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From Authoritarian to Left Populism?:
Reframing Debates

On May 10, 2018, a seemingly unlikely pair of bedfellows—the Center for American Progress (CAP) and the American Enterprise Institute (AEI)—released two jointly authored reports: *Drivers of Authoritarian Populism in the United States* (Rohac, Kennedy, and Singh 2018) and *Europe’s Populist Challenge* (Browne, Rohac, and Kenney 2018), which concluded that “the threat of authoritarian populism will not recede unless a new generation of political leaders offers a credible agenda for improving people’s lives that is more appealing to the public than the populist alternatives. The defense and rebuilding of democratic politics and discourse . . . demands a reinigorated case for how liberal democracy, openness, pluralism, and a rules-based international order can deliver the promise of shared prosperity and common security” (Rohac, Kennedy, and Singh 2018: 19). The classically liberal agenda and analysis set forth in this collaboration between think tanks on the center left and center right of the US political spectrum bears close resemblance to the *Authoritarian Populism Index* (Heinö 2016) published by Timbro, a Swedish think tank that Wikipedia describes as “centered on the core values of individual liberty, economic freedom,

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an open society, and minimizing governmental intervention in the economy.” Such projects are far from unique. A quick Google search makes clear the ubiquity of invocations of “authoritarian populism” (often, although not exclusively, by the Euro-American establishment) to characterize what they see as the threat from both right and left forms of populism. This fear, as Stefan Kipfer (2016) has astutely observed, “fuels the very anti-elitism it opposes.” Populism is of course also anathema to many on the left, for whom it is inherently authoritarian and antithetical to a progressive class politics.

Despite copious citations, neither the CAP-AEI nor the Timbro reports acknowledge the late Stuart Hall’s (1979, 1983) authorship of the concept of authoritarian populism as part of his critical analysis of popular support for Thatcherism—let alone the fierce debate that his intervention provoked, as well as ongoing efforts to reconcile this debate.¹ One wonders how Hall would have reacted to contemporary appropriations of his concept by the (neo)liberal establishment, to whose limits and contradictions he was pointing in an earlier conjuncture. This recent morphing of authoritarian populism into a trope for liberal anxiety should sound a strong note of caution for those on the Left who are currently using it as either a capacious descriptive category or an ideal type to encompass a wide array of right-wing figures, movements, and regimes in diverse regions of the world—and in a global conjuncture vastly different from that which produced Thatcherism.²

Along with burgeoning invocations of authoritarian populism from across the political spectrum, we are currently witnessing intense and escalating debates on the left over whether or not left populism is adequate to confront and counter increasingly virulent and racist forms of right-wing populisms within and beyond Euro-America. Advocacy of left populism is widespread, but the most insistent and influential proponent is Chantal Mouffe, building on her own work as well as that of the late Ernesto Laclau.

In “Towards a Theory of Populism” in *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory* (1977), Laclau challenged the standard left position to insist “there is no socialism without populism, and the highest forms of populism can only be socialist” (Laclau 1977: 196–97). Despite shifting to post-Marxism (Laclau and Mouffe 1985), Laclau maintained his insistence that populism should be understood not as a form of lack in relation to either liberal democracy or class struggle, but rather as “the royal road to understanding . . . the political as such” (Laclau 2005: 67).

Since Laclau’s death in 2014, Mouffe has waged a relentless and influential battle “in defence of left-wing populism,” as she put it in one of many online articles and speeches, and in her conversation with Iñigo Errejón, a

leading figure in the Spanish party Podemos deeply influenced by Laclau and Mouffe.³ Among many others, Syriza in Greece and Jean-Luc Mélenchon's party France Insoumise also take inspiration from what one might call the Laclau-Mouffe line. In her recently published book *For a Left Populism* (2018), Mouffe maintains that the present conjuncture in Europe is characterized by a crisis of what she calls "the neoliberal hegemonic formation." In order to intervene in this crisis, "left populism, understood as a discursive strategy of construction of the political frontier between 'the people' and 'the oligarchy' constitutes, in the present conjuncture, the type of politics needed to recover and deepen democracy" (Mouffe 2018: 20). It is through such a "mobilization of common affects in defence of equality and social justice, that it will be possible to combat xenophobic policies promoted by right-wing populism" (22).

