



# Postdemocracy, the New Right and the Paralysis of the Left: A Commentary

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Two sides of the same coin: the current success of the new right on the one hand, the failure of the contemporary left on the other. What has perhaps been most striking and frustrating for me concerning the role of the left has been its manifest inability to develop a new, combative and progressive discourse – let alone something like a *vision* – that would constitute a *truly alternative* response to the most pressing challenges of today, whether it is the global financial crisis turned EU- and Euro-crisis, the glaring social injustice and inequality, our ecological predicament, or the so-called ‘refugee-crisis’. Instead of producing systematic critical analyses and developing radical, *transnational* courses of action, which would be aimed at fundamental, *structural* changes, the political left has for the most part not been able to adequately address or even name the real problems and has largely retracted to the smaller, more manageable framework of the nation-state, where it dedicates itself mostly to cosmetic surgery, i.e. to elaborating ways of softening here and there some of the harshest negative effects of the capitalist system, while leaving the basic mechanisms and structures untouched (cf. Forst/Ulrich 2016). The left is paralyzed.

I would argue that it is this lack of a profound critique of and viable alternative to the current neoliberal hegemony that is one of the factors that can help us account for the increased and increasing popularity of the new right. While its rise is certainly an overdetermined phenomenon that defies simple, monocausal explanations, my impression is that the state the political arena has been in for arguably over two decades now, a state that thinkers such as Jacques Rancière, Slavoj Žižek and Chantal Mouffe have referred to as ‘post-politics’, must be taken into consideration if we are to understand what has been happening. Although the understanding of ‘politics’ and ‘the political’ in the work of these theorists is by no means identical, they can nevertheless all be said to share the neo-Schmittian assumption that conflict and dissent are not only legitimate, but actually *vital and necessary* components of any social formation, and that such forms of ‘antagonism’ (Mouffe 2005a, 2005b) must not in the end be eliminated by being reduced to the mere competition over the occupation of positions of power on a supposedly neutral political terrain as in the liberal model. Instead, they must relate to



the *institution of the social* as such, i.e. to the power relations which determine the specific configuration of a given society – relations which are not seen as inevitable and immutable, but as the *contingent outcome of political/hegemonic struggle*. It is precisely this essential adversarial dispute about what Rancière calls the ‘partition of the sensible’, about the ‘order of the visible and the sayable’ (Rancière 1999; 2015), and the politico-economic articulations around which the social is structured that is eradicated in our contemporary consensual societies, which leave no room for *fundamental* forms of disagreement – i.e., forms relating to the very foundations of society. As Rancière points out: “Consensus is the ‘end of politics’: in other words, not the accomplishment of the ends of politics [as someone like Fukuyama might claim] but simply a return to the normal state of things – the non-existence of politics.” (2015: 50f)

As Mouffe and many other intellectuals on the left have pointed out, it was particularly in the wake of the dramatic refashioning of social-democratic parties across Europe in terms of a so-called ‘center-left’ position ‘beyond left and right’ during the 1990s that this consensus buttressing neoliberal hegemony was cemented. Through this restyling and renouncing of the traditional identity of the left, social democracy, to use Perry Anderson’s (2000: 7) and Stuart Hall’s (2003: 20) adaptation of Lenin, effectively turned into ‘the best ideological shell’ for global capitalism. As a result, politics has shifted from being an antagonistic or agonistic confrontation of opposites into mere management, *policy* and administration, while democracy progressively transformed into what Rancière (1999) and the political theorist Colin Crouch (2005), albeit from different perspectives, have termed ‘postdemocracy’: a state in which democratic institutions and practices are increasingly hollowed out, with the political parties becoming virtually indistinguishable, with much political decision-making taking place in the back room, heavily influenced by lobbies and the economic elites, and with the political process generally becoming more and more ‘spectacular’ (Debord 2009), driven in large parts by PR-professionals and spin doctors – “politics”, as the British writer J.G. Ballard once put it, “conducted as a branch of advertising” (2008: n.pag.). In this situation, as Rancière remarks, “Marx’s once-scandalous thesis that governments are simple business agents for international capital is today obvious fact on which ‘liberals’ and ‘socialists’ agree. The absolute identification of politics with the management of capital is no longer the shameful secret hidden behind the ‘forms’ of democracy; it is the openly declared truth by which our governments acquire legitimacy.” (1999: 113)

