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Agonistic Representative Democracy in Europe

Chantal Mouffe, as interviewed and translated by Pablo Ouziel

You have written extensively about how one can think about politics and the political. Could you say something about how to weave poststructuralist thought with the thinking of Antonio Gramsci?

Theoretical and political reflection on a given political conjuncture and how one can intervene within it has been an essential and recurrent aspect of my work since *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985).[1] I often refer to Louis Althusser's reading of Niccolò Machiavelli's work as thinking within the conjuncture and not about the conjuncture. This is something with which I identify. My point of departure is always a specific conjuncture and then I develop the theoretical elements that help me think through it. I find of paramount importance that we grasp the fact that there are certain ways of understanding politics that blind us from understanding particular conjunctures. Gilles Deleuze argues that certain images of thought prevent us from thinking. I would paraphrase him by saying that there are images of politics that prevent us from thinking politically. Unfortunately, I think that the left has an image of politics that prevents thinking politically. It also prevents an understanding of the specificity of problems being raised in a particular conjuncture.

Ernesto Laclau and I wrote *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* at a time during which what was then referred to as new social movements began to mobilize boldly. This was after '68; the feminist, antiracist, gay rights and environmental movements were making demands. Yet, we were concerned about the fact that neither the Marxist nor the social-democratic left were capable of understanding the importance of these new demands. The book came out in 1985, but we began writing it at the end of the '70s. At the time, Marxist perspectives were still very important and those within the Marxist and social-democratic left continued to

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[1] E. Laclau and C. Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985).

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defend a socialist project centered on working-class interests. In doing so, they viewed these other demands as petit-bourgeois or subsidiary. We, on the other hand, were convinced of the importance of rethinking and re-formulating the socialist project to include these demands in order to weave them together with the demands of the working class. We began to think about the problem, and soon realized that it was a particular theory that we referred to as class essentialism that prevented these parties from seeing the importance of these new demands. This class essentialism consisted in thinking that the subjectivity of social agents was determined by their position in the relations of production. Therefore, demands that were not identified as working-class demands were not considered important.

In thinking about this problem, we reached the conclusion that there was a need for a theory that would break with this class essentialism and could conceive of society in a completely different manner. Two key theoretical sources were instrumental in the shaping of these ideas. First, we drew from what was referred to as poststructuralist thinking and its conception of society as a discursive space; within this strand, we found the work of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan very important. Second, contributing to the specificity of our approach, we combined poststructuralist theories with the thinking of Antonio Gramsci. Since at the time I was in the feminist movement and was part of a magazine influenced by Foucault, I began to understand the specificity of different demands and the importance of the demands being made by feminists. What those within the movement insisted on was the fact that there existed many specific struggles and that all these fronts needed to be fought separately. Ernesto and I disagreed with this perspective because we thought that in order to act politically there was a need to create an 'us'.

This is where Gramsci's idea of hegemony was important for us. Articulating poststructuralist ideas with Gramsci's thought constituted the specificity of what we called an anti-essentialist approach. This was the principle theme in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, and from this perspective we posited that in order to think about the political there are two central concepts: the concept of 'antagonism' and the concept of 'hegemony'. When speaking about the concept of antagonism we referenced a theoretical perspective that insisted on what one can refer to as 'radical negativity'. This perspective understands that there are certain forms of negativity that cannot be overcome through a dialectical process. Whereas in both Marx and Hegel antagonism can be overcome through a dialectical process, from poststructuralist thought, this radical negativity cannot be overcome. Lacan's thinking around this issue is particularly important, but so is Derrida's challenging of the idea of totalization. From a poststructuralist position totalization is challenged; there can never be a totality. This is one specificity of poststructuralism. Whereas the traditional structuralism of Lévi-Strauss and Ferdinand de Saussure presents a kind of totalization, poststructuralism challenges this idea. In this radical negativity that cannot be overcome poststructuralism presents what we really

refer to as antagonism. There are conflicts in society in which, in some sense, society is always necessarily divided. This evidently implies a conception of the political that is very different from other conceptions. According to the *associative* conception, the political is the field of joint action, acting in common, freedom and consensus. This is the dominant conception in most liberal political philosophy. When I say liberal, I mean liberal in a philosophical sense, and both Rawls and Jürgen Habermas are part of this associative conception of the political. In addition, within this conception, one finds more heterodox people like Hannah Arendt. Within their conception of politics, the negation that exists cannot accept the presence of a radical negativity. Therefore, antagonism, the idea that there are conflicts that can never be rationally resolved, is always excluded.

