

**Chantal Mouffe**

**Versió original en anglès  
Versión original en inglés  
Original version english**

The increasing success of right-wing populist parties in several European countries has in recent months become an important subject of concern for those who are envisaging the future of democratic institutions in Europe and there has been much debate in the media about the causes of their growing appeal. But the fact that they have become a central subject of discussion has not meant that progress has been made in coming to terms with their nature. My aim in this presentation is to examine the reasons for the difficulties encountered in grasping the roots of this new form of populism. I am going to defend the thesis that those difficulties come from the theoretical framework informing most democratic political thinking, a framework that precludes coming to terms with the specificity of populist politics. To be more explicit, my argument will be that it is the claim that the adversarial model of politics has become obsolete, which is at the origin of our current incapacity to understand the origins of right-wing populism and the challenge it represents for the future of Europe.

All the theorists, who like Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens, have announced the dawn of a consensual politics «beyond left and right», are suddenly confronted with the emergence of new political frontiers which pose a real challenge to their post-political vision. By constructing an opposition between «the people» versus the «establishment», not only does right-wing populism shatter the consensual framework, it also brings to the fore the shallowness of the dominant theoretical perspective. Indeed if, as I will argue, the attraction exerted by right-wing populist discourse is the very consequence of the «end of politics» Zeitgeist which prevails nowadays, we should not be surprised by the incapacity of most theorists to explain what is currently happening.

The thesis I want to put forward is that, far from being a return of archaic and irrational forces, an anachronism in times of «post-conventional» identities, something to be fought through more modernization and «third way» policies, right-wing populism is the consequence of the post-political consensus. It is the lack of an effective democratic debate about possible alternatives that has led in many countries to the success of political parties claiming to be the «voice of the people».

### **The shortcomings of the liberal conception**

An important part of my argument will be of a theoretical nature because I am convinced that in order to understand the appeal of right-wing populist discourse it is necessary to question the rationalist and individualist tenets which inform the main trends of democratic political theory. The refusal to acknowledge the political in its antagonistic dimension and the concomitant incapacity to grasp the central role of passions in the constitution of collective identities are, in my view, at the root of

political theory's failure to come to terms with the phenomenon of populism.

While of course not new, those limitations have been reinforced by the recent evolution of liberal democratic societies and the effects of the prevailing ideological framework. This framework presents two aspects: free market on one side, human rights on the other. Jointly they provide the content of what is today generally understood by «democracy». What is striking is that the reference to popular sovereignty –which constitutes the backbone of the democratic ideal– has been almost erased in the current definition of liberal democracy. Popular sovereignty is now usually seen as an obsolete idea, often perceived as an obstacle to the implementation of human rights.

What we are witnessing, actually, is the triumph of a purely liberal interpretation of the nature of modern democracy. According to many liberals democracy is secondary with respect to liberal principles and its objective is limited to their protection. Although agreeing that liberalism and democracy are separate values, I do not think that the relation that exists between them could be reduced to an instrumental one of means/ends as many liberals would have it. While human rights are indeed crucial and constitutive of the modern form of democracy, they cannot be considered as the only criteria to judge democratic politics. Without effective democratic participation in the decisions concerning the common life, there can be no democracy.

The liberal conception also misses the crucial symbolic role played by the democratic conception of popular sovereignty. The legitimacy of modern liberal democracy is grounded on the idea of popular sovereignty and those who believe that it can be discarded are profoundly mistaken. The democratic deficit which manifests itself in a multiplicity of ways in a growing number of liberal democratic societies is no doubt a consequence of the fact that people feel that no real scope is left for what would be a meaningful participation in important decisions. In several countries this democratic deficit has contributed to the development of right-wing populist parties, which are claiming to represent the people and to defend its rights, which have been confiscated by the political elites. It is worth noting that they are usually the only parties that mobilize the theme of popular sovereignty, seen with suspicion by traditional democratic parties.

### **The end of politics?**

The effacement of the theme of popular sovereignty in liberal democratic societies constitutes a first element which is important for apprehending the current rise of right-wing populism and we can already see how it has to do with the kind of liberal consensus existing today both in political life and in political theory. There is a striking convergence between the lack of effective alternatives offered to citizens in advanced industrial societies and the lack of an adequate theoretical grasp of the complex relationship existing between democracy and liberalism. This explains, in my view, why it has become so difficult to challenge the prevailing liberal hegemony. Think for instance of the way in which, in one form or the other, most social democratic parties have been converted to the ideology of the «third way». Nowadays the key terms of political discourse are «good governance» and «partisan free democracy».

