

**(NOTE) POST-TRUTH AND POPULISM: A POPULIST FRAMEWORK FOR
DEFENDING THE TRUTH IN A POST-FACTUAL ERA**

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Abstract

In response to the much-discussed transition into a “post-factual” era led by the election of Donald Trump in the United States, the author argues that the defense of the truth must be conceived along explicitly populist political lines. In other words, it is insufficient to defend the truth for moral reasons alone. Rather, drawing upon the political thought of Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, the author contends that the resistance to the regime of “alternative facts” requires the development of a progressive populist discourse paired with realist political manoeuvring in order to leverage sentiment into a more truth-receptive condition.

Key Words

Populism, post-truth, hegemony, Chantal Mouffe, chain of equivalences

Résumé

En réponse au débat autour de la question de l'entrée dans une ère post-factuelle, engendrée notamment par l'élection de Donald Trump aux Etats-Unis, l'auteure soutient que la défense de la vérité doit être formulée comme allant de pair avec une politique populiste explicite. Pour le dire autrement, il n'est pas suffisant de défendre la vérité en se basant seulement sur des raisons morales. Plutôt, en s'appuyant sur la pensée politique de Chantal Mouffe et de Ernesto Laclau, l'auteure affirme que la résistance au régime des « faits alternatifs » nécessite l'articulation d'un discours populiste progressif associé à une manœuvre politique afin de tirer parti de l'affect pour que nous soyons plus réceptif à la vérité.

Mots-clés

Populisme, post-vérité, hégémonie, Chantal Mouffe, chaîne d'équivalences

In 2016, “post-truth” was named ‘word of the year’ by the Oxford Dictionary, denoting a transition into a post-factual era where public opinion is shaped by personal belief and appeals to emotion rather than facts. What is “post-truth”? How can we properly do politics in a “post-truth” era? What should our next move be to counteract post-truth? Without any doubt, the naming of “post truth” as word of the year comes as a direct response to the triumph of Donald Trump in the United States, but is also frequently used to describe Brexit, or the popularity of presidential candidate Marine Le Pen leading up to France’s 2017 election, as well as various other European politicians. What do these cases have in common? Of course, each case was or is characterized by pseudo-facts or, in other words, lying. This is nothing new when it comes to politics. Also in these cases, politicians strove to unite the popular classes against the existing institutional order. In other words, they have all been populist movements. Populism isn’t something new to politics either. So what is new about the recent rise of so-called “post-truth”? Perhaps it is the combination of lying and populism has given rise to something new in politics, or at least something that we have difficulty grasping.

What is populism? According to political theorist Ernesto Laclau in his work *On Populist Reason*, populism is defined as “putting into question the institutional order by constructing an underdog as a historical agent.” (2005, p. 13) It is the establishment of a frontier that divides society into two camps: the underdog versus those holding power. It is not an ideology but, rather, a way of doing politics. This explains why two movements can appear rather different from one another while still having the word “populist” ascribed to both. Populism does not describe the content of politics but, rather, a particular mode of articulation of politics, or what Laclau refers to as a “political logic”. Some populist movements could lead to fascism, while others could actually have a democratizing effect. In fact, Laclau as well as political theorist Chantal Mouffe argue that populism is essential for a healthy, vibrant democracy.

In response to post-truth, some suggest we should be more thorough in our fact checking, or that we should more forcefully denounce politicians and news media outlets that participate in post-truth politics. Drawing from the ideas of Mouffe and Laclau, I will demonstrate how post-truth is not only a fight between fact and falsity but, more importantly, a fight over hegemonic power. And perhaps it is this hegemonic fight that we should be focusing on as a way out of this post-factual era.

So how do populism and hegemony relate to truth? For Mouffe and Laclau, hegemony describes the way in which every social order exists as an unstable and temporary articulation of power relations without rational ground. The way society is at any given time comes as a result of a series of practices that attempt to establish a certain order. And every articulation of power relations through these practices comes based on the exclusion of other possible articulations. According to Mouffe (2013), “to think politically requires recognizing the ontological dimension of radical negativity...that cannot be overcome dialectically.” (p. 1) She draws on political theorist Carl Schmitt to argue that “every constitution of a ‘we’.... requires as its very condition of possibility the demarcation of ‘they’ ”. (Mouffe, 2013, p. 5) She says, “The affirmation of a difference is the precondition for the existence of any identity” (Mouffe, 2013, p. 5). This tells us that relations of power are an inherent, ineradicable aspect of the political. In other words, a world beyond hegemony cannot exist and every order will be a hegemonic one.