Some of the most vociferous opposition to Mouffe's advocacy of left populism, situated squarely on the terrain of European electoral politics on which she operates, has come from French sociologist Éric Fassin who, shortly before the French election in 2017, published a pamphlet titled *Populism: Le grand ressentiment*, urging the Left to reject Mélenchon's left populist position.⁴ He has also launched a head-on critique of Mouffe's analysis of populism in relation to neoliberalism, as well as the failure by proponents of left populism to confront adequately racisms and anti-immigration forces. In a sharp and intense form, the Mouffe-Fassin debate exemplifies a much wider array of contemporary debates on the Left over questions of populism.

Although I agree with some of Fassin's arguments, my profound and long-standing differences with the Laclau-Mouffe line extend well beyond his critique.⁵ Both analytical and political, these differences derive in the first instance from Laclau and Mouffe's appropriation of Gramscian concepts of hegemony and articulation in terms that evacuate any analysis of capitalism and class. My work in South Africa, and more recently India and the United States, focuses on how articulations of nationalism and neoliberal forms of capitalism have worked in and through one another to generate populist politics in specific but always interconnected national formations. This analysis calls for simultaneous attention to popular antagonisms generated in the realms of everyday life, and to populist forms of bourgeois hegemony that seek to *develop* these antagonisms—often through articulations of nationalism that mobilize race, ethnicity, religion, and other dimensions of difference—but keep them within limits through processes that easily veer toward authoritarianism. While drawing on a strand of argument developed by Laclau (1977) in the context of his work on Peronism in Argentina, my analysis is

firmly situated on a Gramscian terrain—although it also entails stretching and translating Antonio Gramsci’s work (Kipfer and Hart 2013), as well as Stuart Hall’s (1980) dialectical concept of articulation that he used to intervene in the South African race/class debate. The political stakes of this Gramscian understanding are distinctively different from the standard Left dismissal of populist politics, as well as from the sort of left populism that Mouffe is promoting. Instead of a great man (or woman) capable of discursively stringing together “chains of equivalence” of diverse demands or grievances, the major challenges confronting subaltern groups and classes concern the organizational practices and processes through which more critical, coherent, and collective understandings and practices can emerge in the arenas of everyday life (Hart 2013: 308).

My purpose in this essay is to suggest reframing debates cast in terms of whether or not left populism can defeat right-wing forms of populism. The more salient and politically useful questions turn around *how* to produce deeper critical understandings of the forces generating intensifying nationalisms, racisms, and populist politics in the neoliberal era, in not only Europe but also many regions of the world beyond Euro-America.

The argument unfolds in three steps. First I discuss the Mouffe-Fassin debate, focusing on some of the key tensions in Mouffe’s latest book. The irony is that, having long expunged capitalism and class on grounds of economic reductionism, she is now compelled to address questions of neoliberalism—but does so in a remarkably reductionist way that fails to confront the imbrications (or dare I say articulations) of neoliberal forms of capitalism and modalities of rule with racisms and nationalisms.

Second, I focus on two recent essays that I have found stimulating and useful—Michael Bray’s “Rearticulating Contemporary Populism: Class, State, and Neoliberal Society” (2015), and a 2018 paper by Panagiotis Sotiris titled “Is a ‘Left Populism’ Possible?”—and bring my work on populist politics in South Africa into conversation with them. We all start by recognizing the importance of Laclau’s (1977) essay on populism, while also engaging critically and moving on from it in different although potentially complementary ways.

Finally, I return to debates over authoritarian populism and reconsider them in relation to arguments developed throughout this essay. Of necessity I will also very briefly sketch the outlines of a global conjunctural framework that enables us to see resurgent nationalisms and populist politics in South Africa, India, and the United States as connected yet distinctively different nodes in globally interconnected historical geographies.