Politics in its conflictual dimension is deemed to be something of the past and the type of democracy which is commended is a consensual, completely depoliticized

democracy. This «politics without adversary»<sup>(1)</sup> chimes with the consensual way the discourse on human rights is utilized. The subversive potential of human rights is neutralized by their articulation with the neo-liberal dogma. Human rights are reduced to providing the moral framework, which such a politics needs to support its claims of representing the general interest beyond partisan fractions.

As a consequence of neo-liberal hegemony, most crucial decisions concerning social and economic relations have been removed from the political terrain. Traditional democratic political parties have become unable to face societal problems in a political way and this explains the increasing role played by the juridical sphere as the realm where social conflicts can find a form of expression. Today, because of the lack of a democratic political public sphere where a political confrontation could take place, it is the legal system that is made responsible for organizing human coexistence and for regulating social relations. This displacement of the political terrain by the legal one as the place where conflicts are resolved has very negative consequences for the workings of democracy. No doubt, this fits with the dominant view that one should look for «impartial» solutions to social conflicts, but this is precisely where the problem lies. There are no impartial solutions in politics and it is this illusion that we now live in societies where political antagonism has been eradicated which makes it impossible for political passions to be channeled through traditional democratic parties.

In my view, it is the incapacity of traditional parties to provide distinctive forms of identifications around possible alternatives that has created the terrain for the flourishing of right-wing populism. Right-wing populist parties are often the only ones that attempt to mobilize passions and to create collective forms of identifications. Against all those who believe that politics can be reduced to individual motivations and that it is driven by the pursuit of self-interest, they are well aware that politics always consists in the creation of an «us» versus a «them» and that it implies the creation of collective identities. Hence the powerful appeal of their discourse because it provides collective forms of identification around «the people».

If we add to that the fact that under the banner of «modernization», social-democratic parties have in most countries identified themselves more or less exclusively with the middle-classes and that they have stopped representing the interests of the popular sectors –whose demands are considered as «archaic» or «retrograde»– we should not be surprised by the growing alienation of an increasing number of groups who feel excluded from the effective exercise of citizenship by the «enlightened» elites. In a context where the dominant discourse proclaims that there is no alternative to the current neo-liberal form of globalization and that we have to accept its laws and submit to its dictates, small wonder that more and more workers are keen to listen to those who claim that alternatives do exist and that they will give back to the people the power to decide. When democratic politics has lost its capacity to shape the discussion about how we should organize our common life and when it is limited to securing the necessary conditions for the smooth working of the market, the conditions are ripe for talented demagogues to articulate popular frustration.

The current state of liberal democratic societies is therefore particularly favorable for the development of right-wing populism. The displacement of the idea of popular sovereignty dovetails with the idea that there is no alternative to the present order and this contributes to the creation of an anti-political climate that is easily exploited to foment popular reactions against the governing elites. We should realize that to a great extent the success of right-wing populist parties comes from the fact that they provide people with some form of hope, with the belief that things could be different. Of course this is an illusory hope, founded on false premises and on unacceptable

mechanisms of exclusion where xenophobia usually plays a central role. But when they are the only ones to offer an outlet for political passions, their pretence to offer an alternative is seductive and their appeal is likely to grow. To be able to envisage an adequate response, it is urgent to grasp the economic, social and political conditions that explain their emergence. And this requires the elaboration of a theoretical approach that does not deny the antagonistic dimension of the political.

Unfortunately, so far the answer to the rise of those parties has been completely inadequate because it has mainly consisted in moral condemnation. Of course, such a reaction fits perfectly with the dominant post-political perspective and it had to be expected. Given that politics had supposedly become «non-adversarial», the frontier between us and them constitutive of politics can only be drawn in the moral register. It serves to separate the «good democrats» from the «evil extreme right», considered as a sort of moral plague which needs to be condemned morally, not fought politically. Therefore no attempt is made to try to understand the reasons for its emergence, understanding that in any case the amalgam on which the very notion of «extreme-right» is based would make it impossible. Moreover, attempts at understanding are deemed suspect and perceived as a move towards condoning something that is morally unacceptable. This is why moral condemnation and the establishment of a «cordon sanitaire» are so often the only answer to the rise of right-wing populist movements. Such a strategy is, of course, counterproductive since, as we have seen, the appeal of these parties is linked to their anti-establishment rhetoric. So their exclusion by the governing serves to reinforce their oppositional image.

