

Chantal Mouffe: *After Covid-19, What Next?*

A lot of things can still happen in the coming months and it is hazardous to make predictions of how our world will look like after the crisis but many people are already envisaging its political consequences. There are of course those who see the crisis as the confirmation of the ideas that they have always defended. Several people on the left are convinced that this crisis represents the final blow to capitalism. Slavoj Žižek for instance has just published a book in which he claims that the pandemic is revealing the need for a 'reinvented communism'. Others argue that time has now come for rediscovering the social democratic values of equality and solidarity and implementing them worldwide. And there are also those who believe that nothing significant is going to change and that, after the crisis, our societies will simply return to their anterior situation.

This is of course what happened after the 2008 economic crisis. But this time the conjuncture is different and, while not expecting great transformations, I think it is unlikely that we will simply go back to 'business as usual'. In 2008 the hegemony of neoliberalism was still unchallenged and, having accepted the idea that there was no alternative to neoliberal globalization, the 'centre-left' was not in condition to take advantage of the collapse of the financial system in order to advocate a more egalitarian politics. They were unable to use the calls for state intervention to push for redistributive policies aimed at fighting inequality. They agreed with the right to limit the role of the state to saving the banks and acquiesced to the ensuing politics of austerity.

However, we find ourselves today in a different conjuncture. The 2008 crisis has brought to the fore the contradictions of neoliberalism and its hegemony is questioned. We have seen the rise of a variety of forms of resistances and radical left

movements that challenge the social-liberalism dominant in the centre-left parties which have emerged in several countries. Neoliberal globalization has ceased to be considered as our fate and new forms of activism are flourishing in many domains. Thanks to the mobilization of the young in defence of the climate, environmental questions are now central on the political agenda. What we are witnessing is clearly a 'return of the political' after years of post-politics.

It would nonetheless be a mistake to believe that this return of the political will necessarily bring about a progressive response to the current pandemic. One of the main effects of Covid-19 is to have highlighted the vital importance of the health sector, whose practices and institutions have badly suffered in many countries under the impact of austerity policies. We should expect an increased role for the state in that area as well as in other domains but that does not mean a turn to the left. This can perfectly be done without putting the neoliberal logic into question. It could even contribute to its reinforcement. Despite its anti-state rhetoric, neoliberalism has always been compatible with state intervention and it has never refrained from asking for its interposition when it was necessary to sustain its hegemony. In response to the economic crisis caused by the pandemic public power will probably be used to rescue the economy and restore the power of capital.

The current system might evolve towards a form of 'state neoliberalism' that could in certain countries be buttressed by authoritarian measures. We have already observed an authoritarian turn in several countries where, when the neoliberal strategy of 'nudging' people to act according to the requirements of capital fails, popular resistances are crushed by the forces of the police. This is what happened in France with the yellow vests.

It is also possible that, in order to boost its legitimacy, neoliberalism could fully embrace the ‘technological solutionism’ analyzed by Evgeny Morozov. In his book *To save everything, click here* Morozov warns against the dangers of the ideology of solutionism promoted by Silicon Valley and according to which all the problems, even political ones, have a technological solution. He points out that solutionists advocate post-ideological measures and deploy technology to avoid politics. Such an approach represents a new version of the post-political position which became dominant during the 1990’s. To be sure, the current belief that digital platforms could provide a foundation for political order chimes with the claim of third way politicians that political antagonisms had been overcome and that left and right were ‘zombie categories’.

As the current debate about the more adequate technological response to Covid-19 testifies, there exists a strong tendency to believe that the sanitary crisis could be solved by providing people with apps aiming at controlling the health of the population. Several states have already decreed a ‘sanitary state of emergency’ that could easily open the way to the acceptance of forms of techno-authoritarianism that would remain immune from democratic control. A neoliberal version of techno-authoritarianism might not yet be the techno-totalitarian state of surveillance that some fear, but it could represent the first step in that direction.

