**Left Populism, Left Eurocommunism, and Intermediary Bodies**

Efthimios Karayiannides, University of Cambridge

**Abstract:** Before Laclau and Mouffe emerged as leading advocates of Left Populism, they both identified as “Left Eurocommunists.” Intervening in Eurocommunist debates about the potential for a “democratic road to socialism,” Laclau, Mouffe and allied thinkers, including Christine Buci-Glucksmann, Bob Jessop, and Stuart Hall paid close attention to the relationship between the masses, institutions within civil society, political parties, and the state in their conceptualization of socialist strategy. They ascribed particular importance to associations or corporate structures in civil society as intermediaries between the masses and political parties. Associations were understood to crystallize popular subjectivities, and they were therefore identified as crucial sites in the struggle for hegemony. I show how these thinkers caution against abstract endorsements of intermediary institutions on the Left. This is because without an account of how these intermediary institutions are articulated to hegemonic class projects, and without an account of their precise internal organizational structure, we cannot be sure whether they will frustrate or advance democratic aims.

**Keywords:** civil society, Eurocommunism, Stuart Hall, intermediary bodies, Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, populism

**Introduction**

The 2010s saw various theoretical efforts to advocate a distinctively Left populism[[1]](#endnote-2). However, the electoral success of anti-establishment parties and candidates across Europe, North and South America made unlikely celebrities of two academic philosophers in particular. The writings of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe offered sections of the Left a theoretical vocabulary that chimed with the groundswell of popular discontent with economic austerity and centrist party political platforms in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis.[[2]](#endnote-3) In their hands, populism was shed of its derogatory connotations, and was conceptualized as a form of politics that held the potential of deepening democracy and revivifying the socialist Left. They argued that the core features of populist politics – the railing against elites and the claim to speak in the name of ordinary people – could be given a distinctively progressive, democratic cast, distinct from their articulation within the political platforms of the illiberal right.

For Laclau and Mouffe, populism’s adversarial model of political contestation constituted a renaissance of politics. They contrast an era of “post-politics” or a “consensus of the centre”, in which financial capitalism imposed strict limits on state intervention and redistributive policies, to a “populist moment” which opened up a properly political space where different projects of society could confront each other.[[3]](#endnote-4) Populism’s demarcation of society into two antagonistic camps constitutes the starting point for a fundamental questioning of the institutions and practices in which contemporary democratic politics had become ossified. During a populist moment, ‘the possibility arises of constructing a new subject of collective action – the people – capable of reconfiguring a social order experienced as unjust.’[[4]](#endnote-5)

For both Laclau and Mouffe, charismatic leadership is an important dimension of this “new subject of collective action”. The constitution of the people requires an “articulating principle’” uniting manifold democratic demands. This articulating principle frequently emerges in the figure of the leader around whom we see the ‘crystallization of common affects, and affective bonds.’[[5]](#endnote-6) The seemingly strong anti-institutional framing of Laclau and Mouffe’s Left Populism, as well as the prominent role assigned to leadership in their system, has led both their left liberal and radical critics to charge them with positing an unmediated relationship between representatives and represented.

Left liberals, like Jan-Werner Müller, worry that Left populism is inherently anti-pluralist, involving the imposition of homogenous identity on a heterogeneous society.[[6]](#endnote-7) For Müller this is not only undesirable for its potentially authoritarian implication, but also because it is a poor strategy for maintaining power and effecting change. Müller charges Laclau with illegitimately framing modern politics as an exclusive choice between neoliberal technocracy and populism. Claims to represent the authentic will of the people might catapult the Left to power in the short-term, but it is unlikely to secure their long-term consistency and staying power: ‘Once the stakes are raised to the level of non-negotiable identity claims, continuous conflict appears likely.’[[7]](#endnote-8)

The strategic limitations of Laclau and Mouffe’s left Populism have also been stressed by Laclau and Mouffe’s more radical critics. Their model of representation has been described as one of ‘virtual immediacy’ in which masses form an imaginary identification with leaders resulting in a ‘suspension of the distance between them.’[[8]](#endnote-9) Critics argue that this ‘virtual immediacy’, is continuous, rather than in tension with, neoliberal hegemony.

Arthur Borriello and Anton Jäger have drawn on the work of Peter Mair, Pierre Rosanvallon and Chris Bickerton, to argue that contemporary populist parties emerge in the context of the ‘desociologisation of society’ and the disappearance of the associational worlds of traditional mass parties.[[9]](#endnote-10) Following Mair, they argue that traditional twentieth century mass political parties rooted their “representative claim” in a certain segment of the population who transmitted their demands and interests to the leadership through a series of intermediary institutions – unions, co-operatives, churches, associations, and so on. With the decline of these representative intermediary institutions since the 1990s, and thus the stability of representative claims, parties are faced with a gulf separating a deracinated party system and increasingly diffuse electorate. A gulf increasingly plugged with spin-doctoring, PR, social media, and the charisma of leaders. Attending to the transformation of political parties since the 1990s, Jäger and Borriello suggest, allows us to view Laclau and Mouffe exaltation of leadership as the privileged mechanism by which settled hierarchies are displaced and a new popular subject is brought into being as ‘more of a symptom than a conscious tactic, reproducing the very ailment it objects to in mainstream parties.’[[10]](#endnote-11)

Similarly, Nadia Urbinati situates the rise of contemporary populism in the context of a crisis of political parties and other intermediary bodies. For Urbinati these institutions are essential to democracy because they facilitate ‘a structural communication…between political action and political judgment.’[[11]](#endnote-12) This structural communication is undone when these bodies cease to be spaces for genuine citizen participation. Populism, by promising unmediated participation, risks producing an ‘audience democracy’ in which citizens are enjoined ‘to attend to the spectacle of politics as an audience in a theatre, where roles are performed according to a script the audience does not contribute to making and whose participation mostly consists in a reaction to news or rumors that the Internet and the media circulate for which nobody is responsible.’[[12]](#endnote-13)

The problem with all these charges against Laclau’s theory of populism is that they fail to take into consideration Laclau’s analyses of concrete examples of the populism and the theoretical conclusions implied by these analyses. In the last chapter of his *On Populist Reason*, Laclau discusses ‘obstacles and limits to the construction of the people’ in terms of three historical examples: American Populism, Ataturkism, and Peronism[[13]](#endnote-14). In this chapter the role of leaders and intermediary institutions in Laclau’s account of populism are more complicated than his critics suggest.

Interestingly, Laclau contrasts these supposedly deficient forms of populism with the Polish *Solidarność* movement. *Solidarność* transformed the particular demands of Gdansk workers into the rallying point of equivalential associations vaster than themselves. It was relatively more successful than other forms of populism, according to Laclau, because even though the signifier “solidarity” became sufficiently empty that it could be appropriated by myriad democratic struggles, it was ‘still linked to a certain programmatic content’. This in turn made it ‘possible to maintain a certain coherence between the particularities integrating the chain.’[[14]](#endnote-15) This counterexample is introduced suddenly and barely expanded upon. However, read alongside his analysis of the three examples of problematic forms of populism, Laclau cannot be read as advocating a completely unmediated relationship between leaders and the masses. Indeed, all his examples of failed populist movements involve the failure of mass civil society movements to constitute themselves into something like a corporate structure capable of putting forward a shared and coherent program.