### **Right-wing populism in Austria**

I now want to illustrate my argument with the case of Austria that is particularly interesting because it will give me the opportunity to examine the two aspects of my thesis, the negative consequences of consensus politics as well as the inadequacy of the moralistic answer to the challenge of right-wing populism.(2)

To grasp the reasons for the success of the *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* (FPÖ) it is necessary to recall the type of politics that prevailed in Austria since the beginning of the second Austrian Republic. When Austria was reestablished in 1945 the three existing parties, the *Sozialistische Partei Österreichs* (SPÖ), the *Österreichische Volkspartei* (ÖVP) and the *Kommunistische Partei Österreichs* (KPÖ), decided to govern in coalition in order to avoid the conflicts which had dominated the First Republic, exploding into a civil war in 1934. The KPÖ was quickly left out because of the effects of the Cold War and the coalition reduced to the SPÖ and the ÖVP. Those parties were the representatives of the Christian-conservative and the Socialist Lager around which Austrian society was organized after the break up of the Habsburg monarchy. They devised a form of cooperation through which they managed to establish their control on the life of the country in a variety of fields: political, economic, social and cultural. Thanks to the «Proporz system» the most important posts in the banks, hospitals, schools and nationalized industries were divided between their respective elites. Furthermore, the development of social and economic partnership secured the cooperation between the organizations representing the employers and the employees in order to reach acceptable compromises, thereby avoiding industrial conflicts and strikes.

To be sure, this kind of consensus politics played an undeniable role in providing the

basis of stability for the political system and when in 1955, after ten years of allied occupation, Austria won its sovereignty and independence, it had recovered its confidence and prosperity. But the fact is that –except for the years between 1966 to 1983– the formation of a Grand Coalition by the SPÖ and the ÖVP to govern the country led to the blocking of the political system since very little space was left for a type of contestation that would not be directed against the system itself. Indeed, even when governing alone, the two main parties continued to maintain close contacts through the *Sozialpartnerschaft*. This created the conditions that were later to allow a gifted demagogue like Jörg Haider to articulate the diverse forms of resentment against the governing coalition and its bureaucratic machine in the name of «democracy» and «liberty».

When Jörg Haider took control of the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) in 1986, the party was facing extinction.<sup>(3)</sup> The FPÖ, which had succeeded in 1956 the League of Independents (VDU) founded in 1949, was heir to the third component of the Austrian political structure, the German national-liberal Lager that had supported National Socialism and had therefore been marginalized after the war. Since 1960, the FPÖ had tried to redefine itself as a centrist third party by cultivating an image as a progressive, liberal party. But it had been weakened by a three years participation as a junior partner in a coalition with the SPÖ between 1983 and 1986 and its potential vote was estimated at between 1% and 2%.<sup>(4)</sup> The situation was therefore critical and intra-party disputes culminated in 1986 at the Innsbruck conference in the ousting of the party chairman Norbert Steger. Things changed quickly with the new leadership of Jörg Haider who drastically transformed the party's orientation and from then on the FPÖ experienced a dramatic upsurge in electoral support. Notwithstanding temporary setbacks, its share of the votes increased steadily until the November 1999 elections when it became the second party in the country, slightly overtaking the ÖVP with 27%. Despite lengthy discussions the ÖVP and the SPÖ were unable to agree on terms to reconvene their coalition and a new coalition government was established between the ÖVP and the FPÖ in February 2000. This alliance was violently denounced in Austria and abroad and the other European Union members retaliated with a series of measures aimed at isolating the new government. However, the new coalition managed to withstand this opposition and when it collapsed in September 2002 it was because of an internal struggle, not external pressure. I will come back to these events later, but we first need to examine the rise of the FPÖ under Haider.