A different conception of the political, one that is *dissociative*, accepts radical negativity and the fact that society is divided. This conception can be found in Thucydides, Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, Carl Schmitt and Max Weber. One of the theses that Ernesto and I have defended is that if there is politics it is because there are conflicts that cannot be overcome rationally because of the existence of antagonism.

CAN YOU ELABORATE ON YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE CONCEPTS OF ANTAGONISM, CONTINGENCY AND HEGEMONY, AND CLARIFY WHAT IT MEANS TO THINK OF POLITICS FROM A POSTFOUNDATIONALIST AND ANTI-ESSENTIALIST PERSPECTIVE?

The concept of hegemony is important when thinking about politics from our perspective. This is tied to antagonism because if there is antagonism, it means that all existing order is an order that corresponds to a specific position that excludes another possibility. This is tied to two ideas that are also important in our conception of the political and are clearly drawn from poststructuralism. The *first* idea is what can be described as post-foundationalism; if there is antagonism there is no ultimate foundation. Every order is a contingent order that is precarious; there will never be an order that is absolutely rational. I think this is important as it means that all order is a result of hegemonic practices trying to establish order in a field traversed by antagonism. This is why orders are precarious, because all orders presuppose the existence of something that has been excluded and that could also be reactivated. That is hegemony: there is no ultimate foundation. This, however, does not imply a relativist position. There are orders and the objective of politics is always to establish an order. Nevertheless, this order is always precarious and contingent. Contingency is the *second* important idea in our conception of the political. From an anti-essentialist position, society is understood as a discursive space. What we refer to as discourse is an articulation of linguistic elements but also of material elements. It is similar to what Ludwig Wittgenstein describes as a language-game; speaking of

language is part of an activity, or a form of life. It is something materialistic, and not idealistic, as many of our critics have suggested.

We make a clear distinction between the political and politics. We speak of the political at an ontological level, whereas politics is always ontic. Speaking of politics refers to the practices of organization of society. There is nothing too original about this, but what is important is seeing that these practices take place in an antagonistic space. This is why orders are always contingent and precarious. Hegemony implies that in every situation there has always been a path that has not been taken, therefore there is always an alternative. This is especially important when one is going to think about how we can think politics from this view point. If we think it from the perspective of hegemony, we are automatically in a position to critique the neoliberal thesis. We can challenge Thatcher's famous phrase: "there is no alternative." There is always an alternative from a hegemonic conception of politics. This seems very abstract, but it impacts politics directly.

Another element of our anti-essentialist approach is how we think about political subjects. From our perspective, political subjects are always collective subjects. This is an important thesis of ours, which evidently opposes liberal individualism. Of course, when you act politically you act as a person but as part of an 'us'. Here one can see the distinction between a political language game and a moral language game. Moral issues are dealt with from an individual perspective, yet politics is always carried out as a citizen, otherwise it is not a political position.

Another important element that I should have mentioned is the fact that from a dissociative conception, politics always has to do with the construction of an 'us' and this always requires a 'them'. Politics always has to do with collective subjects that are going to enter into partisan relations. This is why from a dissociative-perspective of politics 'us' and 'them' are understood as discursive constructs. This is an important point in order to understand populism. The anti-essentialist perspective helps us to grasp the fact that 'the people' is not simply the population but a discursive construction.

FOLLOWING FROM THIS, IF POLITICS REQUIRES THE CONSTRUCTION OF AN US, HOW ARE COLLECTIVE SUBJECTS CONSTRUCTED?

In relation to the construction of collective subjects, one should speak first of the subject before speaking of collective subjects. Here is where the influence of psychoanalysis is very important for our perspective. There are no predetermined identities. As Freud said, all identities are a form of identification. Using language that is not Freud's, identities are discursive constructions that are transformed through practices in which the subject is

inscribed. This is important because it reveals the importance of political practice. What would politics be if identities were already a given? Politics would only represent identities and this leads us to the question of representation, which, from an anti-essentialist viewpoint, is articulated differently. From this perspective identities are not a given, they are always constructed discursively. This is heavily influenced by de Saussure's idea that all identities are relational; this is key in the anti-essentialist thesis. The creation of an identity implies the establishment of a difference. For example, de Saussure insists that the concept 'mother' has no meaning per se: it has meaning in relation to other concepts like 'father' or 'daughter'. Without these other positions, we could not understand the meaning of 'mother'. Therefore, all identities are relational. This means that in regards to political identities, which are collective identities, the construction of an 'us' implies that there is a 'them'. There can never be an 'us' without a corresponding 'them'. In addition, another important element is the fact that in the construction of subjects there is always an affective element that is important. This also comes from psychoanalysis; affects are always involved in forms of identification. Identification is not a rational issue; this is why I prefer to talk about affective-discursive constructions. Affects are important in discursive constructions and this is very important for politics.