Furthermore, it cannot be argued that Laclau conceives populism as either the top-down imposition of a homogeneous identity by a leader on the people, or as a form of political identification characterized solely by devotion to a leader. On the contrary, all Laclau’s examples of deficient forms of populism point towards the limits of leadership for the constitution of populist subject: ‘a love for a leader which does not crystallize in any form of institutional regularity … can result only in fleeting popular identities.’[[15]](#endnote-16)

Laclau does not give an account of what a populism with “institutional regularity” would look like in his later work. However, this was a major pre-occupation of his earlier work as well the broader intellectual milieu from which it emerged. Before Laclau and Mouffe emerged as leading advocates of Left Populism, they both identified as “Left Eurocommunists”. In this paper, I argue that, for those of us interested in the relationship between radical politics, representative institutions, and contemporary Left political strategy, this period in Laclau and Mouffe’s intellectual and political trajectory bears returning to.

Writing before the “discursive” and “ontological” turn in their thinking, Laclau and Mouffe’s theoretical output during their Left Eurocommunist phase lacks the overwhelming formalism of their later texts[[16]](#endnote-17). Populism, hegemony, and articulation had yet to become co-extensive with politics more broadly, and conjunctural analyses had a far more significant role in their writing. Intervening in Eurocommunist debates about the potential for a ‘democratic road to socialism’, Laclau, Mouffe, and allied thinkers, including Christine Buci-Glucksmann, Bob Jessop, and Stuart Hall paid close attention to the relationship between the masses, institutions within civil society, political parties, and the state in their conceptualization of socialist strategy. They ascribed particular importance to associations or corporate structures in civil society as intermediaries between the masses and political parties. Associations were understood to crystallize popular subjectivities, and they were therefore identified as crucial sites in the struggle for hegemony.

However, I will show that their conjunctural approach vitiated against any abstract endorsement of intermediary bodies. According to these thinkers, the nature of intermediary bodies and their relationship to socialist struggle depends both upon the hegemonic class projects they are articulated to, and their internal organizational structure. They argued that a conjunctural analysis was required to determine the extent to which particular institutions advanced or frustrated democratic aims. While the thinkers examined in this paper shared a broad theoretical approach, I will show how their different characterization of the late-1970s conjuncture led them to divergent conclusions about the role post-war corporate intermediary bodies could play in a potential transition to socialism.

**The Essex Hegemony Group and Left Eurocommunism**

In 1977, at a conference in Venice organized by the Italian left-wing daily *Il Manifesto*, French philosopher Louis Althusser famously announced a ‘crisis of Marxism.’[[17]](#endnote-18) He was referring to the bitter divisions which had emerged over the question of strategy and organizational form within the Western European socialist movement. The most controversial of these divisions emerged around so-called ‘Eurocommunism,’ and over whether West European Communist Parties should abandon the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ as official policy and embrace, instead, a democratic or parliamentary road to socialism. Though Althusser vociferously, and unsuccessfully, campaigned in favor of the dictatorship of the proletariat within the French Communist Party, he nonetheless insisted that the ‘crisis of Marxism’ should be welcomed and embraced.[[18]](#endnote-19) This is because it forced onto agenda those aspects of socialist theory and strategy which Althusser believed had long been neglected by Marxists: the development of an adequate Marxist theory of the state and of class organization.

For those like Laclau and Mouffe who were inspired by Althusser’s reading of Marx in the 1960s and 1970s, Althusser’s pronouncements on the ‘crisis of Marxism’ provoked a shift in theoretical agenda. If Althusserian Marxists had been preoccupied at the start of the 1970s with developing a ‘theory of theoretical practice’, a ‘science’ purged of all ideological and humanist approaches to history and social analysis, by the end of the decade they had shifted focus to questions of socialist strategy. It is in this context that we should read Chantal Mouffe’s contention in 1979 that, “If the history of Marxist theory during the 1960s can be characterized by the reign of ‘althusserianism’, then we have now, without a doubt, entered a new phase: that of ‘gramscianism.’”[[19]](#endnote-20)

This paper is not concerned with judging the faithfulness of Laclau and Mouffe’s reading of Gramsci, nor assessing their claim that Gramsci is a necessary supplement to Althusser’s ideas. Rather, my aim is to show how they deploy their reading of Gramsci to intervene in Eurocommunist debates about the democratization of socialist struggles and transitions. Such an interpretation will bring out the relevance of their thinking to questions about the relationship between radical politics and representative institutions, particularly the question. widely debated in this period, of the relationship between representative democracy and organizations within civil society.

Broader Eurocommunist debates – in France, Italy, Spain, and Greece – were clearly on Laclau and Mouffe’s radar in the early 1980s. This is evident in the research agenda laid out in the so-called ‘Essex Manifesto,’ a statement of purpose for a ‘Marxism and Hegemony research group’ organized by Laclau and other members of the Department of Government at the University of Essex. The text, contained in Stuart Hall’s archive, explains that the ‘Group situates itself within the context of a crisis of Marxism’[[20]](#endnote-21). This crisis was defined specifically as a ‘crisis of economism’ and a ‘crisis of class reductionism’ which ‘locates classes as the only subjects of history and reduces every contradiction to class contradiction’[[21]](#endnote-22). This ‘crisis of Marxism’ could be overcome

by embracing within the theoretical and political practices of marxism the multiplicity of democratic and popular contradictions which constitute the network of contemporary societies, and the multiplicity of democratic subjects which have been incorporated into the arena of political struggle in the stage of monopoly capitalism – women, urban and ecological movements, racial, national and sexual minorities, etc.[[22]](#endnote-23)

While acknowledging the autonomy of these ‘democratic and class contradictions’, that is, their irreducibility to economic relations of production, the Manifesto explains that the group did not subscribe to a pluralist conception of the social. Indeed, it warns against a critique of economic reductionism that would bend the stick too far in the opposite direction and lead to ‘the negation of any conception of totality’[[23]](#endnote-24). It explains that popular and democratic contradictions needed to be studied not merely in their ‘specificity’ but also in terms of their ‘articulation:’

our aim is the formulation of a conception of the articulation of the social whole in which this articulation is not pre-given – through immanent laws, homogeneous world-views or any other mechanism – but is the result of struggle. And it is the result of struggle which does not take place between already constituted social forces – as this would be to fall back into humanism or class essentialism – but between forces which are constructed and deconstructed in the process of struggle itself. It is here that the Gramscian concept of hegemony becomes fundamental.[[24]](#endnote-25)

We see in the Essex Manifesto an anticipation of many of the themes which would be developed in Laclau and Mouffe’s later work. However, the insistence on the notion of totality, as well as the placement of democratic and popular contradictions in the context of a definitive stage of capitalism suggests that discourse has yet to become constitutive of their notion of articulation, and that it is being elaborated in a more sociological and historical register here. The conjunctural basis of their theorization of hegemony is further signaled by one of the key areas of research the group committed itself to pursuing: ‘concrete studies of the processes of formation of bourgeois hegemony, with special reference to British society.’[[25]](#endnote-26)

A circular distributed by Stuart Hall to canvas interest among students and researchers affiliated to the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham in joining the Essex group gives further political context. Hall explains to his colleagues that, besides academics in Britain, Laclau had made contact with theorists attempting to formulate a democratic conception of the transition to socialism in other parts of the world, and that they had responded enthusiastically to the research group. Hall names Nicos Poulantzas in France, Giuseppe Vacca in Italy, as well as ‘people in Spain, Latin Am and Canada’[[26]](#endnote-27). Moreover, Hall’s circular gives us an indication of the political orientation of the group relative to other intellectual groupings in Britain. “The tendency’ of the Hegemony group, Hall explained, ‘is broadly defined as ‘left Euro-comm.’”[[27]](#endnote-28)

In the following three sections I will explore some of the core characteristics of this Left Eurocommunism. It advocated that the Left treat the institutions of liberal democracy as crucial terrains of struggle. However, as we will see, Left Eurocommunism had a rather expansive notion of the bounds of the liberal democratic state and the institutions it comprised. Following Antonio Gramsci, they characterized the modern state as an “integral state”. The idea was that in the post-war period, the state increasingly permeates the social, incorporating associations within civil society into its institutions and functioning. Left Eurocommunist thus went beyond advocating that the left contest elections and take up seats in parliament. This expansive notion of the state allowed these thinkers to characterize a democratic transition to socialism as involving a fundamental transformation and democratization of broader social relations. Democratic socialism could not just involve the seizure of state power and its exercise in the interest of the working class. Rather, the transition to socialism was conceived as a fundamental transformation of the relation between state power and the social. As we will see civil society associations and corporate structures which intermediated between the masses and state were crucial for how Left Eurocommunism conceptualized this transformation.