### **Jörg Haider's strategy**

As soon as he assumed the leadership, Jörg Haider transformed the party into a protest party against the «Grand Coalition». He actively mobilized the themes of popular sovereignty and liberty of choice in order to articulate the growing resistances to the bureaucratic and authoritarian way in which the country was governed by the consociational elites. At first his campaigns were directed against the federal government accused of corruption, excessive political patronage and presented as being responsible for rising unemployment. He advocated the privatization of state-owned enterprises, lower taxes and a reduction of regulation on business and individuals. From the 1990s onwards, starting with the federal parliamentary campaign in Vienna, the theme of immigration began to play a central role and the discourse of the party acquired a clearly populist character. It is at that moment that the party, presenting itself as the voice of the «little man» against the «establishment» began to appeal to working class voters disillusioned with the

SPÖ.(5)

An important element to take into account in this shift of loyalties was the profound impact of the transition to a post-Fordist form of capitalist regulation on the composition and the forms of organization of the working-class. Its consequence was the erosion of the traditional links between the workers and the SPÖ. The forms of «quasi-clientelism» that existed before became eroded as the workers lost several of the benefits of the consociational system. Since in the meantime the SPÖ had, under the leadership of Franz Vranitzky, moved towards the political centre –renaming themselves «social-democrats» and becoming more middle-class oriented– the terrain was laid for the workers to be attracted by the populist rhetoric of Jörg Haider.(6) Besides providing a channel of expression for the increasing disaffection with the political system, the FPÖ also served as an outlet for the growing anxiety and the fears induced by the process of globalization. By articulating all the diverse forms of resentment through a xenophobic discourse the party could present itself as defending the interests of «the people» both against the uncaring political establishment and the foreigners, visualized as a threat to the jobs of the «good laborious Austrians» and their traditional way of life. No doubt, the unconditional support given to Haider by the popular daily *Kronen Zeitung*, read by around three million Austrians also contributed greatly to the amazing growth of the FPÖ during those years.

The discursive strategy of Jörg Haide(7) consisted in constructing a frontier between an «us» of all the good Austrians, hard workers and defenders of national values, against a «them» composed of the parties in power, the trade unions bureaucrats, the foreigners, the left-wing artists and intellectuals who were, all in their own way, contributing to the stifling of political debate. In his book *Die Freiheit, die ich meine* (1993) he declares: «The ruling political class has got the formation of public opinion in its hands and individual opinion is neglected. A dialectical process of extensive nationalization of society and socialization of the state has broken the classic separation of state from society. Ideas and opinions of the citizens cannot be conveyed directly but have been usurped by institutions, interest groups and parties. Between them and the state a power game takes place, leaving little scope for individual freedom and self-determination».(8)

In his view one of the main issue where popular consultation is foreclosed is the question of immigration and multiculturalism. He forcefully argues for the people to be able to decide how many immigrants to allow: «The question is, who should decide which path to take? In my opinion: the people. Whoever doubts the role of the people as the highest sovereign, questions the very essence of democracy. People have the right not just to go to the polls every four years but are entitled to have a say in questions which are decisive for the future of their country».(9)

A debate has been raging in Austria and elsewhere concerning the nature of the FPÖ, many people insisting that it should be described as right-wing extremist, even neo-Nazi.(10) There is no doubt that an aspect of the FPÖ's rhetoric was also aimed at rallying the nostalgics of the Third Reich and one should not overlook the specificity of the Austrian situation and the complex relation of many Austrians with their past. Moreover, coming from a Nazi family, Haider has a very ambiguous attitude towards the crimes of Nazism that he tends to minimize.(11) But it would be a serious mistake to overemphasize this element and to attribute to it the success of the FPÖ. Those nostalgic sectors correspond only to a very small fraction of its electorate and, although they cannot be denied, the references to the Nazi years do not play an important part in the party's ideology. To claim that Jörg Haider and his party are «neo-Nazi» is to completely miss the specificity of this new form of right-wing

politics. It might satisfy the good conscience of those who reject any type of collaboration with them, but it does not help to grasp the causes of their success and their appeal for so many workers and young people.