Can Left Populism Defeat Right Populism? The Mouffe-Fassin Debate

Early in *For a Left Populism* (2018), Mouffe announces that the book is primarily a political intervention that refuses to engage in sterile academic debates over populism. Yet she also makes clear its location on the terrain of post-Marxist thought that she and Laclau have charted and elaborated since 1985—and that conspicuously excludes any mention of Laclau’s 1977 essay. In her 2016 conversation with Errejón, Mouffe (2016a: 23) maintains that “the current situation is far worse than it was when we wrote the book [*Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*], because in 1985 there was still a fundamentally social-democratic common sense that took social rights and the value of equality for granted. . . . We could never have imagined that the working-class victories of social democracy and the welfare state could be rolled back.” In this interview and an array of short articles and talks, Mouffe explains the rise of populist politics in Europe as a reaction against the current postdemocratic phase of politics marked by consensus between parties of the center right and center left (exemplified by Tony Blair) that there is no alternative to neoliberalism, which has produced “an exponential increase in inequality not only affecting the working class, but also a great part of the middle class, who have entered a process of pauperisation and precarisation” (Mouffe 2016b, 2017). Right-wing movements and parties claiming “to give back to the people the voice that has been confiscated by the elites” in xenophobic and nationalist terms can only be countered “through the construction of another people, promoting a left-wing populist movement that is receptive to the diversity of democratic demands existing in our societies and whose aim is to articulate them in a progressive direction.”

Fassin vigorously disputes both Mouffe’s diagnosis and her strategy. Pointing to Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, and invoking Hall’s authoritarian populism, he insists that populism is not simply a reaction from both the Right and Left to neoliberalism, but a weapon in its service. He also roundly rejects the claim that it is possible to convert right-wing populists to a progressive left position: for Fassin, “there is no subconscious desire for economic justice underneath a vote for Donald Trump or the Front National, only resentment towards perceived cultural superiors and racial inferiors” (Hamburger 2018). In terms of electoral strategy, “there is a better chance of converting non-voters into voters . . . than of converting far-right populists into left-wing voters” (Fassin 2018: 81).

Questions of race and immigration in relation to class are central to Fassin’s advocacy of an electoral strategy aimed at nonvoters. The key issue

“is really about the racialisation of economic issues, about how those who are racialised (and thus considered ‘naturally’ other or radically alien) are considered worthless, and then, by the same token, about those who are considered worthless are in turn racialised and treated as ‘other’” (Fassin 2018: 92). His case for appealing across racial divides to abstentionists hinges on emphasizing that the evident dangers of racialization for nonwhites needs to be supplemented with an understanding that “it is also dangerous for whites, in particular for working-class whites who today are told, on all sides, that they are not going to get anything—except whiteness” (92).

In his review of the Mouffe-Fassin debate, Jacob Hamburger (2018) suggests that *For a Left Populism* can be read in part as unacknowledged response to Fassin’s critique of Mouffe’s treatment of neoliberalism. Mouffe (2018) does indeed back away from understanding neoliberalism as having arisen in the 1990s under the likes of Blair and Bill Clinton, in effect following Fassin’s injunction that she pay attention to Thatcherism and to Hall’s concept of authoritarian populism. Central to this reformulation is what she calls the neoliberal hegemonic formation implemented in Western Europe in the 1980s that replaced the Keynesian welfare state. The shift from Thatcher to Blair, along with the consensual Third Way model that spread throughout Europe at the end of the Cold War, “created the terrain for the reign of the postpolitics that provided the conditions for the consolidation of neoliberal hegemony in Western Europe” (Mouffe 2018: 61). This model “did not face any significant challenge until the financial crisis of 2008, when it began to seriously show its limits” (29). In this revised account, far-right populism represents “an authentic reaction against the forms of ‘post-democracy’ that neoliberalism has helped bring about, if not a reaction against neoliberalism itself,” as Hamburger (2018) puts it; and there remains a “democratic nucleus” in the demands of far-right populists that is open to rearticulation by a left populist project. He notes as well that in this reformulated version of Mouffe’s work, she and Fassin “have more in common than either might want to admit, [but] their divergence on the degree of porosity between left and right is crucial”—especially for the questions of electoral strategy on which they are both focused.