**“Transformism” vs the “Socialization of Politics”: Chantal Mouffe and Christine Buci-Glucksmann read Gramsci on the State and Civil Society**

I will begin by examining the theory of the “integral state”, central to the Left Eurocommunist theoretical project. The theory was developed most extensively in the writing of Chantal Mouffe and Christine Buci-Glucksmann. Mouffe and Buci-Glucksmann’s work gives us the outline of how Left Eurocommunists imagined the state could be democratized by increasing the autonomy of civil society associations. An examination of their work thus provides us with the broad contours of the Left Eurocommunist theoretical project which will be shaded in as we progress to analyses of Laclau’s, Jessop’s, and Hall’s writing.

Among intellectuals sympathetic to Eurocommunism in the late-1970s, a debate ensued over how to interpret Antonio Gramsci’s notion of civil society.[[28]](#endnote-29) Gramsci’s writings seemed to blur the distinctions between the political superstructure and the economic structure, as well as between power exercised through consensus and power exercised through force. The debate concerned the extent to which Gramsci had subverted orthodox Marxist categories and approaches.[[29]](#endnote-30) Intervening in these debates, Chantal Mouffe argued that the distinctiveness of Gramsci’s understanding of ideology was the key to understanding how he understood the relationship between economic structure and political superstructure.

Mouffe explains that, for Gramsci, ideology has both a discursive and material character[[30]](#endnote-31). Insofar as ideology is disseminated through practices and institutions – schools, churches, trade unions and other associations within civil society – it constitutes political subjects distinct from social classes at the level of the relations of production. Mouffe explains that, for Gramsci ‘subjects…which exist at the economic level are not duplicated at the political level; instead, different ‘inter class’ subjects are created’[[31]](#endnote-32). According Mouffe, political subjects were conceived by Gramsci as essentially corporate in nature.

Mouffe is clear, however, that for Gramsci political struggles are not resolved through corporatism, or the negotiation between various subjects’ narrow corporate interests. Gramsci, explains Mouffe, describes all societies transitioning from a more primitive corporate stage of the class struggle to a hegemonic stage in which

one becomes aware that one’s own corporate interests, in their present and future development, must transcend the corporate limits of the purely economic class, and can and must become the interests of other subordinate groups too. For Gramsci this is where the specifically political moment is situated, and it is characterized by ideological struggle which attempts to forge unity between economic, political and intellectual objective, ‘placing all the questions around which the struggle rages on a “universal”, not a corporate level, thereby creating the hegemony of a fundamental social group over a series of subordinate ones.[[32]](#endnote-33)

For Mouffe, only ‘a fundamental class’, or a class which occupies one of the two poles in the capitalist relations of production, can become hegemonic.’[[33]](#endnote-34) This is not, she explains, just because these classes occupy one of the central roles (producer, or owner of capital) given by the relations of production. It also because those social groups possess the capacity to command and shape the multiplicity of associations and corporate identities within civil society, whether by virtue of their organic ties to these association, or their capacity to infiltrate or manipulate them. This, according to Mouffe, was the key insight underlying Gramsci’s notion of an ‘integral state’ whose functions increasingly permeated civil society in the post-war period.[[34]](#endnote-35)

Understanding the ‘fundamental’ or ‘hegemonic’ classes, not merely in terms of their dominant role in the relations of production, but also in terms of their capacity to command associations within civil society, allows Mouffe to specify the difference between a hegemonic project pursued by the dominant classes versus that pursued by the dominated classes. The dominant and the dominated classes will have different relations to associations within civil society, and different resources at their disposal to manipulate them. These factors will, in turn, shape their respective approaches to hegemony.

In general terms, Mouffe, following Gramsci, describes the dominant classes gaining hegemony through ‘transformism’. This consists in integrating the masses and their associations into the state ‘through a process of absorption and neutralization of their interests in such a way as to prevent them from opposing those of the hegemonic class.’[[35]](#endnote-36) By contrast, the dominated classes are likely to pursue an ‘expansive’ hegemony, whereby ‘an active, direct consensus resulting from the genuine adoption of the interests of the popular classes by the hegemonic class, which would give rise to the creation of a genuine ‘national-popular will.’[[36]](#endnote-37)

Mouffe drew her distinction between these two antagonistic approaches to hegemony from the work of French philosopher Christine Buci-Glucksmann.[[37]](#endnote-38) In Gramsci’s writings, Buci-Glucksmann explained, ‘‘hegemony serves both as a concept in the theorization of the state and as a concept in its critique.’[[38]](#endnote-39) For Buci-Glucksmann, Gramsci’s theorization of hegemony derived from an analysis of the specificity of the capitalist state in Western Europe. Gramsci’s notion of the integral state was not merely an abstract theory about the combination of coercion and consent necessary for some classes to secure domination over others. Rather, it was a historically specific theory of the nature of the state under ‘monopoly capitalism’. In advanced capitalist society, the state increasingly infiltrates the social, both in order to organize the population around new productive techniques, and to secure the reproduction of the labor force. In the context of such a state which has permeated civil society, socialist strategy can no longer be conceptualized as a frontal assault on the institutions of the state. Rather, Gramsci was understood to have conceptualized the transition to socialism as the democratization of the state though the complexes of associations in civil society.

According to Buci-Glucksmann, the state’s extensive penetration into the economy and mass institutions in the post-1930s period ‘permits an anti-economistic approach to the economy itself’[[39]](#endnote-40). This is because the state actively intervenes in the production process, remolding production techniques and reshaping social relations. It also incorporates the masses into the institutions of the state. Gramsci thus situates power relations and the class struggle within the economic base and not just at a ‘superstructural level’. This interpenetration of power relations and economic relations leads Gramsci to distinguish the hegemonic project of the dominant classes from that of the dominated classes in terms of two alternative forms of political power.[[40]](#endnote-41)

For Buci-Glucksmann the difference in these forms of political power was intimately related to their respective relationship to associations within civil society. On the one hand, Gramsci, particularly in his writings on ‘Americanism’ and ‘Fordism’, conceptualizes the dominant classes’ penetration into the social as the imposition of centralized bureaucratic control over the associations of civil society. The dominant classes pursue a ‘passive revolution’ characterized by a rationalization of the production process and the ‘creation of a new, fragmented proletariat, which is parcellized and interchangeable’[[41]](#endnote-42). According to Buci-Glucksmann, then, the hegemonic project of the dominant classes tends to take the form of the consolidation of the state, ‘or the gradual displacement of civil society by the ‘total’ (totalitarian) state.’[[42]](#endnote-43)

By contrast and in opposition to the hegemonic project of the dominant classes, dominated classes will attempt to achieve ownership and control over the labor-process through harnessing ‘the presence of political forms at the base (such as councils) which are capable of realizing the *unity* of the class as a class of ‘producers’’[[43]](#endnote-44). In contrast to a passive revolution aimed at the consolidation of the state, the hegemonic struggle of the dominated classes is characterized by Buci-Glucksmann as an ‘anti-passive revolution’ or a ‘socialization of politics’ whereby non-state civil society institutions and forms of self-management are expanded at the expense of centralized state control.[[44]](#endnote-45)

Both Mouffe and Buci-Glucksmann conceive of two stages in the organization of working-class forces in the struggle for hegemony. Firstly, the working class is not immediately given at the level of the relations of production, but must constitute itself through corporate associations within civil society – trade unions, councils, social clubs, and so on. But the working class realizing its corporate interests as a class is only the first stage in the struggle for socialism. Confined to this level, the working class will only seek accommodations and concessions by negotiating its narrow economic interests within the frameworks of a state still dominated by the interests of the capitalist class and its allies.