Mouffe and Laclau acknowledge the importance of discourse in the construction of hegemony. Discourse not only describes speech, but all forms of expression, be it written expressions, or actions. It is a particular discourse that allows one to differentiate them self from the “other”. Further, what is not represented in a particular hegemonic discourse, in a way, does not exist in that order and is thus external to the system. Hegemony is a product of discourse, and it is discourse which constitutes objectivity and, to a certain extent, truth. In recent post-truth political practices, politicians have constructed the “other” through racist and xenophobic discourse. It is the role of the left to launch a populist counter-offensive against these hegemonic discursive practices. First I will demonstrate where Mouffe and Laclau believe the left has gone wrong. I will then present their potential solution.

The effects of neoliberal globalization have left the popular classes behind, leaving them suffering and their democratic demands unheard. There has been an oligarchization of politics. Rather than the power resting within the people, a small group of people holds the majority of the money and power. People no longer feel represented by the traditional center right and center left parties. The discourse of these politicians no longer corresponds to the discourse of the people. Politicians who identify as neither left nor right have recently been able to appeal to this fact and have articulated the demands of the popular classes through the use of a racist and xenophobic discourse, this discourse being supported by lies. How did we get here?

Western politics have been characterized by the politics of consensus, which places importance on ethical debate, cooperation and compromise at the center. Mouffe says this way of doing politics overlooks the ineradicable nature of antagonism and power relations with a focus on final consensus. (Mouffe, 2013, p. 10) In other words, the focus of the politics of consensus is to reach a consensus without exclusion, or to establish an “us” without a “them”. As aforementioned, Mouffe argues that, with a plurality of identities, a consensus without exclusion is impossible. However, Mouffe argues that an “us versus them” relationship does, in fact, exist within the politics of consensus. She explains that the center left has a tendency to demonize those on what is often referred to as the “extreme” right, establishing this “us versus them” frontier based on moral terms. For Mouffe, subsuming morality under politics is counterproductive and leads to a “political dead end”. (Mouffe, 2013, p. 17) Rather than trying to listen to the demands of the “extreme” right, which Mouffe argues *are* democratic demands, we perceive them as enemies to be excluded. We dismiss them as uneducated, politically uninformed, or as unethical people. Mouffe argues that it is necessary for us to step away away from this outlook and instead see our opponents as adversaries rather than enemies when it comes to politics. This means we must respect them and recognize them as legitimate voices in the democratic debate. Therefore, rather than dismissing them, what we must do is attempt to understand what is leading them to accept xenophobic, post-truth politics. We need to realize that the only way to fight against this type of extreme right populism is to articulate the demands of the popular classes in a *progressive* way. We need to realize the solution is political, not moral. Mouffe and Laclau argue this can only be done through a left wing populist movement.

Within the politics of consensus, confrontation and conflict are avoided. This has led to the blurring of the frontiers between left and right and, as a result, prevented the emergence of real alternatives to the typical center-left and center-right parties because the right for people to adopt different perspectives is not being recognized. As a result, there has been little opportunity to effectively challenge neoliberal globalization. Then, when a politician comes to

the scene offering what appears to be a real alternative, although this alternative is being articulated in a xenophobic discourse, and a discourse often based on lies, people accept it because it is the only discourse that is truly speaking to them. Mouffe describes this current political climate as “post-democratic” and “post-political”. In her recent work, *Agonistics: Thinking the world politically*, Mouffe puts forth a normative model of radical democracy she calls “agonistic”. She believes that this model not only provides more promise for the context of pluralism than the politics of consensus, but it will also restore representative democracy. An important element of Mouffe’s model, as aforementioned, is the recognition of opponents as adversaries rather than enemies. Although opponents may disagree, they still recognize one another as legitimate voices in the democratic debate. Yet, she acknowledges that some antagonisms cannot be accepted in the agonistic debate – those where there is a radical wrong, or what Jean-François Lyotard refers to as “the differend”. (Mouffe, 2013, p. 11) In the “agonistic” model, it is accepted that not all values and perspectives can be adopted in a final consensus because antagonism exists as an ineradicable element of the political. She says, “The agonistic encounter is neither the annihilation nor the assimilation of the other.” (Mouffe, 2013, p. 41) Rather, Mouffe argues for conflictual consensus, or consensus with dissent. Adversaries agree on the basic institutions and ethico-political values that constitute democracy but may disagree on their interpretation. These ethico-political values would include the often-contradictory values of liberty and equality. Adversaries are in a constant struggle to establish their own interpretation of these principles as the hegemony. The main goal of this kind of democratic politics is not to try to suppress the passions, confining them to the private sphere so a consensus can be established in the public sphere. Mouffe says, “Rather, it is to ‘sublimate’ those passions by mobilizing them towards democratic designs, by creating collective forms of identification around democratic objectives.” (Mouffe, 2013, p. 9) This describes what Mouffe refers to as a “chain of equivalences”.