Therefore, the question one can ask is as follows: If politics always has to do with an us/them relationship, how can we imagine the necessary conditions for a pluralist democracy? Here is where I often reference Carl Schmitt, and this needs some clarification. The importance that we give to antagonism in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* has led some people to say that our perspective is influenced by Schmitt. It is important to say that when we wrote the book neither Ernesto nor I had read Schmitt. It was following the publication of the book that a Greek friend asked me if I knew Schmitt's work. I responded that I did not and he told me that in Schmitt I was going to find a lot of affinity with my work regarding the political. At that point, I began to be interested in Schmitt. I found him helpful as I reflected on how to criticize liberalism.

WHAT HAS YOUR WORK OVER THE YEARS TAUGHT YOU REGARDING ALTERNATIVE MODELS OF DEMOCRACY AND HOW TO IMAGINE A PLURALIST DEMOCRACY?

First, I looked at existing models of democracy. On the one hand, there is an aggregative conception of democracy, which, for example, we find in Joseph Schumpeter. This is the dominant or most common conception one finds in political science departments today. Its argument is that democracy has to do with the aggregation of interests. On the other hand, there is a different conception of democracy, referred to as deliberative democracy, that has

developed primarily from Rawls' critique of the aggregative conception. From this conception, the field of democracy has to do more with moral considerations or types of justice than simple interests.

Without a doubt, I am more sympathetic toward the deliberative conception of democracy. I agree with its critique of the aggregative model. I find the aggregative model very restrictive. Nevertheless, I also find many missing elements in the deliberative conception, as it fails to give space for thinking through antagonism. This is clear in Habermas' ideal speech situation. Although he is conceiving it as a regulative idea, the end goal is to reach a rational consensus. Ultimately, the deliberative model attempts to establish the procedures that can lead to a rational agreement. There are many deliberative models and they all propose different processes. Nevertheless, for all of them the ultimate aim is to figure out how to establish a rational consensus. This, in essence, means that there is a negation of antagonism. This I say because antagonism means to accept that there are conflicts that cannot be resolved rationally. In addition, the deliberative perspective does not allow for an imagining of hegemony in a postfoundationalist key. Ultimately, this model presumes that there is always a point at which everyone can come to an agreement on what it means to be rational: an inclusive consensus from which there is an 'us' without a 'them'.

COULD YOU SAY A LITTLE MORE ABOUT THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN YOUR WORK AND THAT OF SCHMITT?

It was in thinking about pluralist democracy from a dissociative and anti-essentialist conception that I found Schmitt's critique of liberalism interesting. In the 1920s, Schmitt argued that the problem of liberalism was that it needed to negate politics. Here he understood politics as the friend/enemy relationship. When Ernesto and I speak of antagonism, Schmitt speaks of the criteria of the political as friend/enemy. Nevertheless, we are ultimately speaking about the same thing. Of liberalism, Schmitt says that when it attempts to speak of politics it does so from a model either borrowed from the economy or from morality, but it cannot speak of antagonism, which is what is specific to politics. This moral model is what corresponds to the deliberative model. Schmitt was helpful at the time, as I was developing my own critique of a certain type of liberalism. What I was really critiquing was the rationalism and individualism of liberalism. Schmitt was evidently also critiquing political liberalism (pluralism) but I was not interested in following him along that path. In fact, my goal was to reformulate political liberalism in order for it to incorporate the dimensions of antagonism and hegemony. This, for Schmitt, was impossible. If one accepts that the us/them relationship is partisan and that there is antagonism, it is impossible to imagine a pluralist society in which there is the possibility of legitimate dissensus. This is why Schmitt ends up defending an authoritarian model of democracy.

Interestingly, it is worth noting that Schmitt and Habermas are in agreement on one point: that one cannot have pluralism and antagonism together. Schmitt asserts that antagonism is ineradicable and that the idea of a pluralist democracy is impossible, while Habermas holds the opposite position. Habermas wants to defend pluralist democracy; therefore, he has to negate antagonism. Nevertheless, both are in agreement about the fact that you cannot at the same time have an acknowledgment of antagonism and a pluralist democracy. Hence, my challenge to demonstrate through my agonistic conception that this was actually possible. This is how I developed what I call an agonistic model of democracy. It consisted in pointing out that Schmitt did not envisage that antagonism can manifest in different ways. Of course, from the Schmittean friend/enemy conception in which the enemy needs to be eradicated, the legitimacy of the demands of the enemy cannot be recognized and it is impossible to think pluralist democracy because that would lead to civil war. Nevertheless, one can understand that there is another form of 'antagonism' that I call 'agonism'. Opponents understand that the objective is not to find the procedures that will lead to consensus because there is an antagonism between the positions they defend, but they do not treat each other as enemies. Instead, they treat each other as adversaries.