Hence, they both argue for a second stage which sees the working class transcend its more narrow corporate identities to set forth a program for the fundamental transformation of social relations. We thus witness a movement from a particularistic corporate identity to a universal, hegemonic one. For Buci-Glucksmann this takes the form of proposing a different, radically democratic organization of production and the migration of the political power from centralized state apparatuses to mass associations in civil society. Mouffe seems to place slightly more emphasis on the ideological dimension of this movement; that is, the way in which working class would go about portraying its interests as the interests of society as a whole, and how this would come to be accepted by other classes.

Later, we will see that the choice to stress economic self-management versus ideology will result in substantial disagreements over strategy among British Left Eurocommunism. For the time being let us stick to their major theoretical convergence: both argue that the working-class movement must become “popular”, and not merely representative of the narrow interests of a class, in order to viably compete for hegemony.

**Ernesto Laclau and the Perils of Populist Jacobinism**

Mouffe and Buci-Glucksmann’s work are essentially attempts to sketch the range of hegemonic political projects that can emerge in conjunctures characterized by the expansion and consolidation of the welfare state and Fordist relations of production. These range from the “transformism” under the hegemony of the dominant classes, to the “socialization of politics” under the hegemony of the dominated classes. These two alternatives were posed in the abstract, neither thinker gives us an account of how we move from one to another, or between different forms of “transformism.”

This theme was, however, taken up by Ernesto Laclau in his writings on fascism and South American populism. We will see in the next section that other Left Eurocommunists, such as Stuart Hall and Bob Jessop, drew upon Laclau’s thinking to make sense of Thatcherism. Laclau used the historical examples of fascism and populism to determine the conditions necessary for the emergence of a new hegemonic bloc.

Like Mouffe and Buci-Glucksmann, Laclau explains that in moments during which the hegemony of the dominant classes is firmly entrenched, the neutralization of political opposition takes place through ‘transformism’, that is, ‘the co-option of their representative political organizations into the power bloc.’[[45]](#endnote-46) For Laclau, Fascism emerged partly out of a “crisis of transformism”. The aftermath of World War I led to the accumulation of contradictions that put into crisis the ability of the state to effectively neutralize political opposition. This involved the difficulty of absorbing men who had been mobilized in war into traditional political structures. More fundamentally, this was a context in which monopoly capitalism was beginning to emerge as an important force in the economic sphere, but had little effective representation in a political sphere still dominated, in both Italy and Germany, by an unstable alliance between feudal landowners and an ascendant bourgeoisie.

Given that monopoly capital was unable to base itself firmly in the apparatuses of a state, it had to radically confront the existing political system. In other words, it had to constitute itself as a mass movement. Laclau explains that it was not just the contradictions among the dominant classes that allowed monopoly capitalism to build an anti-systemic mass movement, it was also enabled by a crisis of working-class organization. If the integral state described by Mouffe and Buci-Glucksmann was shaped by a dialectic between a “transformism” of the dominant classes that attempts to neutralize the associations in civil society and the Left’s attempt to “socialize” politics by putting the state under the democratic control of civil society associations, then fascism emerges in a context where both these hegemonic projects had fallen into crisis.

Laclau explains that the crisis of the Left’s hegemonic project in this period stemmed essentially from an adherence to “economism” and “class reductionism”. The Left eschewed any articulation between its class ideology and popular ideologies. It presented the latter as essentially elements of the ideology of one of its rival classes: the bourgeoisie, the petty-bourgeoisie, or the feudal landowners. The Left refused any possible autonomy of the popular-democratic struggle and argued that any diffuse popular ideologies could only hinder the construction of a class ideology. It thus prioritized the organization of the unions and the economic struggle of the working class, constituting itself as a pressure group within bourgeois society. [[46]](#endnote-47)

The Left justified its economism on the basis of a teleological conception of capitalist development which underestimated the importance of articulating a broad-based popular political program: if the dynamic of capitalist accumulation was leading to the proletarianization of the middle classes and of the peasantry, then there was no need for building class alliances based on popular-democratic interpellations. Likewise if the economic contradictions inherent in capitalist accumulation would provoke, by necessity, the crisis of the system, rather than its restructuring, then the Left need not intervene in the struggle between factions of the dominant classes.

This narrow economism was, on Laclau’s account, disastrous for the Left and paved the way for fascism, by ceding popular-democratic interpellations to the Right. This allowed for what Laclau describes as the “jacobinization” of the petty-bourgeoisie: ‘the disarticulation of democratic interpellations and the radicalization of those interpellations outside any class discourse.’[[47]](#endnote-48) Fascism was able to successfully articulate popular traditions – anti-plutocratic, nationalist, democratic – with racial ideologies. In the process, ‘all the jacobin radicalism proper to a radical confrontation with the system was retained, whilst its channeling in the socialist direction is obstructed.’[[48]](#endnote-49)

For Laclau, an effective Left opposition to fascism would entail establishing the maximum possible articulation between class ideologies and popular ideologies. In other words, it would combat the emergence of a “Jacobinism” wherein the confrontation between the ‘people’ and ‘the power’ bloc was disassociated entirely from anti-capitalist discourses. To do so it would need to jettison ‘its pressure group mentality’ and present itself to popular classes as a whole as a political alternative.[[49]](#endnote-50) This would have involved a hegemonic initiative on the part of the Left to galvanize nationalist agitations among the middle classes, which had taken on an increasingly plebeian and anti-capitalist character, and to orient them in a socialist direction. For Laclau, fascism was not the outcome of the failure of a proletarian revolution to emerge in Western Europe, as some on the Marxist Left claim. It was not the “purity” of the working class movement that was at the roots of its failure – that is, the failure of the working class to realize its true interests. Rather, it was their insufficient *impurity* that helped pave the way for fascism. That is, their inability to move beyond narrow economic-corporate or factional interests and articular a properly popular political program.[[50]](#endnote-51)

Fascism was only one possible form Jacobinism could take, according to Laclau. The disarticulation of popular-democratic interpellations from class could take place whenever “transformism” and working-class organization were thrown into crisis. He used the concept to distinguish Juan Perón’s regime in Argentina, from Gétulio Vargas’ regime in Brazil.

According to Laclau, Peronism was responsible for a lasting articulation between popular-democratic interpellations and socialism in Argentina. While Peronist discourse certainly attempted to confine confrontation with Argentina’s liberal oligarchy within the limits imposed by its class project (the development of national capital), it was rooted predominantly in Argentina’s working class and extensive trade union movement.