In fact, it can be argued that the strategy of *Ausgrenzung* ('exclusion') aimed at permanently excluding the FPÖ from government established by the two main parties contributed to its remarkable rise in the last decades. The refusal of the SPÖ and the ÖVP under the last two legislatures to even consider the possibility of an alliance with the Freedom Party allowed it to be perceived as «victim» of the political establishment and reinforced its populist appeal. It could appear as David fighting against Goliath, as defending the «little people» against the elites in power.

It is clear that Austrian politics was trapped in a vicious circle. On one side the lack of a real democratic discussion about possible alternatives resulting from the consensual politics was at the origin of the success of the FPÖ; on the other side this success contributed to the permanence of the coalition whose main justification had become to stop Haider coming to power. The negative consequences of such a situation were exacerbated by the attempt by the government to stop the progression of the FPÖ by implementing some of the policies that it was advocating, mainly in the field of security and immigration.(12)

It must be stressed that this strategy to win back voters was accompanied by a strident moral condemnation of Jörg Haider's xenophobia and his demonization as a «Nazi». Of course such a hypocritical stance made it impossible to seriously challenge the FPÖ. But the moralistic response to the rise of Jörg Haider was very convenient for the governing parties because it exonerated them from being self-critical and acknowledging their responsibility for his success.

### **The impasse of moralism**

To claim the moral high ground is always very tempting but it does not provides a political strategy and it is unlikely to decrease the appeal of right-wing populist movements. In this respect the case of Austria is very instructive and it brings us important insights concerning the mistakes to be avoided. I believe that the European reactions to the formation of the coalition government between the ÖVP and the FPÖ represent the very example of the wrong strategy. We witnessed an explosion of moral indignation that led, under the instigation of France and Belgium – worried by the possibility of similar alliances at home– , to a series of bilateral measures against the new Austrian government. In the name of the defense of European values and the struggle against racism and xenophobia –of course always easier to denounce in others than to fight in your own country– the other fourteen European governments ostracized the new coalition before it had even made anything that could be deemed reprehensible. All the good democrats saw it as their duty to condemn the coming to power of a supposedly «Nazi» party and raised the alarm bell against a return of the «brown plague».

Clearly the whole episode had negative consequences for the European Union. For instance, it antagonized small nations like the Danes who felt that such a treatment would not have been used in the case of a more important country. And, as the lack of European reaction to the much more dangerous coalition established by Silvio Berlusconi in Italy with the Lega Norte of Umberto Bossi and the Alleanza Nazionale of Gianfranco Fini testifies, they were right. Moreover, this strategy of moral

denunciation did not have the expected effect in stopping the growth of right-wing populist parties. Witness the good results of the Progress Party in Norway in September 2000 (14.6%), the People's Party in Denmark in November 2001 (12%), the Pim Fortuyn List in the Netherlands in May 2002 (26%), not to mention the 18% for Le Pen in the second round of the French presidential elections of May 5, 2002.

Right-wing populism does indeed represent a real challenge to the democratic values that are at the core of the political identity of Europe. This is why it is urgent to find an adequate way to address its growing attraction. But this requires understanding the causes of this success and envisaging a truly political answer to the problems that they raise. To begin with, it is necessary to acknowledge that for several decades important changes have taken place in European countries without real popular consultation about possible alternatives. It is therefore not surprising that a sense of frustration exists among all those who have not profited from them or who feel that those changes are jeopardizing their future prospects. As long as traditional parties refuse to engage with those issues, with the argument that this evolution is a necessary one and that there is no alternative to the neo-liberal model of globalization, it is likely that right-wing populist parties will continue to grow. And it is certainly not moral condemnation that will make them disappear. It might even have the contrary effect.

There is, of course, the possibility that their appeal will diminish once they become part of the government, as they are often only able to thrive when in opposition. This is clearly the case with the FPÖ for whom participation in the Austrian government has meant sharp electoral decline. In the anticipated elections held in November 2002 they only received 10% of the votes, as against 27% in November 1999. A similar, though much quicker fate, affected the centre-right coalition established in the Netherlands with the Pim Fortuyn List, which collapsed after less than one hundred days in power because of an internecine power struggle in the party of the murdered politician.

