralist and anti-democratic. This final section works through these two refrains in reverse order.

To some extent, Müller's fears about populists 'occupying' the state are well founded. Both Mouffe and Deneen are forthcoming about the intent of populist movements being not so much a seizure of state power by the people, but a 'becoming state'—that is, the inscription of the interests of the populist people into the institutional logics of the state. As Deneen notes, regime change requires the occupation rather than the demolition of existing institutions—the purpose being that 'a fundamentally different ethos informs those institutions and the personnel who populate key offices and positions' (2023, 5). While this leaves the structures of liberal democracy intact, Müller argues that such an occupation makes it increasingly difficult to untangle populist logic from the institutions of the state. This would inscribe them as *de facto* foundational principles and placing them beyond contestation. Both left and right populists are aware that 'the authoritarian propensities of this political logic are evident' (Laclau 2005, 197). Echoing Müller's fears, Deneen writes that 'some form of populist nationalist authoritarianism or military autocracy seems altogether plausible' as the outcome of the populist moment (2018, 181).

From the left-populist perspective, however, it is precisely the right-populists who would implement a 'populist nationalist authoritarianism'. Right-wing populism is anti-pluralist and exclusionary in that it seeks to restore 'popular sovereignty' in the form of 'national sovereignty', prioritising 'true nationals' at the expense of immigrants, the queer community, and other minorities (Mouffe 2018, 23–24). Furthermore, as 'the people' for right-populists represents a distinct, unified, and pre-political sociological category which is be 'found' rather than constructed, the re-drawing of boundaries of inclusion/exclusion is precluded. By contrast, the left-populist 'people' is self-consciously constructed and re-constructed. Akin to Critchley's notion of a 'supreme' 'fiction that we know to be a fiction' (2012, 91), this understanding of the people as a contingent articulation implies that its identity remains open and undetermined.

Deneen also notes that the left does not imagine there to be a 'final resolution', and that it would instead initiate a 'revolution that is potentially unceasing' (2023, 85). Where Mouffe sees this commitment to contingency as a political virtue, Deneen condemns it as a weakness. The political consequences of this distinction—whether 'the people' are created by or pre-exist populist politics—is most clearly illustrated in the different ways in which Mouffe and Deneen operationalise their references to Machiavelli. Mouffe takes her bearings from Machiavelli's insistence on recognising the facts of a social order—specifically his distinction between the *Popolo* and the *Grandi*. As Mouffe noted in *On the Political*, it is worth reflecting on Machiavelli's insight that: 'in each city are found these two different desires . . . the man of the people hates being ordered and oppressed by those greater than he. And the great like to order and oppress the people' (Machiavelli, quoted in: Mouffe 2005, 7). It is the post-political assumption, she continues, 'that we have entered a new era where this potential antagonism has disappeared' (Mouffe 2005, 7). Drawing her general orientation from Machiavelli, then, has two main functions. Firstly, it is to push back against any notion of a universal 'common good' by placing antagonism at the heart of society (Oppelt 2014, 267–68). And secondly, it is to insist, with Machiavelli and against much of the mainstream literature on populism, that the elites, and not the masses, present the greatest threat to popular freedom.

Where Mouffe draws on Machiavelli to recognise the 'social fact' of class antagonism, Deneen instead quotes his approval of popular violence. Despite the fact that many 'writers' are appalled by popular violence, such outbursts in response to elite behaviour are almost always justified for Machiavelli, who was particularly fond of recounting examples of elites being 'explicitly hacked to pieces, or implies that they should have been' (McCormick 2011, 6; 2001, 298). Give his perspective that—unlike the elite—the people rarely act against the interest of freedom, popular sovereignty is likely to be lost if the people do not actively keep the elite in check. While Deneen agrees thus far, he does not take this observation any further. In contrast to Machiavelli, whose work prioritises popular control over the elites, Deneen does not provide any institutional recourse for popular freedom. McCormick (2011) describes *Machiavellian Democracy* as a 'tribunate' or 'assembly' model, referring to the range of institutional innovations Machiavelli lauded for allowing the people to hold the powerful to account—including tribunate offices/assemblies with veto power; political trials in which the entire citizenry functions as judge; and 'lottocratic' institutions (Guerrero 2024). Instead of establishing an institutional system to hold elites in check, however, Deneen's aristo-populism simply suggest the people rely on 'a better set of elites' than those currently in charge to protect their interests (2023, 62).