From a perspective shaped by engagements beyond Europe, three key sets of considerations jump from the pages of *For a Left Populism*. First, Mouffe’s shift to an account of a stable neoliberal hegemonic formation thrown into crisis by the financial crisis in 2008 remains remarkably reductionist. Alternative analyses outlined below call attention to the inherently contradictory forces encompassed by neoliberal forms of hegemony. A second related point is that issues of race and xenophobia at the core of Fassin’s

critique remain marginal in Mouffe's revised account, and delinked from questions of class. Her key claim is that "demands for democracy . . . articulated in a xenophobic vocabulary" can be rearticulated in a progressive direction through a democratic chain of equivalence: "It is only by entering in equivalence with other democratic demands, like those of the immigrants or the feminists, that they acquire a radical democratic dimension. This is of course also true for the demands proceeding from women, immigrants or other groups discriminated against" (Mouffe 2018: 107). Mouffe's answer as to how such a chain of equivalence might be constructed hinges on charismatic leadership. In contrast to right populism that rests on "a very authoritarian relation where everything comes from the top without real grassroots participation," left populism requires the "crystallization of common affects, and affective bonds with a charismatic leader" whose relationship with the people is "less vertical" than their authoritarian counterparts (117). Yet, as we shall see below, several observers call attention to growing tendencies toward centralization of power in both Podemos and Syriza.

A third set of reservations concerns questions of nationalism—bearing in mind that Laclau and Mouffe's theorization of hegemony "remained haunted by a tacit assumption of the nation-state as the spatial container of politics" (Sparke 2005: 233). Mouffe (2018: 119) now argues that instead of "closed and defensive forms of nationalism," left populism should offer "another outlet for those affects, mobilizing them around a patriotic identification with the best and more egalitarian aspects of the national tradition." Yet how such invocations of "good" nationalism will operate in relation to racisms and xenophobic anti-immigration sentiments remains at best unclear. Fassin shows how Mélenchon's shift to a left populist position has been accompanied by his adopting an increasingly nationalist version of politics and moving to the center on immigration. In a similar vein are reports of a German initiative spearheaded by Die Linke's chairwoman, Sahra Wagenknecht, to woo right-wing supporters with an anti-immigration "national social stance" (Oltermann 2018).

Poulantzian and Gramscian Paths to Analyzing Populist Politics

Let me turn now to two recent Marxist analyses by Bray (2015) and Sotiris (2018) that, unlike many on the Left, do indeed take populist politics seriously—a reflection, at least in part, of their concrete engagements (Bray through his concern with the "pink tide" in Latin America and Sotiris through his critical relationship to both Golden Dawn and Syriza in Greece). Both begin with similar critiques of Laclau's (1977) essay, and then move in directions

charted by Poulantzas (Bray) and Gramsci (Sotiris). In the process, they move us well beyond the debate over whether or not left populism can defeat right populism, and do so in potentially complementary ways. In conversation with both Bray and Sotiris, I will then suggest how a rather different reading of Laclau (1977) in conjunction with other interlocutors might contribute to a broadly Gramscian analysis of populist politics.

Bray begins by retrieving the class basis of populism that Laclau (1977) initiated and then abandoned, but argues that Laclau's sharp separation of economic and political-ideological fields severely limits his analysis. He is referring here to Laclau's argument that nonclass ideologies (such as nationalism) have no necessary class belonging; and, conversely, classes have no necessary form of existence at the ideological and political levels—a distinction, Bray (2015: 33) argues, that leads to the problematic conclusion that political conflict and class divisions/struggles have very little to do with one another.

Hence Bray's turn to Nicos Poulantzas's final book *State, Power, Socialism* (1978)—grounded in a refusal to separate the economic and the political—which, he maintains, contains an unrecognized framework for an alternative theory of populism.

To demonstrate this argument, Bray focuses on three key dimensions of what Poulantzas (2015: 30) called the institutional materiality of the capitalist state: individualization, the intellectual/manual labor division, and the people-nation, with “each understood as an *articulation of class struggle*, even as each serves to mask the very existence of antagonistic struggles.” At the same time, he acknowledges Bob Jessop's (1990) point that there is a functionalist presumption implicit in Poulantzas's account of the unity of capitalist state—but argues that the understanding of populism implicit in *State, Power, Socialism* shows this unity to be inherently fragile and contested:

Laclau's intuition that the state is where populism and socialism rhyme proves true but in an altered form: the ‘popular’ is not a set of non-class meanings open to hegemonic struggle but the statist-hegemonic terrain on which class power is consolidated and, provisionally, contested. Populist movements have a common set of political-discursive forms—a divisive, antagonistic appeal to the people, calls for the reform or surpassing of representative democracy, and an attack on expertise, bureaucracy and other forms of ‘mental labour’—precisely because these are the sites where class antagonisms appear in political-popular forms. *Populism is, in other words, a symptom, within the representative structures of the capitalist state, of repressed class antagonisms.* (Bray 2015: 40–41; emphasis added)

Bray also makes several interesting observations about race and the people-nation in relation to populist politics, but these are less elaborated than those pertaining to the intellectual/manual labor divide—a point to which I return below.

In putting these arguments about populism to work in relation to neoliberalism, Bray (2015: 46) maintains that “neoliberalism’s rise to hegemony has centrally involved the mobilisation of populist antagonisms”—this, of course, was also the key point of what Hall meant by Thatcherism as authoritarian populism, which Fassin points to as well. A primary claim is that “neoliberal theory began with a distinctive populist appeal, laying the groundwork for a new legitimation strategy that turns, paradoxically, on perpetually *fostering*, rather than resolving, popular legitimation deficits” (Bray 2015: 49). This reading is intentionally in opposition to accounts of neoliberal rationality that view the state as no longer encumbered by the danger of incurring legitimation deficits. Instead Bray is pointing us toward the profound contradictions of neoliberal hegemony and its deep entanglements with populist politics.

What Bray calls neoliberal populism derives in part from market populism—the notion that markets are a more democratic form of organization than governments, and that they disempower elites. This “proved extraordinarily useful as a vehicle for electorally channeling popular frustrations over economic conditions in the core” and continues to do so through ongoing attacks on “the declining Keynesian welfare state” (Bray 2015: 50).⁶ Hence “threats produced by the state’s economic functions can be managed to a degree, by their attribution to the old state’s haunting presence, fuelling new waves of antagonism”—especially when claims of a “smaller state” are associated with dismantling of a state portrayed as “being *for* the racially identified poor and marginalized” (50). More generally, “the explosion of variegated populist movements, as well as the managed use of populist tropes by mainstream parties, across the globe today is therefore a function of both a reconfiguration of accumulation processes that undermine other forms of collective identification and a legitimation strategy that fosters populist articulations” (51). Populism continues to be considered as a threat, Bray argues, because neoliberalism generates antagonisms that it is incapable of containing.

Bray (2015, 53) explicitly distances himself from those on the left who posit a sharp distinction between rightist and leftist political forms with the populist label attached to the former, in order “to inoculate emancipatory politics, in principle, against populism.” Instead, he concludes, “the task is not to overcome populism but to render its forms of articulation and agency more coherent, more engaged with repressed struggles over social production and

reproduction, while not underestimating the destructive potentials that lie in its ambiguous formations” (59).

Although Bray mentions Gramsci only in passing, his eminently Gramscian conclusion resonates with the recent work of Sotiris (2018), who also starts by acknowledging Laclau’s (1977) pathbreaking move and then delivers a similar critique of his separation of class struggle and political antagonism: “The specifically capitalist division between economics and politics is reproduced in Laclau’s conception in contrast to Marx’s attempt to insist on the dialectical relation between class struggle and political antagonism” (Sotiris 2018: 4). Sotiris goes on to suggest that Laclau and Mouffe’s idiosyncratic conception of hegemony as a general modality of politics “delinked from class projects and strategies” is prefigured in Laclau’s earlier work; by “moving away from any conception of emancipatory politics [as] the limit form of the antagonism already inscribed in the conflictual and antagonist character of social relations of production . . . [left populism] simply become[s] another form of political rhetoric addressed to the subaltern” (10). At the same time, he acknowledges the limits of class reductionism—and the challenge of rethinking how notions of “the people” have become the contested terrain of political antagonism (30). For this Sotiris turns to Gramsci’s conception of subaltern groups and classes, along with a recent essay by Peter Thomas (2018) that clarifies how, for Gramsci, the subaltern is defined not by exclusion but as actively included into the hegemonic relations of the bourgeois integral state: “It is precisely here, in the midst of a hegemonic relationship, constitutively open to contestation, that the potential political power of the subaltern lies” (Thomas 2018: 15). There are strong complementarities here with Bray’s analysis.

