

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نپاشد تن من مباد بدین بوم و بر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

by VINCENT NAVARRO

29.04.2019

Why Left Wing Populism Is Not Enough



Photograph Source: Sutch – [CC BY 3.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/)

The considerable advances that the labor movements made in the period 1945–1978 (known as “The Golden Age of Capitalism”), and the considerable expansion of social, labor, and political rights that these movements achieved on both sides of the North Atlantic (North America and Western Europe), generated a response from the economic and financial establishments—as well as from the political and media establishments which they influence

enormously—that had an extensive impact. These establishments developed the anti-labor movement policies, known internationally as neoliberal policies, that significantly reduced the powers of labor and weakened the rights that had been won over the previous decades.

The data speaks for itself: labor income fell as a percentage of GDP in most of these countries at the cost of a large increase in capital income from the 1980s until now (see my book *Ataque a la democracia y al bienestar. Crítica al pensamiento económico dominante*. Anagrama, 2015).

Neoliberalism (the political project of the ruling classes) thus became the hegemonic model in the Western world, both in Europe and in North America. As a result, a new story and discourse were imposed, in which concepts such as capitalist class and working class (which characterized the analysis and socialist discourse) practically disappeared from political and media language. This intellectual domain explains why the leaders of the left parties stopped using the language of classes. The concept and story of the “class struggle” disappeared, and the working class disappeared from such discourse, converted into a “middle class.” This discourse transformed the social stratification into the rich on the top, the poor on the bottom, and everyone else—the middle class—between the two. Even some authors related to the left considered and continue to consider this fact positive. Among these authors is Chantal Mouffe, who has extensively theorized about citizen protests and what she defines as populist movements.

In her latest book, *For a Left Populism*, recently published in the Anglo-Saxon world, Mouffe asserts that the decline of the left parties is due to their fixation on the analysis and proposals based on social class. She claims that the left’s emphasis on class struggle has been a great mistake, since it has underestimated the importance of other conflicts. Mouffe considers that today a whole multitude of conflicting causes that have nothing to do with class conflict generate a multiplication of protest movements against “those who are above” by “those who are below” (without clearly defining who are at the top and who are at the bottom, and without clarifying or defining the relationship between them). The key issue, according to this author, is to analyze the elements that those who are below have in common and the transversality that can unite them. Within this conceptual framework, she defines as populist all those who oppose those at the top, incorporating a huge variety of movements, ranging from the movement led by Le Pen in France to the new Labor Party in the United Kingdom or the Podemos party in Spain.

Mouffe accepts a differentiation between right and left populism, the latter being the kind that aims to achieve democracy and equality (democratic and egalitarian objectives), without

defining either of these concepts. She considers the division between socialism and capitalism of little value, substituting socialism for the category of radical democracy, which, she says, is the objective to be achieved through liberal democracy.

Response to Chantal Mouffe: left-wing populism is not enough

Needless to say, much of what Chantal Mouffe emphasizes has great value and should not be disregarded. But her contempt for socialism and class analysis clearly prevents her from understanding what has happened and what is now happening in the developed capitalist countries that she believes she knows well. In light of what we know of the years since the 1980s, however, it is difficult to accept that the electoral decline suffered by the European and North American left-wing or progressive parties (the Democratic Party of the United States, which includes some progressive and even left-wing voices but can not be defined as a left-wing party, and the socialist and social democratic parties in Europe) is due to their use of a class discourse as she assumes. I do not know in what world Chantal Mouffe lives, but in the world where I have lived for many years now (Western Europe and North America), practically no leader of a majority left wing party has used the term “class struggle” or “working class” in his or her discourse. The latter term has been replaced by “middle class” or “popular class.” In fact, this narrative of social class and class struggle has long since disappeared from the official discourse of the left. “[The left’s] fixation with social class” (a phrase used by the author), which supposedly caused its decline, does not appear in reality anywhere. Those responsible for the electoral descent of the left (Clinton, Blair, or Schröder, among others) never used such terms or such analyses. The great depoliticization of socialist and social democratic discourse has included the total abandonment, or concealment, of class language. In fact, it is easy to document that the decline of those parties is based on their forgetting the working class which, in turn, has been abandoning them, transferring their support to the emerging populist movements (see my article “Las causas del crecimiento del mal llamado populismo,” *Público*, 04.10.18). Moreover, treating the class category as irrelevant (or ignoring it completely) makes it difficult to understand other forms of protest. This is because the category of social class intersects with all other categories of identification, affecting the behavior of members of all types of social movements. For example, the character and orientation of different feminist movements are defined and determined, in large part, by the social class orientation of their leaders. The notable difference between the evolution of the feminist movement in the United States and that in Spain, for example, is based on this fact. The Spanish feminist movement is much more progressive, defining itself as anti-capitalist and socialist, which would be unthinkable in the

National Organization for Women (NOW), the major feminist movement in the United States (see my article “[La importancia de las distintas tonalidades del feminismo](#),” *Público*, 06.07.18).