No doubt this reveals the limits of such movements. However, without a profound change in the working of democratic politics the problems that have led to the emergence of right-wing populism will not disappear. If a serious attempt is not made to address the democratic deficit that characterizes the «post-political» age that neo-liberal hegemony has brought about, and to challenge the growing inequalities it has created, the diverse forms of resentment are bound to persist. And there is even the danger that they will take on more violent forms of expression. This is why I want to argue for the urgency of envisaging at a European level what could be an alternative to the neo-liberal model of globalization, informed by a different political project; a globalization aiming at a different world order where inequalities would be drastically reduced and where the concerns of the most exposed groups would be addressed, instead of focusing exclusively on the welfare of the middle classes. This is why initiatives like the first European Social Forum that took place in Florence in November 2002 and whose objective was to create a European relay for the World Social Forum of Porto Alegre (Brasil) are to be welcome. This is how we can begin working, as Europeans on the elaboration of an effective political answer to the challenge of right-wing populism.

**Notes:**

1. For a critique of the «third way» from such a perspective see MOUFFE, CHANTAL, *The Democratic Paradox*,

Verso, London 2000, ch. 5.

2. For a useful overall discussion, see WODAK, RUTH AND PELINKA, ANTON [eds.], *The Haider Phenomenon in Austria*, Transactions Publishers 2002.

3. One can find a comprehensive presentation of the FPÖ in LUTHER, KURT RICHARD, «Die Freiheitlichen (F)» in DACHS, HERBERT et al. [eds.], *Handbuch des politischen Systems in Österreich: Die Zweite Republik*, Manzsche Verlags- und Universitätsbuchhandlung, Vienna 1997.

4. A good analysis of this period is provided by PELINKA, ANTON, *Die Kleine Koalition*, Vienna 1993.

5. For an analysis of Haider's early populist discourse, see MORASS, MICHAEL AND REISCHENBÖCK, HELMUT, «Parteien und Populismus in Österreich», in PELINKA, ANTON [ed.], *Populismus in Österreich*, Junius, Vienna 1987.

6. This period is examined in BISCHOF, G., PELINKA, A. AND KARLHOFER, F. [eds.], *The Vranitzky Era in Austria*, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick and London 1999.

7. For a good discussion of this strategy see REINFELDT, SEBASTIAN, *Nicht-wir und Die-da: Studien zum rechten Populismus*, Braumüller, Vienna 2000.

8. HAIDER, JÖRG, *THE FREEDOM I MEAN*, SWAN BOOKS 1995, P. 16.

9. Ibid., p. 34.

10. See for instance GALANDA-BAILER, BRIGITTE AND NEUGEBAUER, WOLFGANG, *Haider und die «Freiheitlichen» in Österreich*, Elefant Press, Berlin 1997.

11. Haider's background is examined by ZÖCHLING, CHRISTA, *Haider-Licht und Schatten einer Karriere*, Molden, Vienna 1999.

12. See in this respect the article by MITTEN, RICHARD, «Jörg Haider, the Anti-immigrant Petition and Immigration Policy in Austria» in *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 28, No. 2, 1994.

## L'autor/El autor/Author

Professora de teoria política al Center for the Study of Democracy de la Universitat de Westminster, Gran Bretanya.

Va estudiar a les universitats de Lovaina, París i Essex, on es va especialitzar en teoria política. Ha ensenyat a diferents universitats d'Europa, Amèrica Llatina i Amèrica del Nord i ha fet estades d'investigació a les universitats de Harvard, Cornell i Califòrnia, a l'Institute for Advanced Study de Princeton i al Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique de París. Entre el 1989 i el 1995 va ser directora de programes al Collège International de Philosophie de París. Les seves línies principals d'investigació se centren en l'auge del populisme de dretes a Europa i els límits de la "tercera via".

## Bibliografia/Bibliografía/Bibliography

*Gramsci and Marxist Theory*, (ed.), Routledge, Londres 1979.

*Dimensions of Radical Democracy*, (ed.), Verso Books, Londres 1996.

*Deconstrucción y pragmatismo*, (ed.) Paidós, Barcelona 1998.

*El retorno de lo político. Comunidad, ciudadanía, pluralismo, democracia radical*, Paidós, Barcelona 1999.

*The Challenge of Carl Schmitt*, (ed.), Verso Books, Londres 1999.

*The Democratic Paradox*, Verso Books, Londres 2000.

*Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (juntament amb Ernesto Laclau), Verso Books, Londres 2001 (1985, 1a ed.).