That is, agonism involves recognizing opponents' rights to defend their own point of view; they abide by certain mutually accepted principles that shape the struggle. They do so according to procedures that they themselves have mutually recognized. This is why I speak of conflictual consensus, which requires a kind of consensus about what, following Montesquieu, I refer to as the ethico-political principles of the regime. In the case of a liberal pluralist democracy, the principles that are going to shape our coexistence are freedom and equality for all. We must be in agreement on those principles, but evidently there is going to be disagreement in the way they are interpreted: What is 'freedom'? What is 'equality'? Who are we referring to when we say 'all'? There is obviously no possibility for a rational consensus. The point is not to put people together to deliberate and argue until they reach consensus. There is always going to be disagreement.

Political theory speaks of concepts like freedom and equality as essentially contested concepts. There is no way of saying that a particular definition is the true definition of equality. The same happens with freedom. Therefore, I think that in a democracy it is important for an agonistic struggle to be able to exist between different interpretations of what it means to be democratic. This is the essence of a pluralist democracy, and from a perspective of dissociative democracy it is perfectly possible to understand its existence. Of course, this requires institutions that facilitate the articulation of the conflict in an agonistic and not antagonistic manner. In order to understand this, one has to situate oneself within an anti-essentialist perspective. It is not about positions that are already defined, but about something that is constructed in different ways.

Politics consists, in this sense, in seeing how one can transform antagonism into agonism; creating the conditions so that when a conflict arises it does not adopt an antagonist shape but an agonistic one.

Let me emphasize that in no way do I pretend to say that this conception of politics is the truth about politics. I will never say I have the true conception, and Habermas, for example, does not. In the conception of politics that I defend there is no conception of truth. Of course, I would attempt to defend my conception of politics with respect to Habermas'. Nevertheless, I would do so in a pragmatic manner. I would argue that starting off from such a conception helps us to understand many more political phenomena than beginning from the other. For example, one cannot understand the dissolution of Yugoslavia from a liberal perspective. It was very interesting to see how liberal thought responded to these events. Think of Francis Fukuyama who came out with his *The End of History and the Last Man*, in which liberal democracy was the only possible model.[2] Yet, this lasted very little time because the end of antagonism was followed by the dissolution of Yugoslavia. What was interesting about this event was seeing how liberal theorists attempted to justify the contradiction between what was happening and their theories. They spoke of remnants of communism or specifically of the Balkans; theorists were unable to comprehend that in politics the possibility of antagonism can never be eliminated.

COULD YOU SPEAK ABOUT THE DIFFERENT CONJUNCTURES ON WHICH YOUR WORK OVER THE YEARS HAS FOCUSED?

In *On the Political* (2005), I examine the Third Way of Tony Blair and Anthony Giddens.[3] The book is a critique of their idea that we are no longer in the first modernity but in a second one in which the adversarial model of the political has been overcome.

At that time, I had many arguments with people who celebrated this model as an advance for democracy. They claimed that we were living in a more mature democracy and I responded that this was an antipolitical, or postpolitical (as I called it at the time) position. For me this model was a danger to democracy. I argued that it would create the conditions for right-wing populism to grow. There was not much right-wing populism in Europe at the time. There was Jean-Marie LePen in France, there was a right-wing populist party in Austria with Jörg Haider, and there was the Vlaams Blok in Belgium. I considered it a mistake, pretending that there was no more antagonism and that the idea of left and right had been overcome. Conflicts were not going to disappear but would take on a different form. This would create the possibility for opposition to be formulated in ethnic terms, which is exactly the field of right populism.

[2] F. Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).
[3] C. Mouffe, *On the Political* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011).

Now we see that this is exactly what has happened as a consequence of the abandonment of leftist values by the social-democratic project. This has created the conditions for the growing success of right populism.

Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically (2013) was a reflection on the occupation of the squares movements.[4] It was a critique of the limits of movements like the Indignados and Occupy Wall Street. In essence, it was a critique of pure horizontalism. For example, I think that especially the Indignados avoided defining an adversary. They shouted *democracia real ya*! ("real democracy now!"), and there was a hope of creating a completely inclusive 'us'. What caught my attention was the fact that they were against voting in assemblies because they said that if they voted they would become divided. Granted, Occupy Wall Street was better than the Indignados and at least acknowledged that there was an adversary that was the 1 percent. Having said this, I think the Indignados and Occupy had commonalities in their rejection of institutions, political parties and trade unions. Theirs was a purely horizontalist perspective and I think it missed the fact that building hegemony must necessarily pass through the state. I am not defending in any way that politics is limited to the parliamentary sphere. The horizontal dimension is very important, but to have a real impact and transform things a vertical element needs to be articulated. Its objective being one of '*becoming* state' (Gramsci) rather than one of seizing state power.

Up to today, I am yet to see a purely horizontal movement that can transform our societies in a meaningful manner. In the case of the Indignados, Spain was lucky that Podemos did not allow the impulse of the 15M to disappear and worked toward structuring it. In the case of Occupy Wall Street this did not happen and therefore it disappeared. The same thing happened with Nuit Debout in France and I think this is the risk that the Gilets Jaunes are facing.

I think that at this point we have enough examples demonstrating that unless there is a vertical articulation aimed at reaching the power of state institutions, it is unlikely that true transformation can take place. The key is to build a new hegemony and this passes also through the apparatuses of the state.

In my latest book, *For a Left Populism* (2018), my particular interest is with the current conjuncture in Western Europe.[5] The conditions in Eastern Europe are completely different and the reasons for the emergence of right populism there are also different. This is why I always insist on reflecting on a specific conjuncture. Obviously, the studying of a particular state of affairs can provide insight for other cases but the reflection must be of a particular conjuncture. What is specific to the current conjuncture is that we are living through a crisis of neoliberalism. The failures of the model began to show with the crisis of 2008. Before this, the hegemony of neoliberalism was almost uncontested. Now

[4] C. Mouffe and E. Wagner, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (London: Verso, 2013).
[5] C. Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* (London: Verso, 2018).

things look different. We see a series of resistances against what I refer to as the postdemocracy that is the consequence of thirty years of neoliberal hegemony.

CAN YOU CLARIFY WHAT YOU MEAN BY POSTDEMOCRACY?

When I speak of a situation of postdemocracy I do so in reference to two primary phenomena happening at both the political and the economic levels. At the political level, I am thinking of what I have been studying as postpolitics: consensus to the center so that eventually there are no fundamental differences between left and right when citizens go to the polls. As the Indignados would say, "we have a vote but we have no voice." Ultimately, there is no possibility for citizens to choose between different political projects. The element of popular sovereignty, which I consider one of the central ideas of democracy, has been eliminated. I use this term in a very specific and simple manner. For me popular sovereignty refers to the fact that citizens have a voice. That they have a genuine capacity to choose. If they do not have such a capacity, this is what I call postpolitics.

The second element has to do with economic transformations. I speak of a process of oligarchization of our societies. We are living through the broadening of the gap between a shrinking group of ever richer people and the remaining population that is undergoing a process of impoverishment and precaritization. This is a consequence of financial capitalism. One of the main features of the neoliberal model is that it gives primacy to financial capitalism and this has led to a situation of oligarchization.

What we are seeing now is that many citizens have stopped accepting this postdemocratic situation and there is a growing rebellion. We are witnessing the birth of antisystem movements saying that they no longer want this model. This is what I call the populist moment. I use the term "populism" in the way that Ernesto Laclau defines it. In *On Populist Reason* he says that populism is a strategy of construction of political frontiers between those from below and those from above.[6] Evidently, in order to understand this one has to situate oneself in a dissociative conception of politics as it is this conception that describes politics as the drawing of a frontier between us and them. I think that the reason there is so much hostility toward populism coming from liberal thinkers, including the most progressive, is that they situate themselves within an associative conception of politics for which there are no frontiers. On the contrary, they argue that in democracy there is no us and them. When you begin from such a conception you are going to see populism as a pathology of democracy, as a perversion of democracy. Yet, what I think we are seeing with the rise of populism is a return of the political: a challenging of the consensual model and the re-establishment of what politics is. We begin to see again the re-establishment of the partisan character of politics. Obviously, the

[6] E. Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005).

re-establishment of a frontier does not necessarily lead to more democratic or progressive decisions. This depends on the manner in which the us and them is constructed and this is where the difference between left and right populism lies.