At the same time, Sotiris’s work picks up where Bray’s leaves off, by outlining an explicitly Gramscian political strategy distinctively different from left populism. In 2015 he drew attention to the tendencies to centralization of power in both Syriza and Podemos, calling for “political organizations that are at the same time laboratories for the collective elaboration of new projects and new mass forms of critical political intellectuality, and experimental sites for new social and political relations . . . [as part of] a political process that is deeply democratic and open and necessarily contradictory” (Sotiris 2015: 38), and grounded in social praxis. More recently, he has underscored fundamental differences with the left populist framework:

In contrast to a conception of the people as the effect of discursive construction or interpellation, we are dealing with a complex and uneven expansion

and politicization of the practices, demands, and aspirations of the subaltern classes, beginning with the conflicts and antagonisms of the contemporary condition of labour, including the particular importance of racism. . . . Such a strategy requires social, political, organizational and intellectual resources well beyond the emphasis of left populist movements. It requires new forms of grounding in social movements and conscious attempts to intervene into the ‘political composition’ of the working classes and expand the aspirations of labour into the political terrain. (Sotiris 2018: 44–46)

In a related contribution on what it would mean to rethink popular sovereignty in a postnational and decolonial way, Sotiris (2017) argues that Gramsci’s work on the “people nation” remains relevant to a political project to recuperate popular sovereignty without falling back on exclusionary nationalisms. What this leads us to is a conception of “the people” not as a community of common origin, but of common condition and perspective: “It is an antagonistic conception of the nation that also demands a ‘decolonialization’ of the nation, as recognition of the consequences of colonialism and state racism, the struggle against all forms of racism within a potential alliance of the subaltern classes” (Sotiris 2017: 80). Here there are resonances and complementarities with Poulantzas’s work on the nation and the spatiotemporal matrix of the capitalist state—as well as with Fanon; the work of Indian scholars of nationalism; and relational conceptions of the production of space that have been central to my own work and collaboration with Stefan Kipfer (Kipfer and Hart 2013), which I discuss more fully in the following section.

First, though, let me outline my own pathway from Laclau (1977). I concur with Bray and Sotiris about Laclau’s problematic separation of the economic and the political—and would add as well the limits of the Althusserian concept of interpellation on which he relies that abstracts from forces generated in the realms of everyday life (Hart 2013). What I have found useful, however, is his concrete historical analysis of the forces that produced Peronism in Argentina, the further contradictions that Peronism unleashed, and how this analysis spoke to the political imperatives of the moment in which he was writing (Laclau 1977: 176–94). In these pages clunky structuralism and sharp class/nonclass distinctions give way to a far more supple and dialectical understanding of how the Peronist movement emerged from the crisis of liberal bourgeois hegemony exercised by the landowning class in the context of the 1930s Depression, and the contradictory forces it both encompassed and intensified. This concrete analysis is, I suggest, productive of Laclau’s (1977: 173–74) powerful insights into the populism of the dominant classes:

When the dominant bloc experiences a profound crisis because a new fraction seeks to impose its hegemony but is unable to do so within the existing structure of the power bloc, one solution can be a direct appeal by this fraction to the masses to develop their antagonism towards the State. . . . The populism of the dominant classes is always highly repressive because it attempts a more dangerous experience than an existing parliamentary regime: while the second simply neutralises the revolutionary potential of popular interpellations, the first tries to develop that antagonism but to keep it within certain limits.

He goes on to show how, following the fall of Peron in 1955, the rooting of Peronism in the working class “enabled it to continue as a political force and even to extend its influence into the middle classes, radicalised in the last two decades as a result of the contradictions created by the expansion of monopoly capital” (Laclau 1977: 192); and how Argentinian liberalism, restored to state power, was completely unable to absorb the democratic demands of the masses and resorted increasingly to repression. More generally, he argued, in contemporary Latin America power blocs had reunited under the control of monopoly capital, and the new type of military regime was increasingly reliant on its repressive apparatuses. At the same time, Latin American masses had developed popular antagonisms to a point where it was very difficult for any fraction of the bourgeoisie to absorb and neutralize them; hence his insistence on the possibilities for a populist path to socialism. It is important to recall that Laclau was writing in a moment prior to the neoliberal counterrevolution—although neoliberal capitalism had of course taken hold in Chile under the auspices of Augusto Pinochet and his generals in the mid-1970s.