For Mouffe and Laclau, a populist counter-hegemony is a political articulation made up of different sectors linked by a “chain of equivalences”. (Mouffe, 2013, p. 74) The “chain of equivalences” describes the establishment of connections among democratic demands among the popular classes, social movements, political parties, and various disadvantaged sectors. In other words, it is when various groups establish solidarity and seek to transform power relations through finding a common ground. For Mouffe, the establishment of a common ground is dependent on the collective determination of an opponent as an adversary, that adversary being representative of an existing power structure. (Mouffe, 2013, p. 75) Each group is disadvantaged by the power structure in their own particular way, but they are able to come together to challenge it through a collective will. In pursuit of establishing a new hegemony, the counter-hegemony engages in what Mouffe refers to as a “war of position”. In the war of position, the counter-hegemony strategically acts to gain leverage over “common sense”. “Common sense” describes the masses’ conception of reality, or objectivity, “which provides the terrain in which specific forms of subjectivity are constructed.” (Mouffe, 2013, p. 89) For example, if you want to have a working class victory, common sense must be bent to appeal to working class values. In the war of position, parties making up the counter-hegemony must participate in the targeting and transformation of various nodal points of power. It is a combination of the engagement with both parliamentary and extra-parliamentary institutions, for example, mass media institutions, art museums, educational institutions, institutions of mainstream culture, etc. Many institutions provide opportunities to nudge common sense towards the left.

Mouffe attributes, in part, the lack of a true left wing presence in politics to the reluctance of the left to engage with government institutions. She believes that movements like Occupy Wall Street demonstrate promise in that the people are beginning to challenge neoliberal hegemony, though she criticizes for them organizing strictly outside of parliamentary institutions with an anti-political approach and having a lack of strategy in regards to how to actually bring institutional change. (Mouffe, 2013, p. 113) In particular with Occupy, she argues that it is simply not enough to organize outside the dominant capitalist structures; they must be transformed from within. And although they clearly defined their adversary as Wall Street, their discourse was articulated in moral terms: the 99% good and the 1% bad, rather than analyzing the many economic and ideological structures and antagonisms at play and articulating a strategy involving democratic demands. (Mouffe, 2013, p. 117).

Rather than organizing strictly outside parliamentary institutions, Podemos, a left wing and populist party, provides an example of left wing populism that gained traction in Spain. Podemos merged with other political parties and social movements in 2014 to challenge austerity and the growing inequality gap between the popular classes and the wealthy, defining their common adversary as the elites. Despite skepticism, Podemos experienced great success in the 2015 Spanish general election. They received a surge of support, winning over 5 million votes in the election, trailing not far behind the Spanish Socialist Workers Party and becoming the third political force in Spain. (Errejoñ, 2016, p. 156) While Podemos has struggled since 2015, their failures do not invalidate the populist strategy. More recently, both politicians Bernie Sanders in the United States and France's Jean Luc Melenchon adopted progressive populist strategies to mobilize the left. In particular, while Melenchon was not victorious in France's 2017 election, his late surge of success in organizing the left was a success in that it proved a left wing victory could be a concrete political possibility. The very existence of these cases demonstrates a real political possibility that could be seized upon.

The traditional moral opposition between left and right can no longer persist. Left wing activists and politicians must realize that politics based on rationality and a demonization of the right are alienating and counterproductive in their hegemonic fight. They need abandon the idea that the passions only have a place in "extreme right" or "fascist" politics. The goal is to combine the fights of political parties with various social movements, establish a progressive collective will through a populist discourse that is able to articulate the democratic demands of all the disadvantaged sectors in a progressive way, and leverage the common sense of the masses into a more truth-receptive condition. This way, the passions can be mobilized towards social justice and against neoliberal hegemony *rather than* against immigrants. Then, it might be possible to transform democratic institutions into those where we see opponents as adversaries, where new and different ideas are valid, and where the xenophobic, racist, post-truth politics will no longer be a discourse that speaks to the people.

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