In both cases a frontier is drawn but the way in which it is drawn differs. Generally, right populism constructs its frontier in an ethno-nationalist key. It limits the us to a certain category of citizen. It includes nationals and excludes immigrants. From this conception immigrants are constructed as the them. Left populism, on the other hand, constructs the us and them in a completely different manner. A left populist conception constructs a much more inclusive us. In my conception of left populism, the us being drawn includes numerous democratic demands that are not only socioeconomic; they have to do with other forms of domination and discrimination. When, for example, we incorporate LGBT demands, the us we are constructing is different, and the them becomes the forces maintaining the neoliberal order at the core of all forms of oppression.

As I explain in *For a Left Populism*, the political challenge that we face is both a great opportunity and a great danger. This is why at the beginning of the book I make clear that I write it as a political intervention. I feel a real urgency because we are in a key moment. We are facing the crisis of neoliberal hegemony and this can open the way for more authoritarian regimes or can lead to a process of radicalization of democracy. It can allow for the creation of a different hegemony, but what kind of hegemony is constructed will depend on which forces are going to win. This is why I insist on the importance for the left to understand the nature of the conjuncture. Realizing that this is an important moment for them to intervene in a manner that allows for a progressive exit out of the crisis.

Currently, we see a lot of references to the fact that we are returning to the 1930s. Many intellectuals see the return of fascism. We start hearing people talking about it rearing its ugly head. Personally, I think this is the worse way to react. Demonizing right populist parties as the expression of the return of that malignant force of fascism is a mistake. Doing this, we stop trying to figure out the reasons, the origins, of the rise of right populism. From this position, which treats it as a sort of meteorological phenomenon that returns, one is not going to understand how to struggle against it. In order to understand how to struggle against it in an efficient manner one has to grasp what exactly is going on. This is a new phenomenon and one cannot think about it through traditional concepts like fascism and extreme right. This is something very specific to the current conjuncture. In addition, as I keep emphasizing, I think social-democratic parties are in great measure responsible for the success of right populist parties, as they have converted to neoliberalism and to the idea that there is no other alternative. They have abandoned the popular classes.

In all countries, social-democratic parties have taken the side of the winning sectors of neoliberal globalization and have been unable to present a defense for its losers. Without such a defense, the field has been left completely open for right populist parties to speak to those that feel excluded. The origin of right populism is not immigration but the fact that social-democratic parties have

forgotten to defend the losers of neoliberal globalization. Therefore, instead of demonizing the voters of these parties, as many on the left do, we must engage them. Most of these people are not fundamentally and intrinsically racist or homophobic. Of course, some are, but Didier Eribon's book *Retour a Reims* clearly reveals the point I am trying to make.[7] Eribon came from a poor working-class family that had always voted for the communist party. Due to the fact that he was gay and not accepted in his community he left Reims for thirty years. When he returned, he found that all his family was voting National Front (now known as National Rally). Eribon reflects on this and concludes that their community has been abandoned by the Left, that the only party that actually engages with them and claims to be there to give them a voice is the National Front.

IS THE RISE OF RIGHT POPULISM AND THE NEED TO RESPOND TO IT WITH LEFT POPULIST OPTIONS AN INDICATION OF THE CRISIS OF REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY?

Evidently, we are living through a crisis of the representative model. Nevertheless, I think this has been wrongly interpreted by a certain part of the left. Some theorists say that the problem is with representative democracy per se. Following from this, they suggest that the solution to the current crisis is the elaboration of models of direct democracy. I see it differently, I think that the problem of our crisis of representation is that our societies are not representative enough; there are numerous sectors of society that do not have a voice. This is, I think, a consequence of our democracies no longer being agonistic. When people think there is no left and right anymore, then there are no alternatives. Therefore, what we need to do in this conjuncture is to re-establish partisanship. This is what the populist moment offers and, therefore, it is a return of the political. The key during this moment is not to accuse the others of being fascists, because by doing this you will not have an agonistic relationship with them. All constructs of politics on moralizing grounds should be avoided. If one sees their opponents as evil, then instead of their right to their own point of view being recognized they are seen as needing to be eradicated. Under such conditions there is no room for an agonistic relationship.

CAN YOU CLARIFY HOW AN ANTI-ESSENTIALIST CONCEPTION CAN HELP US UNDERSTAND THE RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES OF THE POPULIST MOMENT AS YOU CONCEIVE IT?