How to envisage a progressive response to the pandemic? How to impede an impact of the crisis that favours right-wing forces, providing them with an opportunity to undermine democracy? To imagine an adequate strategy, I would like to suggest that valuable insights can be found in the notion of ‘double movement’ elaborated by Karl Polanyi in his book *The Great Transformation*. Analyzing the devastating consequences of the attempt by 19th Century liberalism to commodify all aspects of

social life, treating land, labour and money as commodities, Polanyi brought to light the countermovement through which a society, imperiled by the dislocation produced by advances of commodification, reacted in the 1930's with a defensive countermovement to protect itself, readapting the economy to social needs by re-embedding the market into social structures. Such a process, he noted, was not bound to be democratic and if it took a progressive form with Roosevelt's New Deal, this was not the case with fascism or with Stalinism.

Polanyi's theory has gained great currency in recent years to explain the global growth of contemporary social movements resisting neoliberalism but this is not the aspect that concerns me here. What I find particularly relevant for the present situation is the importance he attaches to the element of self-protection, which he sees as constituting the central drive of the countermovement and particularly the different forms through which the demand for protection could be satisfied. Indeed, in all the examples that he mentioned the role of the state was crucial, but in most cases the countermovement led to authoritarian regimes.

The point that I want to stress by making reference to Polanyi is that in situations in which societies experience serious disturbances in their modes of life, the need for protection becomes a central demand and that people are likely to follow those who they believe can best provide it. This is why we should be aware that right-wing populist parties might be in a better position than the left to take advantage of the current pandemic. This pandemic is a sanitary crisis that takes place in a particular conjuncture defined by conditions that are both natural and social, global warming on one side, neoliberal globalization on the other. There is no doubt that the emergence of the virus and its spread to the whole planet have been overdetermined by the destruction of the environment, destruction that has been accelerated and intensified

by financial capitalism. Moreover, decades of neoliberal policies of austerity have destroyed the public services of many countries who found themselves disarmed in the face of the pandemic. For those reasons the coronavirus accredits the theses of the progressive camp, nevertheless it could benefit its adversaries if they are able to capitalize on the demands for protection that the crisis is arousing. We should be aware that they could take advantage of those demands by framing them in a way that is consonant with their defence of traditionalist values and the promotion of an exclusive nationalism.

Unfortunately, the left is in a weak position to resist such an offensive. It is generally suspicious of the desire for protection emanating from the popular classes that it tends to interpret as a rejection of the cosmopolitan values that it cherishes. An important part of the left has in truth adopted the neoliberal worldview that envisages moral progress as the creation of a borderless world where everything can move freely and without hindrance. Notions like sovereignty and protectionism are anathema for those who consider themselves as progressive and the defence of free trade constitutes for them an article of faith. It is therefore not surprising that they are unwilling to dispute the meaning that those notions have acquired in the nationalist discourse. To have abandoned these notions to the right in the current conjuncture represents a serious hindrance for the elaboration of a political project capable of entering in resonance with the demands of the popular classes. It is urgent for the left to forsake the promotion of free trade and to realize the importance of recovering sovereignty in strategic domains like food, industry, energy and health. The fact that this ideological terrain is already occupied by right-wing populists should not be a reason to disdain it. There are many ways to envisage the exercise of sovereignty, the modes of implementation of protectionism and to define the very idea of protection. The

meaning of those notions is always discursively constructed and it depends on how they are articulated. Right-wing populists construct them around the interests of a people conceived in an ethno-nationalist guise and they put the emphasis on national sovereignty at the expense of popular sovereignty. The left should reclaim those crucial democratic notions by articulating them around the demands of a 'people' constituted by all those who suffer from relations of exploitation, domination, or discrimination. This means promoting policies that, instead of being informed by a xenophobic and nationalistic outlook, are animated by democratic egalitarian values. This is what I understand by a 'left-populist' strategy and it is particularly relevant in the present conjuncture. It is likely that in the aftermath of Covid-19 we will witness a confrontation between competing political proposals about how to rebuild the economy. The left needs to seize this opportunity to federate social and ecological demands around a project that articulates the demands for protection to the values of solidarity and social justice. Such a project should uphold a new social contract that addresses the issue of climate change linking it with the various struggles against inequality in the mode of the Green New Deal defended by Alexandria Ocasio Cortez in the USA. This Green New Deal should become the hegemonic principle of a popular collective will aiming at a profound democratization of the socio-economic order envisaged in terms of a real ecological transition. Nothing guarantees the success of such an initiative, but this is an occasion that cannot be missed because it is the very future of democracy that is at stake in this struggle.