The relevance of forgotten categories such as working class

Throughout the 20th century, the popular movements that most improved the quality of life and well-being of the working class and popular classes—which constitute the majority of the population—in the European democratic countries were those rooted in the socialist ideology, represented by the many sensitivities that such an ideology holds. These movements had as an electoral base the working class of each country, which (in alliance with other classes, particularly wide sectors of the middle classes) have constituted the axis of their social action. Their type of social action is distinct from the social and political behaviors of the upper-middle classes, bourgeoisie, and petit bourgeoisie.

In its origins, the goal of the project based on socialist ideology was to transform society and replace capitalism with socialism, and thus to destroy the exploitation of the working class along with other forms of exploitation. As such, the societies which have advanced the most in this socialist project are those where the populations are exploited less: in terms of class, of course, but also, importantly, in terms of gender. It is not only the workers (of which many are women) but also women in general who have benefited most from the existence of such projects. The evidence shows that countries which have pursued the socialist project more successfully (such as Sweden, where parties of socialist sensibility have governed most of the time since World War II) have also made more progress for women (such as achieving abortion rights, maternity leave, increased support services for families, and an increased number of women in positions of power).

The necessary transversality in the struggles of the different groups

It is important to emphasize that none of the left-leaning Scandinavian countries had a powerful feminist party that was decisive in the development of these advances for women. What did exist was a socialist movement with great feminist sensitivity, with the objective of eliminating exploitation, that took the feminist cause as its own, relating it to other forms of exploitation. This inclusion of feminism in the Scandinavian socialist movements added a great capacity for them to identify this cause as one part of an overarching whole which represented several causes and sensitivities: a common project. Undoubtedly, the fact that a large part of the popular classes were women was decisive in ensuring that all the demands of the socialist movement contained a feminist dimension.

The United States as an example of the limitations of the proposal made by Chantal Mouffe

Contrast this situation in Northern Europe with what happens in the United States: the latter is the developed capitalist country where the corporate and corporatist class has more power and the working class has less power. The reverse is true in many Northern European countries, such as Sweden. These differences in political developments over the past century explain why the United States is the country with the greatest inequalities of wealth, income, and political power among the social classes, genders, and races. The differences are enormous.

It is no coincidence that the United States is one of the few democratic countries in which there has not been a mass socialist movement whose objective is to eliminate exploitation of class, race, and gender. Yes, there are women's liberation movements like NOW, as there are movements in favor of the rights of the elderly, civil rights movements in defense of minorities, and many movements to defend specific causes. But the situation in the United States seems paradoxical, in that NOW is a movement of millions of women that has existed for many years, and yet women in the United States have very few rights compared to the rights of women in most countries in the European Union. And they may lose some of the few rights they have, such as the right to abortion (with the recent change in the composition of the U.S. Supreme Court).

The necessary relationship between various types of exploitation: class, gender, and race

Something similar is visible, in general, regarding the elderly. Pensions in the United States are relatively low compared to pensions in European Union countries. And accessibility to health care (despite the federal program for the elderly, Medicare, and for the "medically indigent," Medicaid) is limited, which translates into a significant family burden to have access to the country's medical services. This lack of rights is also prevalent among U.S. workers, for whom insecurity is a very common characteristic (the United States is the country where it is easier to lay off a worker), as well as among the majority of the black population, which is clearly discriminated against in that country.

Overwhelming evidence suggests that the exploitation of class, gender, age, and race is the most accentuated in the United States when compared to European countries, even though the movements aimed at defending each group vulnerable to exploitation are even larger than those in Europe. How is it possible that, in the country with large movements in defense of

women, the elderly, minorities, the disabled, and many others, such social groups have so few rights?

The cause is quite easy to see: the lack of a movement based on a transversal ideology that connects all these movements and that pursues the elimination of all forms of exploitation. In other words, the lack of a socialist movement that encompasses and endorses the demands of all exploited social groups. In fact, the great diversity of protest struggles, each going their own way and with their own particular demands, weakens them enormously. The evidence of this leaves no room for doubt. In fact, the victims of exploitation in the United States even compete to obtain the attention and services of society and the state.