When Peronism became proscribed after Argentinian liberalism was restored in 1955, Peron’s mass base was radicalized and started to reorganize the movement from below. Popular ideology became increasingly anti-liberal and, in the most radicalized sectors of the working class, fused with socialism. In this context, both the liberal oligarchy and Peronist leaders like Isabel Perón found it impossible to turn back the clock and articulate popular-democratic ideology in a form assimilable to the bourgeoisie, turning instead to repression. In short, by rooting its populism in a mass working class base, Peronism, however unwittingly, led to the hegemonization of popular-democratic interpellation by the working class. The maximum articulation between popular-democratic ideologies and class ideologies was achieved – the formula ‘National Socialism’, for instance, was coined in the period of Peronist working class radicalization – and “Jacobinism” was thereby avoided.

By contrast, Laclau argued that the regime of Gétulio Vargas is best characterized as a form of populist Jacobinism. This is because Brazil, unlike Argentina, lacked the socio-economic characteristic most propitious to the hegemonization of the popular democratic struggle by the working class: inter alia, the lack of a peasantry, the overwhelming predominance of an urban population, the substantial development of the middle classes, and the development of trade-unionism throughout the country. In short, inter-regional conflicts between local oligarchies and a nascent national bourgeoisie, which had been resolved in Argentina, were still very much present in Brazil. The Brazilian middle classes had failed to institute themselves as a national political force, and the political machines of local oligarchies remained entrenched. This meant that Vargas was never able to become the leader of a unified and homogenous movement like Perón did. Rather, Vargas became an ‘articulator’ of heterogeneous forces over which he established his personal control. Varguism was in fact a combination of two parties: the Social Democratic Party (PSD) which gathered conservative forces within the traditional regional political machines, and the Brazilian Labor Party (PTB) which attempted to develop a populist Jacobinism among the urban working classes.

This unstable coalition on which Varguism was built led to an oscillation in its political program and the failure to constitute a political language of national dimensions: at moments of stability its language was conservative and paternalistic; at moments of crisis, it swung in a populist direction. It failed to develop either an enduring anti-oligarchic political platform or secure the articulation between socialist discourse and popular-democratic discourse. It thus constituted a form of Jacobinism, in which popular-democratic interpellations became disarticulated from any definitive class content.

We clearly see the seeds of Laclau’s later account of “the obstacles and limits to the construction of the people”. Even more than in his later work, he stresses the emergence of popular democratic interpellations through effective organization of, and strategic and ideological co-ordination within, associations of the dominated classes. In his account of Peronism, he even seems to suggest the properly popular-democratic moment in the struggle for hegemony emerges when the mass base of the movement becomes organized and autonomous enough that the leader loses effective control over the strategic and ideological direction of the movement. In other words, while members of Peronist mass movements may still identify as Peronists, the actions they take progressively have less to do with Perón himself than the working-class associations which form Peronism’s mass base.

There is a certain ambiguity in Laclau’s writing which echoes the difference described in the last section between Buci-Glucksmann and Mouffe’s conceptions of hegemonic struggle. At times, Laclau seems to be following Mouffe when he describes the transcending of the working classes narrow corporate identity in primarily ideological terms. Laclau frequently speaks of the necessity of fusing working-class and popular democratic *ideologies*. However, in his writing on populism, Laclau’s account of the transformation working class associations into popular-democratic ones, seems closer to Buci-Glucksmann. That is, there is more emphasis on how associations can arrange themselves and co-ordinate with one another in order to democratize the party or the state. Here Laclau stresses that the Left is popular-democratic not only on account of its ideology, but also to the extent that it transfers the agency within the party or the state from the leader or hierarchical bureaucratic structures to working class associations – in Peronism’s case, radical trade unions, youth organizations, and urban guerilla organizations.

The question of whether the transformation of working-class struggle into a popular-democratic one should be conceptualized in primarily ideological or institutional terms led to disagreements over strategy and tactics among Left Eurocommunists. The precise nature of these disagreements and how they related to the general theoretical approach of the Left Eurocommunist is most dramatically illustrated by the debate between Stuart Hall and Bob Jessop over how best to characterize and respond to Thatcherism.

**Bob Jessop and Stuart Hall: Corporatism contra Thatcher?**

In the latter half of the 1970s, both Hall and Jessop became interested in corporatism and began to investigate the extent to which it had transformed the British state in the course 20th century. For his part, Jessop, became interested in corporatism as a means of understanding the complex of representative and interventionist institutions undergirding modern Western European liberal democracies. He thought that such an analysis was central to determining how the liberal democratic state might be democratized in a potential transition to socialism.[[51]](#endnote-52)

Meanwhile, for much of the latter half of the 1970s, Stuart Hall and a group of doctoral students affiliated to the Cultural History Group of Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of the Birmingham had engaged in an ambitious attempt to chart the major turning points in the formations of the modern British state, focusing roughly on the period between 1880 and 1930. This project was modelled on the Gramsci’s writings on the transformations of monopoly capitalism and the formation of the integral state. Hall’s archive is practically overflowing with material from this period. We see paper drafts, position papers, and notes on topics spanning the formation of ‘monopoly capitalism’, welfare, women’s suffrage, the eugenics movement, policing, Keynesianism, British socialism, leisure, the family, as well as detailed intellectual history early-20th century liberalism, conservatism, and social imperialism.[[52]](#endnote-53)

During this period, Hall and his students had become interested in a series of recently published histories of New Liberalism[[53]](#endnote-54). They were especially impressed by the conservative historian Keith Middlemas’ *Politics in Industrial Society* (1979). Middlemas argues that a key turning point in the formation of the modern British state was the supposed disintegration of constitutionalism in the years immediately prior to World War I, particularly in the crisis of 1911 and intractable political divisions over the question of Ireland. The following decades saw the succession of government crises, and a breakdown of the classical two-party system, marked by the coalition politics of Asquith and Lloyd George. Middlemas argues that this instability was resolved through the development in the early 1920s of a new form of state which survived relatively unscathed until the late 1960s. This state form was born out of the struggle of the corporate representatives of capital and labor for some direct political representation, and involved the absorption of these corporate institutions into the field of state power itself. This development was fundamental, because it meant that Parliament ceased to be the supreme governing body of the British state. The supremacy of Parliament was replaced by a ‘corporate bias’, or brokerage between the new foci of power: the state, employer organizations, and the Trades Union Congress (TUC).

The resonances are clear between Middlemas’ account of the emergence of the British state and Mouffe and Buci-Glucksmann’s reading of Gramsci. To a Gramscian audience at the CCCS, what Middlemas was describing was the formation of a specifically British “integral state” and passive revolution. Middlemas stressed that this new form of the British necessarily depended on continual negotiation and struggle. In particular, it came increasingly to rely on the organization of public opinion in order to deflect any potential threats to its bureaucratization of class struggles, endowing the state with an unprecedented ideological function.

Hall and his collaborators situated the rise of Thatcherism within a crisis of the “corporate bias” through which the dominant classes in Britain secured their hegemony in the post-war period.[[54]](#endnote-55) At the end 1970s, Hall claimed that the corporate strategy of coordinating economic policy and containing economic crises through incorporating sections of the working class and unions into the bargain between state, capital, and labor, was coming undone. This is because, under the pressure of worsening economic crises, the Labour Party had increasingly to succumb to disciplining rather than advancing the interests of the working-class organizations it represents.[[55]](#endnote-56) Hall places particular emphasis on Labour’s ideological role in constructing popular conceptions of crisis. To justify its disciplining of the working class, Labour needed to construct a discourse which pitted “the unions” and “classes” against “the nation” and “the people”[[56]](#endnote-57). At the same time, the coercive function corporatism had increasingly played under the Wilson and Callaghan governments had led to an association between all the negative effects of state power and socialism.