This disjunction between discursive support for the common people and institutional follow-through is characteristic of right-populism in practice. As Müller noted, 'contrary to the cliché of the ultra-wealthy as liberal do-gooder globalists, the actual economic policy preferences of the 0.1 percent are extremely conservative' (2021, 20). Many of those 'one might plausibly describe as oligarchs' have broadly supported right-wing populists where they have come to power (Müller 2021, 20–21). It is not entirely unexpected, then, that despite their 'pro-worker' rhetoric, the economic policies of Salvini, Bolsonaro, Modi, Orbán, and Trump all revolved around corporate tax cuts (Fong and Guastella 2020).

Nevertheless, Deneen puts little stock in Machiavelli's insistence that society is necessarily antagonistic—instead arguing that the societal division of the 'elites against the people' is an artifact of liberal and Marxist thought (2023, 68). Rather than recognising that the *Popolo* and the *Grandi* are likely to have diverging, or even competing, interests, Deneen's 'populist' elite would be 'aligned with the values and needs of ordinary working people', and would govern for the 'common good' (Deneen 2023, 164). His reference to Machiavellian popular violence, consequently, functions as a means for reconciling any divisions between the people and the elite:

> 'What is needed is the application of Machiavellian means to achieve Aristotelian ends—the use of powerful political resistance by the populace against the natural advantages of the elite to create a mixed constitution not ultimately of the sort imagined by Machiavelli, but in which genuine common good is the result. The aim should not be a mixing of hostile elements, but a genuine blending of the classes…' (2023, 166)

This selective use of Machiavelli appears to be an embrace of political violence more than of popular sovereignty. Echoing Strauss (1958), Deneen suggests accepting Machiavelli's stance on political action in defence of political ideals, without also adopting his—arguably populist—conception of the diverging interests of the people and the elite, or the institutional mechanisms which would protect the former from the latter (McCormick 2001). In other words, Deneen happily encourages populism—and particularly popular tumult—as a political strategy, and reiterates his reverence for the common people, but ultimately disdains democratic self-governance.

The defence of democratic 'openness' by left-populists while right-populists take a more openly anti-democratic stance initially appears like a vindication of Müller's argument that what is commonly called left-populism is not *really* populism. Müller can claim that populism

is ultimately anti-democratic only by excluding from the category of 'populist' those who are not explicitly anti-pluralist in their counter-hegemonic claims—such as those who resemble what Mouffe would consider 'left-populism', including Syriza, Podemos, or Bernie Sanders. By holding that left-populism does not *really* make a pars-pro-toto claim, Müller is more rigorous than those who reduce the term to a *kampfbegriff* by presenting all 'critiques of the neoliberal order… as a danger to democracy' (Mouffe 2018, 47–48).

By diminishing the gap between populism and the status quo, it appears that, despite her rhetoric, Mouffe's left-populism is not a radical alternative—a view is shared by many leftist thinkers. Žižek, for example, argues that: 'Laclau's and Mouffe's 'radical democracy' comes all too close to merely "radicalizing" this liberal democratic imaginary, while remaining within its horizon,' while el-Ojeili suggests that Laclau and Mouffe's attempt 'to steer the radical democratic project between the 'totalitarian myth of the Ideal City… and the positivist pragmatism of reformists without a project' has fallen to the latter side of the equation' (Žižek 2000, 325; el-Ojeili 2001, 238).

In contrast to Müller's limiting of the critique of populism only to explicitly anti-democratic actors, however, Mouffe's minimising of the differences between left-populism and the status quo instead functions to broaden the pluralist critique. Implicit in dismissals of hegemonic politics *as such*, there is the assumption that really-existing-liberal-democracy accurately resembles the liberal democracy defended by liberal-pluralists. In other words, the claim that the 'the people' of the status quo only ever appear as 'plural, composite, and even conflicting' assumes that the current order is not the product of a hegemonic claim, but represents a genuine pluralism (Urbinati 2014, 162). This would reject Mouffe's insistence that the identity of the people is always a constructed around a (fictional and insufficient) hegemonic claim.