Moreover, the American business and conservative class, aware that the division of victims favors the victimizer, supports such division, hindering and impeding the transversality of such movements and showing great hostility toward the socialist project, which uses the concept of social class as the starting point of such transversality. This project—the alliance of the popular classes against the ruling class—is the most feared, since transversality would allow a union of actions that would weaken the ruling classes' ability to exploit the rest of society. When the 1984 presidential candidate Jesse Jackson (whom I had the honor to advise) presented himself as the candidate of the black minorities, the *New York Times* (the voice of the political and media establishment) wrote an extremely laudatory editorial. Four years later in 1988, when he presented himself as the working-class candidate in the Rainbow Coalition, which united all races and genders of the working class, the same newspaper wrote an editorial accusing him of “wanting to destroy the USA.” When, in the last primaries of 1988, journalists asked Jesse Jackson how he was going to win the vote of the white worker from Baltimore (an industrial city), he answered: “by making him see that he has more in common with the black worker, for being workers, than with the owner and manager of the company, for being white.” Jesse Jackson won the primary of the Democratic Party in Baltimore and almost won nationwide, despite the enormous opposition and hostility of the political and media establishments, including the apparatus of the Democratic Party. More recently, during the 2016 U.S. presidential elections, the socialist candidate Bernie Sanders emphasized the need to unite the “working American families” in a coalition that cuts across identity differences. He almost won the primaries, despite the opposition of the Democratic Party apparatus (including the opposition of the feminist movement NOW, which supported Hillary Clinton as its favored candidate).

Following the rise of so-called populism based on identity causes, it is important to underline this point. Promoting populism with its great diversity of anti-establishment movements,

celebrating such diversity without any criteria in terms of transversality that can unite such movements, is to reproduce what has happened in the United States, the country of social movements (except for the socialist movement) where the left (and women and the minorities) is enormously weak.

The why of the necessary transversality

One of the possible elements of transversality that could unite these different groups is nationalism. However, nationalism per se does not allow for a mobilization against the person responsible for victimization, who may be of the same nationality. In Catalonia this is clearly seen. Part of the decrease in quality of life and well-being of the Catalan popular classes is due to the neoliberal policies imposed on the Catalan population by the Catalan nationalist parties ruling in the Catalan government (la Generalitat de Catalunya). Nationalism (like patriotism) is always used by the ruling classes to mobilize the popular classes against their own interests. Catalonia and, on a wider scale, Spain are clear examples of this.

What could be another element of transversality that encompasses most of the popular classes? This is where social class acquires great relevance. The majority of women, black people, and the elderly, for example, in any developed capitalist country, are members of the working class and other sectors of the popular classes (it is interesting to note that, despite the working class objectively being the largest social class in the United States, more people in the United States define themselves as working class than middle class, according to the most elaborate surveys that have asked the population for their perceived position within the social structure). In fact, following the process of “proletarianization” of large sectors of the middle classes that has occurred, huge portions of this class are facing precariousness and insecurity: not only the working classes but also members of the professional sectors of the middle class. Hence, the socialist project (which prioritizes the well-being of the popular classes) is needed to provide a common ground and purpose in which the different forms of exploitation are rooted. This need is even more prevalent in a society where the common adversary—the ruling class—also belongs to the dominant race and gender. It is important to emphasize, however, that the change of gender or race of the elites (from the default white male) does not necessarily benefit the majority of women (who are working class) or black people (who are mostly working class). The standard of living of the black popular classes in the United States did not change during the term of the first black president, President Obama, supported by major sectors of the economic and financial establishments.

For many promoters of populism, their strategy of change contains no clear explanation of who is at the top and why they are at the top. And that is where, once again, forgotten

categories must be reignited. In most European and North American countries, the owners of capital and its managers are the ones who set the standards of the economic, political, and media behavior of the country. And the greater the power of these establishments, the lower the democratic quality of the country. And again, the least democratic country of the developed capitalist countries is, without a doubt, the United States. The influence of the U.S. corporate class (composed of the owners and managers of large corporations) in political, media, and cultural life is enormous and almost absolute. And the fact that they are so powerful is due, precisely, to the significant weakness of the working class. It is the strength or weakness of the working class (women and men, black and white together) that plays a key role in determining levels of inequality: not only of class but also of gender and of race.