In the context of my work in postapartheid South Africa, Laclau’s analysis helped me see how neoliberal capitalism and modalities of rule ushered in by Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki in the 1990s were mediated through predominantly liberal forms of bourgeois hegemony and articulations of nationalism that sought to neutralize popular antagonisms. By the early 2000s escalating popular antagonisms and oppositional movements signaled the limits of liberal forms of bourgeois hegemony. They also paved the way for the rise of the Jacob Zuma regime, which sought precisely to develop these antagonisms but keep them under control, in part through strengthening the securocratic and repressive arms of the state that were on horrendous display in the massacre of striking mine workers by paramilitary troops in 2012. The bursting onto the political stage of Julius Malema and his Economic Freedom Fighters in 2013, seeking to outdo Zuma in developing popular antagonisms, exemplified the forces that Zuma had helped to unleash

but was unable to control. The ferocious debate currently under way in South Africa about expropriation without compensation of white-owned land can also be located on this larger canvas.

Although stimulated by Laclau's work in Argentina, this analysis of the contradictory forces at play in postapartheid South Africa has required taking his insights in a far more explicitly Gramscian direction. It has also entailed stretching Gramsci into direct engagement with questions of race, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender—as well as bringing his work into dialogue with that of Frantz Fanon (Kipfer and Hart 2013), especially around questions of nationalism. Of crucial importance as well is Hall's (1980) dialectical concept of articulation, which he developed partly in critical conversation with Laclau to fundamentally reconfigure South African debates cast in terms of race versus class (Hart 2007)—and that remain central to my present efforts to develop concrete and comparative understandings of the contradictory forces generating populist politics in different regions of the world within an explicitly relational, conjunctural, and global framework.

In concluding, I return to the amplifying invocations of authoritarian populism posed at the start of this essay, and reflect in a conjunctural way on questions of authoritarianism and populist politics. Of necessity very briefly, I suggest how a global conjunctural framework is not just analytically powerful, but also politically relevant to the sort of Gramscian project that Sotiris outlines.

Authoritarian Populism Revisited: Toward a Global Conjunctural Analysis

A useful starting point is Poulantzas's (1978) discussion of authoritarian statism, to which Hall's concept of authoritarian populism was a response. In his essay titled "The Rise of Authoritarian Neoliberalism," Ian Bruff (2014) rejoins the debate over authoritarian populism of the 1980s, framing his argument about neoliberal authoritarianism in terms of the complementarities between Hall and Poulantzas:

Hall's more concrete analysis enables us to acknowledge, perhaps more than Poulantzas allows, the potential for popular struggles rooted in antistatism to transform the state in precisely the authoritarian directions that Poulantzas discussed. Conversely, Poulantzas shows us more clearly than Hall that an increasingly authoritarian state is simultaneously strengthened and weakened by this shift toward coercion as new forms of popular struggle set up "major dislocatory effects within the State itself." Therefore the insights of

both theorists are particularly beneficial when analyzing the contemporary period, for together they show in a range of ways why and how one should view “authoritarianism” as a complex, multifaceted, and contradictory phenomenon. (Bruff 2014: 120)

I strongly endorse Bruff’s call to combine insights from Hall and Poulantzas to engage questions of authoritarianism, but suggest an expanded reading of both authors that moves beyond the terrain of the debate over authoritarian populism.

Apropos Hall, instead of starting with authoritarian populism I have found it more useful to go back to the coauthored volume *Policing the Crisis* (1978)—a fully dialectical analysis of the simultaneously economic and political crises of the 1970s, which makes vividly clear how race and class are profoundly imbricated in ways that paved the way for Thatcherism—and which also dramatizes the authoritarian tendencies linked to moral panics over crime and race that preceded Thatcherism, and enabled it to gain traction. Rereading the book for me has also made clear how it was Hall’s dialectical reworking of Laclau’s (1977) concept of articulation that enabled his profoundly important intervention in the South African race versus class debate in 1980—which represents, more broadly, a demonstration of Marx’s method with vitally important political stakes. This dimension of Hall’s work has been sidelined in the debate over authoritarian populism—and constitutes, in my view, a far more significant contribution.