This is where Thatcherism steps into the breach. It is not only the disorganization of class forces by corporatism that is an essential precondition for a lurch to the right. Crucially, it is also at the ideological level that corporatism paves the way for Thatcherism. It disarticulates notions of “class” from notions of “nation” and “the people”, and even allows them to be counterposed to one another. Here the sectional interests of the unions or the “welfare scroungers” can be posed as fundamentally antithetical to the will of the people, the nation, or the respectable working class. Furthermore, against the backdrop of a coercive corporative state, Thatcherism can pose anti-statism and market fundamentalism as a popular-democratic platform that will protect respectable workers and small business owners against “creeping collectivization.”

For Hall, the rightward shift that Thatcherism represents is not merely an authoritarian turn in British politics. There were certainly authoritarian aspects to Thatcher’s rule: her “presidentialization” of the British political system and her riding roughshod over parliamentary protocols and democratic conventions, the violent policing of minorities and unions, and so on. However, pointing to the authoritarian aspects of Thatcher’s rule was not enough to account for the Thatcherism’s significance. This is because there was an authentically *popular* dimension to Thatcherism. It success political force depended in part on its capacity to mobilize a mass base.

Thatcherism, on Hall’s account, does not merely secure its legitimacy through force or coercion, but also by successfully condensing a wide range of popular discontents with the post-war economic and political order and mobilize them around an authoritarian, right-wing, and radical free-market political agenda. It is a properly hegemonic project in that it mobilizes fractions of both the dominant and dominated classes around a particular conception of the “people” and around an anti-statist and anti-collectivist political and economic agenda. This is why, for Hall, Thatcherism is not simply authoritarian, but best described as a form of “Authoritarian Populism.”[[57]](#endnote-58)

Bob Jessop’s influential co-authored critique of Hall’s account of Thatcherism is usually interpreted as a critique of Hall’s “ideologism” at the expense of a more careful examination of the underlying political economy that facilitated Thatcher’s rise. This interpretation is superficially correct but does not, in my opinion, get to the heart of their disagreement. For Jessop himself was a member of the same Left Eurocommunist intellectual current that Hall was a part of. Jessop also emphasized the importance of the ideological and popular-democratic dimensions of the struggle for socialism. We must therefore be more precise about the source of their disagreement.

Jessop’s critique of Hall essentially centers around the “populist” character of Thatcherism. Jessop argues that Thatcherism is populist in a very qualified sense, that is, in Laclau’s terms, it is a form of “populist Jacobinism”. Thatcherism emerges, according to Jessop, in the context of significant partisan dealignment – an increase in the mass of floating voters – and factional struggles within the conservative party.[[58]](#endnote-59) Thatcher’s strategy in this context is to appeal to the “people” over the heads of their representatives in competing parties in Parliament. This appeal to “the people”, Jessop insists, is not concerned with active political mobilization, but with outflanking political opposition from her own backbenchers and from the labor movement. ‘In this sense Thatcherite populism is indeed predominantly plebiscitary and ventriloquist in character: Thatcher speaks in the name of the people against all sectional interests, including those in her own party.’[[59]](#endnote-60) According to Jessop, Hall overestimates the extent to which Thatcher has any substantial basis in a mass movement that could outrun her rule. Thatcherite populism on Jessop’s account, is more about how Thatcher exploits partisan realignment and the disorganization of the labor movement to get her policies legitimated and accepted. It is not involved in substantially reshaping and mobilizing constituencies into a novel popular or hegemonic force.

Likewise, from the perspective of its economic program, Thatcherism was less shaping a new hegemony or consensus than exploiting the disorganization of both capital and labor. Indeed, if Thatcherism’s monetarist economic policy constituted a new economic hegemony, it should have produced favorable economic conditions for a sizeable constituency within the dominant classes. But this was far from evident according to Jessop et al. The move to laissez-faire in financial markets was broadly endorsed by the City, but large sections of industry – particularly in manufacturing – regretted the absence of a concerted industrial policy, especially since Britain had entered a recession at least a year ahead of other countries.

Thatcherite monetarism had in fact put the British economy on a precarious growth part. The move to laissez-faire would allow the City to continue to prosper independently of the domestic economy, but this prosperity depended on a continued upturn of the global economy. Meanwhile, in the absence of a coordinated industrial policy, the rest of British capital, especially the manufacturing industry, would continue to decline. According to Jessop, the only reason Thatcher could continue to pursue a monetarist economic agenda was the absence of opposition against the small business ideology of economic liberalism from both traditional corporate representatives of capital like the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) and organized labor.

Thus, according to Jessop, combatting Thatcherism purely on the ideological front concedes to it a coherence and epochal significance it lacks. Thatcherism neither involves a substantial reorganization of the “people” nor of the ruling hegemonic bloc. Rather, it opportunistically pushes through its agenda in a context in which both the party system and corporatist bodies are in a moment of organizational crisis. Combatting it on the ideological front alone risks mirroring its “Jacobinist” qualities and contributing to the conditions that facilitated its rise[[60]](#endnote-61). The left should focus on stemming the trend towards partisan dealignment by democratizing the structures of the Labour Party and providing more effective representation to the working class. Likewise, it should work to reverse Thatcherism’s demotion of the role of functional representation by corporate bodies over economic policy formulation and implementation. However imperfect this system has been in the past, it provided anchorage of economic policy making in formal political and economic representation.

In both political and economic policy, Thatcherism thrived through the enhanced decisional autonomy of government. Jessop et al seem to be implying that it is the task of Left faced with Thatcherism is to defend and deepen effective representational institutions, not only within the legislature, but also through corporate arrangements. His perspective is thus fundamentally at odds with Hall’s contention that the corporatist hegemony of the post-war period had been definitively exhausted and was in the process of being replaced by something new with the rise of Thatcherism. Jessop et al argue that while Thatcherism indeed poses a threat to this hegemony, corporatism still represents a potential basis for a counter-hegemonic project, provided it is radicalized and democratized by the Left.

In Hall’s reply to Jessop et al., it was precisely this optimism about corporatism that attracted some of his harshest criticism. He wrote:

I also think that Jessop *et al* are still too mesmerized by a problem which has long ago disappeared, in the sociological form in which it was carefully tended in the 1970s, into the oblivion. That is the question of ‘corporatism’. The problems to which ‘corporatism’ was a response in the 1970s remain. The corporatist strategy is in abeyance – one of Thatcherism’s accomplishments: though a healthy dose of Kinnochism will undoubtedly revive its deeply undemocratic features and endow it with a life-after-death.[[61]](#endnote-62)

For Hall, by the 1980s corporatism can no longer provide a basis for hegemony, nor form the basis for a Left counter-offensive against Thatcherism. Indeed, returning to our earlier discussion of Hall’s account of Thatcherism, a Left endorsement of corporatism would merely play into the hands of the Thatcherites. It would both further disorganize the working class and further associate the Left with all the negative effect of state power. What’s more, it would only serve to further entrench ideological distinctions between the “nation” and the “people”, and “class” that Thatcherism so effectively exploits.

Jessop et al. were not of course arguing for a straightforward return to corporatism as it existed in Britain prior to the rise of Thatcherism. They are quite clear about its limitations, both in terms of producing effective economic policy outcomes and in terms of the dearth of democracy within corporate structures. However, they saw corporate structures as essential sites of socialist struggle and as potentially democratizable, precisely because, at least formally, they provided the working class through their corporate representative a direct role in the formulation and implementation of economic policy. Abstaining from defending these structures, would only serve to strengthen the decisional autonomy of the executive and open democracy up to capture by populist Jacobinism.