The construction and destruction of socialism

In the developed capitalist countries, the most successful socialist strategy has not been the Leninist strategy of taking the Winter Palace—that is, to conquer the state (year Y, month M, and day D)—but to build socialism daily. Every time the so-called representative institutions intervene to respond to the citizens according to their needs (democratically defined) with the resources obtained according to the ability of each citizen, socialism is being built, regardless of what it is called or if they are aware that it is socialism. It is interesting to note that several surveys show that most of the socialist principles (“to each according to his/her need, and to each according to his/her ability”) are accepted by the vast majority of the popular classes in the countries on both sides of the North Atlantic, including, by the way, the United States.

A condition *sine qua non* for this to happen is that the working class be empowered not only in the world of work but in all dimensions of civil and political society. In the developed capitalist countries, Sweden was the country where such power reached the highest level. The Meidner reforms were the maximum expression of this power, since they came to propose the collective property of capital (not only through the state but also through the extension of cooperativism) as a necessary condition to achieve the full democratization of society. Needless to say, nothing of this appears in Mouffe’s position, since socialism is an irrelevant concept.

What happened in Sweden (the deconstruction of socialism)

Sweden was the country where the popular classes were most empowered and where the universality of social, labor, gender, and race rights has been more entrenched. But, the conservative-liberal parties that governed Sweden for many years have challenged all of these rights. And that universality has been disrupted in many areas. The privatization of health care and education has reinforced the class inequalities in that country. Unsurprisingly, the

break of universalism has changed substantially the culture of solidarity, facilitated by a huge increase in immigration (300,000 immigrants since 2014, which is equivalent to 9 million people in the United States). The parties responsible for these changes, including the Social Democratic Party (which initiated them), have lost electoral support dramatically, while an ultra-right-wing party has appeared and received 17 percent of all votes, a large part of which were from the working class.

The necessary coalition of anti-establishment forces

It is enormously important that the different anti-establishment forces and movements, while retaining their autonomy, unite in a coalition that shares a common desire: the substitution of exploitative social relations, which are characteristic of capitalist systems, for social relations shaped by the liberation of class, race, gender, and nation and based on solidarity and justice. Such a project is carried out daily and can be built or deconstructed according to the power relations of social class, gender, race, and nation in each moment within a common project: socialism. That this proposal is presented as “antiquated” or “irresponsible” is the great triumph of the conservative and neoliberal forces, responsible for so much suffering.

One last note of a personal nature

I am fully aware that the asphyxiating dominance that neoliberal capitalist thinking has in the production and reproduction of the country’s hegemonic culture (which defines the discourse and narrative that reproduce it) means that scientific terms and concepts have been marginalized and stereotyped to lose their popular appeal. This determines that it is advisable, for tactical reasons, not to use certain terms or even symbols to reach those who have been indoctrinated by the hegemonic ideology. I am convinced of the wisdom of such tactics. Now, underlining this point is different from rejecting or belittling the analytical concepts that help to understand our realities, as Chantal Mouffe does.

Needless to say, much of what Chantal Mouffe says has great value. And I welcome her emphasis on the need to recognize the diversity of conflicts that require differentiated attention. But this recognition—which I repeat, I support—is done at the expense of a lack of attention to scientific categories, such as social class, that I consider essential to understanding capitalist societies.

In Spain, the 15-M movement was a denunciation of the Spanish political establishment. Their “they do not represent us” motto quickly reached enormous popular support, denouncing the argument used by the ruling classes in this country (and their public servants in democratic institutions) that there were no alternatives to the neoliberal policies that they (including the Socialist Party) were imposing. Actually, Juan Torres, Alberto Garzón, and I

wrote *Hay Alternativas (There are alternatives): Proposals to create employment and social welfare in Spain*, a book in which we showed that for every neoliberal policy that was implemented, damaging the popular classes, there were other alternatives ignored by the ruling classes—the political caste—that benefited such classes. The 15-M movement used the book extensively to show and document the lack of credibility of the argument that there were no alternatives. Yes, there were. The cry “si se puede (yes, you can)” became the cry of mobilization of Podemos, rooted in the 15-M.

The economic and social proposals of this social movement were precisely a step toward allocating resources according to the needs of each citizen (democratically defined), financed according to the abilities of each one. And this political formation (together with its confluences En Comú-Podem and En Marea), along with another formation of the left (IU), has built a political bloc that is transforming Spanish society, guiding it toward that direction, becoming the engine of the change. Contrary to what may seem, this statement is not partisan but objective, in the sense that such a movement—in collaboration with other movements and political parties—can be the source of the profound change that Spanish society needs.

APRIL 26, 2019

Vincent Navarro is Professor of Public Policy, Johns Hopkins University, U.S., and Professor of Political Science, Pompeu Fabra University, Spain.