Following Mouffe, I would argue that it is (also) against the background of this situation and against the ensuing widespread political frustration, disidentification and apathy that the successes of the right in the recent past have to be understood. As voters were lastingly deprived of any real choice between substantially different political options and identities, and with the left having become more or less fully absorbed into the stifling consensus, the parties and movements of the right were able to articulate the



dissatisfaction with the status quo and the desire for an alternative of significant parts of the electorate to their own political project. I think the established political parties need to recognize their share of the responsibility for the serious inroads made by right-wing populism: by confining themselves to securing the smooth functioning of the market, by their endless appeals to ‘political realism’ – according to Rancière “the system of belief peculiar to the consensus system” (1999: 132) – their exhortation that ‘there is no alternative’, and by thus blurring the frontier between left and right and stifling democratic debate, they created a void in which racism and right-wing extremism practically became the only readily available discursive register in which dissent could be expressed. I quote at length a passage by Mouffe that seems to describe the situation today quite adequately:

Democracy is in peril not only when there is insufficient consensus and allegiance to the values it embodies, but also when its agonistic dynamic is hindered by an apparent excess of consensus, which usually masks a disquieting apathy. It is also endangered by the growing marginalization of entire groups whose status as an ‘underclass’ practically puts them outside the political community.

When, as is the case today, liberal democracy is increasingly identified with ‘actually existing liberal democratic capitalism’, and its political dimension is restricted to the rule of law, there is a risk that the excluded may join fundamentalist movements or become attracted to antiliberal, populist forms of democracy. A healthy democratic process calls for a vibrant clash of political positions and an open conflict of interests. If such is missing, it can too easily be replaced by a confrontation between non-negotiable moral values and essentialist identities. (2005b: 6)

It seems that this situation was only aggravated by the financial crisis of 2007/08 and the way the political elite responded to it. What could – and should – have led to a repolarization of the political field and the formation of a strong movement on the left trying to push the various contradictions (economic, political, social, ideological, etc.) at work in society towards what Althusser termed a ‘ruptural unity’ and thus bring about a true ‘conjunctural crisis’ that might have opened up a path to radical change, did, in the end, only result in the reaffirmation of the power of what Tariq Ali (2015) has recently called ‘the extreme center’. The Occupy movement notwithstanding, and with a few exceptions such as Syriza in Greece or, more recently, Podemos in Spain, the left was and is – and arguably more starkly and obviously than before – generally unable or unwilling to produce a comprehensive conjunctural analysis, sharply criticize the neoliberal model of globalization as well as the current shape of the European Union (e.g. its undemocratic and authoritarian character, its neoliberal policies, and the sealing off of its borders), and develop possible alternatives to the “symbiosis of big money and minimalist politics” (Ali 2015: 42). It was this failure that made and makes the right such a pole of attraction; for while the left remained paralyzed, the new right seized the opportunity to elaborate a discourse that is, of course, highly problematic (to say the



least), but whose properly *political* character (in Mouffe's sense) cannot be denied – thus, the disturbing impression that a certain form or rhetoric of critique (regarding the current state of parliamentary democracy, state bureaucracies, the media, the 'establishment', etc.) one would have expected to come from the left was instead articulated by the right.

If the current trend of more and more electoral successes of the right in America and Europe is to be stopped, I believe the left needs to finally overcome its lethargy and reject its role as caretaker of the status quo, find the courage to reappropriate what has traditionally been its very own topic, social justice – and not just as rhetoric but as political content – and begin to take more seriously the affective dimension of politics (cf. Mouffe 2005a: 23-25) by constructing a powerful pole of collective identification that is able to mobilize what Mouffe calls 'passions'. Above all, what has to be made clear in the present moment is that the various anxieties surrounding migration are really a sort of 'moral panic' (Cohen 2011; Hall et al. 1978), i.e. a largely symbolic way of working through the current crisis, with the figure of the 'migrant' functioning as a kind of 'folk devil' or scapegoat, and that what needs to be resisted to end socio-economic inequality is not migration, but austerity measures (which are rolled out whether or not migration is curbed anyway). In this way, it is to be hoped, a new, popular-democratic and counter-hegemonic movement (cf. Laclau 2007) might be fashioned that would be able not just to reverse the contemporary drift towards the right, but also to seriously challenge the reign of neoliberal capitalism.

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