The Hall-Jessop debate is a useful illustration of how reflections about the nature of intermediary representative institutions shape conceptions of radical politics among Left Eurocommunists. If we follow Hall’s analysis, intermediary representative institutions – in this case corporatist structures – can potentially serve to disorganize dominated classes and produce discourses likely to increase popular discontents. In certain cases, both these discourses and popular discontents can be exploited by right-wing populists. On the other hand, Jessop et al’s analysis suggests that right-wing populism thrives when intermediary representative institutions are weak or disorganized. Therefore, however non-ideal these institutions are, the Left has a fundamental strategic interest in defending them. A failure to do so will only serve to further exacerbate the very conditions in which right-wing populism thrives. With these contrasting perspectives in mind, we can move on to drawing some conclusions about how Left Eurocommunist ideas might offer several avenues for deepening analysis of the relationship between radical politics and intermediary institutions today.

**Theoretical Conclusion**

In conclusion, I would like to suggest three broad theoretical takeaways from the preceding discussions. Firstly, Left Eurocommunist theory has much to offer contemporary theorists of populism. Several radical democratic theorists have pointed to Laclau’s early writings as potentially providing greater critical purchase on contemporary politics than his later work.[[62]](#endnote-63) In these texts the formalism and post-Marxism of his later writings were dialed down, allowing some historical and sociological specificity to enter his analysis.[[63]](#endnote-64) Here populism, hegemony, and articulation had yet to become co-extensive with politics more broadly, and Laclau was able to furnish a conceptual toolkit capable of differentiating different forms of populism.[[64]](#endnote-65)

His focus on the interpellation of particular class practices by class neutral signifiers like ‘the nation’ and ‘the people’, and the distinction he draws between a populism of dominated classes versus that of the dominant classes, is particularly valued by contemporary scholars of populism for providing a potential guide to differentiating Left populism from Right Populism.[[65]](#endnote-66) However, contemporary theorists, have yet to recognise the central importance ascribed to associations within civil society in the sociological and historical analyses pursued by the intellectual milieus Laclau found himself during the late-1970s. Laclau’s account of “populist Jacobinism,” paired with Mouffe and Buci-Glucksmann’s distinction between “transformism” and the “socialization of politics,” offers a clear protocol for distinguishing left populism from right populism.

Left populism would emerge with a successful co-ordination between the associations of the dominated classes, such that they transcend their particular corporate economic interests and articulate their class discourses into a broader popular democratic agenda with a clear programmatic content. Moreover, the mass base of the movement would have sufficient autonomy and institutional strength to shape the strategic and ideological direction of the movement, and discipline leaders who attempted to disarticulate popular-democratic interpellations from a class discourse. Conversely, right populism could be understood to emerge when the organization and co-ordination of associations of the dominated classes fail to emerge, allowing the complete disassociation of popular-democratic interpellations from discourses of class.

Secondly, the ideas discussed in this paper could serve as fruitful complements to the political theorists developing theories of political representation on the basis of Laclau’s writing. These interpreters of Laclau have also challenged the assertion that he posits an unmediated relationship between leaders and the masses.[[66]](#endnote-67) They argue that a more subtle conception of representation emerges from his writings. By attending to the performative dimensions of Laclau’s conception of populist politics – the extent to which a populist movement brings into being what it claims to represent – these authors have identified a potentially dynamic interplay between representatives and represented. As Lasse Thomassen explains, populist representation is more than a sovereign act of naming. Leaders provide the masses with a “hegemonic pole”, but for the leaders’ representative claims to take root, they need to be accepted by the people. Moreover, leaders do not have the sole propriety over the name – ‘the people’, ‘the masses’, ‘the 1%’ – that comes to signify a given collective subject. Laclau allows for circumstances in which the people talk back in the name of that name, implying that the leader is subject to democratic accountability.

Laclau’s more sociological and historical analyses, particularly his account of how Perón gradually lost control over the ideological and strategic direction of his own movement, could be drawn upon to specify the social and institutional conditions under which people can effectively talk back in the name of a particular collective subject. Moreover, both Laclau’s account of populist Jacobinism and Hall and Jessop’s account of the nature of Thatcherite populism could be drawn upon to determine the conditions under which the ability of “people” to talk back is severely circumscribed. One of the additional upshots of the Left Eurocommunist’s writings is that it links the potential authoritarian tendencies of a populist democracy not only to a crisis in the institutions of liberal democracy but also to a crisis in intermediary bodies situated in civil society or corporate structures irreducible to the legislature or other conventional liberal democratic structures.

Finally, the writing of the Left Eurocommunists could contribute some much-needed nuance to democratic theory which stresses the importance of intermediary representative institutions and associations within civil society. There are certainly good reasons for preferring democracies with extensive intermediary bodies to those without them. However, intermediary institutions cannot be understood in a historical and sociological vacuum. Their desirability needs to be considered by means of the kind of conjunctural analyses pursued by the thinkers examined in this paper. The concept of transformism, as well as Hall’s account of the problems of corporatism and how they potentially produced the conditions for Thatcherism, point to contexts in which intermediary bodies can potentially become disabling of democracy. These ideas suggest that contemporary socialist strategy cannot simply be conceived as a Polanyian counter-movement whereby the fragmentation of our contemporary political landscape is resisted through a re-embedding social life into the “associational worlds” of the 20th century social democracy. Left Eurocommunists make a compelling case as to why the undemocratic internal structures of these associations as well as their articulation with anti-worker, anti-popular hegemonic projects may require, at the very least, their radical institutional re-organization.

Moreover, the Left Eurocommunists convincingly argue that more intermediary bodies on their own will not necessarily produce socialist or progressive outcomes. Recall that Mouffe and Buci-Glucksmann theorized two stages in the formation of popular or working-class forces during the struggle for hegemony. First the working class must constitute themselves through corporate associations within civil society, but only as a preliminary stage towards transcending its narrower corporate identities and linking up to allied forces to set forth a program for the fundamental transformation of social relations. The distortions socio-economic inequalities produce on democracies cannot, as Urbinati claims, be solved merely through reforming campaign finance law, diversifying media ownership and providing education, so that citizens from all walks of life can use political rights and exercise political influence.[[67]](#endnote-68) Left Eurocommunist thinkers suggest that progressive outcomes are unlikely without popular forces constituting a powerful counter-power within civil society that can organize effectively to resist repression by the forces of dominant classes. Such a counter-power would also have sufficient coercive strength to force policymakers to take into account popular or working-class concerns.

There is much that contemporary theorists will find challenging and productive about these writings published at the cusp of the collapse of traditional social democracy and the triumph of neoliberalism. This was a time when mass social democratic and communist parties were still considered susceptible to radical reforms and could still be imagined as potential vehicles for a transition to socialism. However, this was also a time in which the limitations of these parties and their “associational worlds” were most soberly faced.