The anti-essentialist conception is very important here. Many of the critiques coming from the left of people that vote for right populist parties is that they are

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[7] D. Eribon and E. Louis, *Retour à Reims* (Paris: Flammarion, 2018).

intrinsically racist and/or homophobic. This is an essentialist conception; it assumes that this is the essence of these people and that they cannot be transformed. Following from this, the response to these people from many on the left is to stigmatize them. I think this is a mistake. If we want to understand how to fight against this phenomenon of right populism, what we need to do is to acknowledge that in the origin of many of the demands being made by these voters there is a genuinely democratic nucleus. These demands are resistances against what I call postdemocracy. There is a request for democracy; people are saying that they want a voice. Politics is about how one responds to these demands, how one is going to articulate them. I think on this front La France Insoumise has made great advances. In the elections of 2017, they managed to win in various parts of France that were strongholds of the Front National. This was the case because La France Insoumise took the time to speak with these people. It helped them understand that their problems were not caused by immigrants but by neoliberalism. It was interesting to see how a kind of very traditional extreme left was completely against this move and critiqued La France Insoumise for going to speak to 'fascists'. Refusing to speak to these people because they are seen as intrinsically fascists is the worse strategy possible. We must attempt to transform and give a progressive response to these demands. One can only understand this from an anti-essentialist conception of politics. Identities are not a given but are always constructed through political discourse. Hence, they can be constructed in the manner of left populism or in the way of right populism. This I see as a big challenge for the left in the current conjuncture.

YOU HAVE DESCRIBED YOUR WORK AS POST-MARXIST. COULD YOU CLARIFY WHAT YOU MEAN BY THIS?

In order to think about the work that Ernesto and I have done, post-Marxism is an important term. We did not present ourselves as post-Marxist. Nevertheless, right before the publication of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, the traditional Marxist left was already labeling us in this manner because of a series of articles that we had published. In calling us post-Marxists they claimed that we had abandoned Marxism. Following from this, when we published the book we accepted the "post-Marxist" label with the condition that it was post but also Marxist. We were not rejecting Marxism. We acknowledged the important elements in Marx's work that help us understand capitalism, while refusing to read Marx like one would read the Koran. We do the same with Gramsci. We borrow from different people in order to develop our own theories. Otherwise, it would be like saying that physics is limited to Newton. Without a doubt, Marxism is an important element in our biography. But Marxism is just one of the elements in our thinking on the political.

There is an aspect of our book that has been misunderstood. I am afraid that Ernesto did not help with this because of certain statements that he made. As an example, he once said that the class struggle did not exist. What he was criticizing was the idea of class struggle as theorized by Marxism. Personally, I think that the idea of the class struggle understood as the motor force of history has to be completely abandoned. Having said this, we must not abandon the idea that there are what could be referred to as class antagonisms. In a metaphorical sense, this references certain antagonisms at the socioeconomic level. Ernesto and I do not reject the idea that there is antagonism at this level; what we are saying is that this is just one kind of antagonism amidst a multiplicity of different forms of antagonism and that it does not have an a priori privilege. Moreover, anticapitalist struggles are not limited to issues of class. For example, a lot of feminist struggles have an anticapitalist dimension. In some way or another, the impact of the neoliberal system and financial capitalism manifests itself in the lives of everyone. Traditional Marxism sees the proletariat as having an ontological privilege in the struggle against capitalism, and from that a metaphysics of the evolution of history is constructed. Yet, today it is not only the working class, the proletariat, the factory workers that are exploited and affected by the neoliberal regime. We are all affected by austerity politics. Therefore, many struggles have an anticapitalist dimension. The anticapitalist struggle is not the prerogative of the working class.

This is why in left populism we speak of a construction in terms of the 'people' versus the 'oligarchy'. Liberal thought negates the existence of frontiers, Marxism does not. Marxism constructs frontiers but it does so by creating a distinction between capital and labor, proletariat and bourgeoisie. According to left populism the frontier is between the people defined as an articulation of democratic demands against diverse forms of domination and a them, which includes all that are at the core of these forms of domination. We are not taking an anti-Marxist position. We do not reject Marxism but present instead a post-Marxist conception that broadens the struggle and shows that it cannot be limited to a mythical class struggle. We do show our disagreement with the Marxist conception of a law of history that will necessarily lead to the realization of socialism. From a post-foundationalist conception everything is contingent; there is no direction of history.

COULD YOU ELABORATE ON YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF REPRESENTATION AND REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY?

In the traditional conception of representation there is something that is a given before representation. It is an essentialist conception; there are always interests that are first given and then are represented. From an anti-essentialist perspective, however, there are no identities or demands that are a given. There are no objective interests that need to be represented (or not). All

interests are constructed and this construction is a form of representation. Therefore, there are no collective identities that are not the product of representation, because of the fact that they are not a given in an essentialist sense. Following from this, the idea that there can be a democracy that is not representative is impossible. This would imply a democracy without a subject of democracy. If democratic subjects are always the result of a discursive construction then representation is inscribed into the very construction of the identity. All ideas of direct democracy or the critique of representative democracy imply what Derrida calls a metaphysics of presence. Interests are not a given but are constructed; thus, representation is inscribed in the very heart of the construction of identity.