There are, of course, close parallels between *Policing the Crisis* and Poulantzas’s *State, Power, Socialism*. On the eve of the Thatcher-Reagan counter-revolution, Hall et al. and Poulantzas were drawing connections between the capitalist crisis of the 1970s, the implosion of the Keynesian welfare state, and burgeoning authoritarianism—but they were doing so at very different spatial scales. While Hall et al. focused on the realms of everyday life in Britain, Poulantzas (1978: 203) was pointing to “a new form of State” in Europe and the United States, characterized by “intensified state control over every sphere of socio-economic life *combined with* radical decline of the institutions of political democracy and with draconian and multiform curtailment of so-called ‘formal liberties.’” In a cryptic way, Poulantzas (1978: 203–4) was also calling attention to new forms of imperialism, with intensifying interimperialist contradictions and “the emergence of a *new form of dependent State*” in the zone of dominated countries, “for example in Latin America.” There are of course strong resonances here with Laclau’s (1977) focus on military regimes in the region. In short, I am suggesting that the comple-

mentarities between Hall and Poulantzas are wider and deeper than generally recognized, and also that Laclau (1977) should be brought into the mix.

These complementarities are directly relevant to my current efforts to bring resurgent nationalisms and populist politics in South Africa, India, and the United States into the same spatiohistorical frame of analysis. The framework focuses on how nationalisms and neoliberal forms of capitalism have worked in and through one another to generate populist politics in specific but always interconnected national settings, through processes that intensified in the post-Cold War period. It encompasses attention to broad global political-economic conjunctures and to praxis in the realms of everyday life, as well as to projects and processes of hegemony that mediate between global forces and everyday life. Central to this framework is the concept of articulation derived from Hall that focuses on race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, caste, and religion as inseparably and actively constitutive of both class processes and nationalisms in South Africa, India, and the United States.

Bringing the United States into the same frame as South Africa and India poses the question of why it has taken so long for a demagogic figure like Trump to ascend to power, given the long histories of racism, right-wing nationalism, and populist politics in the United States; the ravages of neoliberal forms of capitalism; and the abandonment of the working class by the Democratic Party. The conjunctural framework enables us to see Trumpism not as an aberration, but as a live though latent possibility that required a particular conjuncture of forces in order to burst forth; it calls as well for attention to new forms of imperialism that were taking shape in the 1970s, to which Poulantzas presciently pointed. This approach also lets us see how Trumpism is riddled with contradictions.

More than just an explanatory device, I see this comparative conjunctural framework as potentially contributing to the sort of political project that Sotiris envisages. By illuminating spatiohistorical specificities as well as relations and interconnections, it directs attention to common challenges confronting the Left in widely different circumstances—and opens up possibilities for translating and forging new connections and rearticulations.



As I draw this essay to a close on a beautiful sunny Sunday morning in Durban, a vigorous rendition of Jacob Zuma's signature song "*Awuleth' Umshini Wami*" ("Bring Me My Machine [Gun]") drifts through the open window—a reminder, if one needed it, that populist politics are alive and well.⁷

Notes

- 1 The most recent examples are Bruff 2014 and Gallas 2016, which both turn to Poulantzas 1978.
- 2 For one such debate, see Akram-Lodhi's (2018) critique of Scoones et al. (2018).
- 3 See Mouffe (2016a, 2018) and Errejón and Mouffe (2016).
- 4 The English version, titled *Populism, Left and Right*, was not published at the time of writing. In this essay I am working from a lengthy interview with Fassin in *Radical Philosophy* (2018) and Hamburger 2018.
- 5 They include, most recently, Hart 2007, 2013, and 2014.
- 6 Jamie Peck (2010: 8) similarly points to how many failures of neoliberal policy continue to be "tagged to intransigent unions, to invasive regulation, to inept bureaucrats, and to scaremongering advocacy groups."
- 7 A recent version showing Zuma singing to his supporters outside the court where he was charged with one of many cases of corruption is available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=jqt-kulXG7Y.

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