To some extent, Müller admits that 'state colonisation, mass clientelism, and discriminatory legalism are phenomena that can be found in many historical situations' (2016, 47). The neoliberal 'market populists' elevated a certain *plebs* to the status of *populus,* and rebuilt democratic institutions around the values of the 'market's People' (Hall 1988; Brandes 2020). Nonetheless, the situation resulting from the neoliberal 'state colonisation' is still defended as the pluralist alternative to the anti-pluralism of contemporary populism. As Müller writes elsewhere, 'once the utopian energies of Thatcherism had dissipated, the European picture still recognizably featured the contours of the [pluralist and democratic] post-war constitutional settlement' (2011, 237).

There is a recognition here that what undermines democracy is not the making of a hegemonic claim, nor the 'occupation' of state institutions, but whether these identities and commitments

remain contestable. This means that the same critiques aimed by pluralist thinkers at populism also apply to hegemonic neoliberalism. Despite the recognition, Müller maintains his critique against hegemonic politics as such. He notes that he remains: 'reluctant to attribute redemptive potential, or at least the power to politicize a supposedly post-political settlement… to populism in the way it has been suggested—with due caution and hedging—by theorists as different as Margaret Canovan and Ernesto Laclau' (2012, 1263, note 47). This functions to resist the re-articulation of democracy's collective subject in the name of ensuring that this identity remains undetermined and open to re-articulation. For Mouffe, this reinforces the false choice between 'accepting the current neoliberal hegemonic formation as the only legitimate form of liberal democracy or rejecting liberal democracy altogether' (2018, 47–48). Reflecting limited possibilities for democratic conflict, and doing little to address perceptions of a democratic deficit (Urbinati 2024), this effectively returns us to the post-political situation against which both Mouffe and Deneen frame their manifestos.

Conclusion

Bringing the liberal-pluralist, post-Marxist, and post-liberal approaches to populism into conversation with each other raises important questions regarding the function of political theory in drawing distinctions and making judgements—specifically between categories of pluralist/anti-pluralist and democratic/anti-democratic. Müller ultimately suggests that left- and right- populism are fundamentally alike, and that both are necessarily anti-pluralist, although he reaches this conclusion only by excluding from his definition many movements commonly referred to as 'left-populist'. This approach which brings together a range of different movements under the populist umbrella suggests that the perceived threat to democracy stems from the 'formal' structure of populism more than its substantive content. In other words, the problem is the making of a hegemonic claim and the subsequent occupation of state institutions.

Mouffe and Deneen's work complicate this picture. They highlight how the status quo—whether framed as neoliberal hegemony or as liberal regime—functions according to the same hegemonic logic. This aligns with Müller insofar as it claims that left and right populism share a certain form, but it also extends that observation to the status quo. Where Müller treats this hegemonic logic as necessarily anti-democratic, for Mouffe it is the condition of possibility for forming collective political subjects. This equivalence between populist movements and the status quo has two important implications for the study of populism. Firstly, it requires a substantive (self-)criticism of the status quo. For Mouffe and Deneen, the defenders of the

status quo cannot conceive of themselves as being part of the cause of populist discontent, and in their anti-populism are less far removed from the objects of their critique than they suppose. Without this self-awareness, pluralist critiques of populism all too quickly descend into kneejerk conservatism.

Secondly, it requires approaching populism in a manner which is both more discerning and sympathetic. Criticising populists for making hegemonic claims appears insufficient when that which is being defended from the populists is founded on its own hegemonic claim. In other words, critical analyses of populism should be concerned more with their particular characteristics rather than their formal wholism. The similarities between left- and right-populism are highlighted when it comes to descriptions of their political logic abstracted away from any specific content, yet when examined in positive terms—i.e. what they are populating their hegemonic claims with—there are very clear differences. This becomes apparent when reading Mouffe and Deneen side by side—while both understand their respective projects as counter-hegemonic challenges to an increasingly undemocratic liberalism, a close reading highlights the former's commitment to, and the latter's disdain for, democratic processes.

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