Another important aspect is the fact that to put into practice a pluralist democracy one needs representative institutions to give an institutional form to pluralism. This is why I think political parties are key if we want to have an agonistic democracy. One cannot think agonistic democracy without parties that represent different interests. This does not mean that existing parties are the best form of representation. Evidently not, since, lacking any fundamental difference, they do not allow for an agonistic struggle to materialize. Having said this, the point is not to say that all this has to be replaced with a kind of direct expression of the will of the people; this would not allow for pluralism to be represented. A pluralist conception of democracy implies the existence of institutions and parties that are going to permit the expression of this pluralism. Everyone that defends direct democracy does so, ultimately, from a consensualist position. They are ultimately defending the idea that there is one people and what is needed is the articulation of a sole voice for it. Contrary to this, if one departs from a position in which society is understood as divided, then this implies that there is a need to represent this division and this implies the existence of political parties or whatever one choses to call them.

AS A FINAL QUESTION AND THINKING ABOUT THE CURRENT CONJUNCTURE, COULD YOU SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS ON BREXIT?

I think that the anti-essentialist perspective helps us to understand better a phenomenon like Brexit and the strategy of right populists in the United Kingdom. The success of the "leave" vote in the referendum came from the capacity of those defending leaving the EU to articulate a whole series of demands that were in some sense heterogeneous. Tony Blair's politics has largely been responsible for Brexit. He implemented a program that benefited the middle classes of the south of England, while completely abandoning the more industrial northern regions. Neoliberal globalization has truly devastated these sectors and the leave camp in the Brexit referendum has managed to present the European Union as the origin of all the problems that these communities are experiencing. Brexit has become the hegemonic signifier that

has crystalized a whole series of demands. Initially, these sectors were worried about the conditions they were facing but they did not identify the EU as the cause of their problems. The leave campaign crystalized this and discursively constructed all these demands around the signifier 'take back control'. In the construction of a people, heterogeneous demands are always articulated. This requires a hegemonic signifier that becomes the symbol that represents these demands; it is around this symbol that a people crystalizes. The people of the leave campaign crystalized around the signifier Brexit that symbolized all those heterogeneous struggles that were in fact resistances against the postdemocratic conditions created by neoliberal hegemony. Those running the Leave campaign managed to express these not as effects of neoliberal hegemony but of being a part of Europe. Following from this, the solution was to take back control and leave the EU. This has become the cement that has crystalized a collective will. This collective will is not the expression of existing demands; there were no such existing demands against Europe. These demands have been constructed discursively by the Leave campaign.

Many of the Remainers have said that the Leave campaign is the expression of racism and xenophobia. I do not think this is the case. The demands have been constructed in this manner, but one must acknowledge that at the origin of that vote there exists a series of democratic demands. If one is going to struggle against this construction of a people then one must articulate demands around a different signifier and construct a different people. I am convinced that a Green New Deal could be the hegemonic signifier that will allow for the crystallization of a whole series of demands. The Green New Deal is the articulation of ecological objectives with demands concerning different forms of inequality. Following from this, I think it has the necessary strength to appeal to many different sectors of the population. For example, many of the feminist demands and different democratic demands about equality and racial justice can find a space in a project like the Green New Deal.

What I think is key for a left populist project is to be able to offer a vision of a society with which people can identify, a vision which offers hope of something different. The way a left populist project can struggle against a populist right movement is by identifying what are the demands being articulated and how are they crystalizing. Once these have been identified, one can determine which of these demands could be articulated in a different and progressive manner and what type of society needs to be defended and/or proposed. This requires recognizing the affective element of the mobilization of passions. I say this because I remember that the week before the referendum in the United Kingdom everyone seemed convinced that there would be no problem and that the Remain vote would win. At the time, I remember thinking that they were completely wrong, that they were going to lose. I could see all the passion being mobilized around Brexit. On the Remain side, the arguments were mainly economic; the discussion was about what people were going to lose. There was no passion being mobilized. Whereas in the Leave

side people really identified with a project and passions were being mobilized. In the Remain side people simply insisted on the negative effects of abandoning the EU. Brexit serves as an example of the importance of creating new forms of collective identity through the mobilization of affects. Critiquing rationally and saying what the opponent is saying is false is not enough for a progressive left option to succeed. The question for the left today is whether the key is to show the mistakes of the opponent or to propose something different that can give people hope.