**Notes**

1. See Laura Grattan, *Populism Power. Radical Grassroots Democracy in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), and Paolo Gerbaudo, *The Mask and the Flag: Populism, Citizenship and Global Protest* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. Dan Hancox, ‘Why Ernesto Laclau is the figurehead for Syriza and Podemos,’ *Guardian* (2015), Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/feb/09/ernesto-laclau-intellectual-figurehead-syriza-podemos> [Accessed 8 December 2023] [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. Chantal Mouffe, ‘The populist moment’ *Simbiotica*. *Revista* *Electronica* 6/1 (2019), 6 – 11 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. Ibid., 70 [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. Jan-Werner Müller, *What is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 3 [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. Ibid, 69 [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. Benjamin Arditi, *Politics on the Edges of Liberalism: Difference, Populism, Revolution, Agitation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 66 [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
9. Anton Jäger and Arthur Borriello, ‘Left Populism on Trial: Laclauian Politics in Theory and Practice’ *Theory & Event* 23/3 (2020), 740 – 764; Peter Mair, *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracies* (London and New York: Verso, 2013); Chris Bickerton, ‘The Collapse of Europe’s Mainstream Centre Left,’ *New Statesman*, 1 May 2018; Greg Conti and Will Sellinger, “The Other Side of Representation: The History and Theory of Representative Government in Pierre Rosanvallon,’ *Constellations* 23 (2016), 550. See also Carlos de la Torre, ‘Is left populism the radical democratic answer?’ *Irish Journal of Sociology* 27/1 (2019), 64 – 71 [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
10. Anton Jäger and Arthur Borriello, ‘Left Populism on Trial’, 749. For an elaboration of this critique of the centrality of leadership, as well as an account of the centrality of intermediary institutions and voluntary associations to early twentieth century American populism, see Anton Jäger, ‘State and Corporation in American Populist Political Philosophy, 1877 – 1902,’ *The Historical Journal* 64/4 (2021), 1035 – 1059 at 1058 – 1059 [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
11. Nadia Urbinati, *Democracy Disfigured* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2014), 212 [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
12. Nadia Urbinati, ‘A Revolt Against Intermediary Bodies,’ *Constellations* 22/4, 477 – 486 [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
13. Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005), 200 – 222 [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
14. Ibid, 217 [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
15. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
16. On the “ontological turn” in radical democratic theory, see Oliver Marchart, *Post-Foundational Political Thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007) [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
17. Louis Althusser, ‘The Crisis of Marxism’ *Marxism Today* 22/7 (1978), 215 - 221 [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
18. This positive connotation of the notion of ‘crisis’ is rendered more clearly in both the Italian and French versions of the article. The French, for instance, is entitled ‘Enfin, le crise du Marxisme!’, as opposed to the dourer English title, ‘The Crisis of Marxism’. For Althusser’s defense of the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat, see his afterword to Étienne Balibar’s *On the Dictatorship of the Proletariat* (London: New Left Books, 1977), 193 - 212 [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
19. Chantal Mouffe, ‘Introduction: Gramsci today’ in Chantal Mouffe, ed., *Gramsci and Marxist Theory* (Routledge: London, 1979), 1 – 19 at 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
20. Ernesto Laclau, ‘Marxism and Hegemony Research Group: The Essex ‘Manifesto’’ in Stuart Hall Archive US121, Box 52, Cadbury Research Library, University of Birmingham, 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
21. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
22. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
23. Ibid, 3 [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
24. Ibid, 4 [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
25. Ibid, 5 [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
26. Stuart Hall Archive US121, Box 52, Cadbury Research Library: Special Collection, University of Birmingham. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
27. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
28. This was in part shaped by a paper written by Norberto Bobbio entitled ‘Gramsci and the conception of civil society’. The paper was first presented at a conference on Gramsci’s work in Cagliari in 1967, but republished in English translation in the late 1970s. See Norberto Bobbio, ‘Gramsci and the conception of civil society,’ in Chantal Mouffe, ed., *Gramsci and Marxist Theory* (London: Routledge, 1979), 21 – 48. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
29. See Norberto Bobbio, Jacques Texier and Nicola Badaloni’s chapters in Chantal Mouffe, ed., *Gramsci and Marxist Theory* (London: Routledge, 1979), 21 – 47 , 48 – 79, 80 – 111 [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
30. Ibid., 186 [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
31. Ibid., 189 [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
32. Ibid., 180 [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
33. Chantal Mouffe, ‘Hegemony and Ideology in Gramsci,’ in Chantal Mouffe, ed., *Gramsci and the State* (London: Routledge, 1979) [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
34. Ibid., 182 [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
35. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
36. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
37. Christine Buci-Glucksmann, ‘State, transition and passive revolution’ in Chantal Mouffe, ed., *Gramsci and Marxist Theory* (Macmillan: London, 1979), 231 [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
38. Ibid, 230 [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
39. Ibid, 225 [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
40. Ibid, 222 [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
41. Ibid., 226 [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
42. Ibid., 225 [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
43. Ibid, 226 [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
44. Ibid., 225 [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
45. Ernesto Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory* (London and New York: Verso, 1977), 115 [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
46. Ibid, 127 [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
47. Ibid, 119 [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
48. Ibid., 120 [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
49. Ibid., 136 [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
50. Ibid., 117 [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
51. Bob Jessop, ‘Capitalism and Democracy: The Best Political Shell?’ in Gary Littlejohn, ed., *Power and the State* (London: Croom Helm, 1978), 10 – 51; ‘Corporatism, parliamentarism, and social democracy’ in Philippe C. Schmitter and Gerhard Lehmbruch, eds., *Towards Corporatist Intermediation* (London: Sage, 1979), 185 – 212; ‘The Political Indeterminacy of Democracy’ in Alan Hunt, ed., *Marxism and Democracy* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1980), 55 – 81. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
52. Mary Langan and Bill Schwarz, *Crises in the British State, 1880 – 1930* (London: Hutchinson, 1985). [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
53. See Kenneth O. Morgan *The Age of Lord George: The Liberal Party and British Politics,1890 – 1929* (London: Routledge, 1971); Peter Clarke, *Liberals and Social Democrats* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1978); Stefan Collini *Liberalism and Sociology* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1979), Michael Freeden, *The New Liberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978). [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
54. See Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke and Brian Roberts, *Policing the Crisis* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1978), 218 – 317; Stuart Hall, ‘The Great Moving Right Show (1979)’ in Sally Davidson, David Featherston, Michael Rustin and Bill Schwarz, eds., *Selected Political Writings: The Great Moving Right Show and Other Essays* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 172 – 187; Stuart Hall, ‘Popular Democratic vs Authoritarian Populism: Two Ways of ‘Taking Democracy Seriously’’ in Alan Hunt, ed., *Marxism and Democracy* (London: Lawrence and Wishart Ltd., 1980). [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
55. Stuart Hall, ‘The Great Moving Right Show’, 198; ‘Popular Democratic vs Authoritarian Populism’, 169 [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
56. Stuart Hall, ‘Popular Democratic vs Authoritarian Populism,’ 170 [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
57. Ibid., 173 – 182 [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
58. Bob Jessop, Kevin Bonnett, Simon Bromley and Tom Ling, ‘Authoritarian Populism, Two Nations and Thatcherism,’ *New Left Review* I/147 (1983), 32-60 at 46. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
59. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
60. Éric Fassin has recently presented a similar criticism of advocates of Left populism. Taking the French context as his point of departure, he argues that Jean-Luc Mélenchon, by mirroring Le Pen’s tactics and discourse, merely reinforces the right-wing populist articulation of French identity. See Éric Fassin, Martina Tazzioli, Peter Hallward and Claudia Aradau, ‘Left-wing populism, A legacy of defeat: Interview with Éric Fassin,’ *Radical Philosophy* 2/2 (2018) 80-81. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
61. Stuart Hall, ‘Authoritarian Populism: A Reply to Jessop et al,’ *New Left Review* I/151 (1985), 115 – 124 at 123. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
62. Yannis Stavrakakis, ‘Antinomies of formalism: Laclau’s theory of populism and the lessons from religious populism in Greece’ *Journal of Political Ideologies* 9/3 (2004), 253 – 257 at 254 – 258; Giorgos Katsambekis and Alexandros Kioupkiolis, ‘Introduction: The Populist Radical Left in Europe’ in Giorgos Katsambekis and Alexandros Kioupkiolis, eds., *The Populist Radical Left in Europe* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2019), 1 – 21 at 7 [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
63. See Ernesto Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory* (London and New York: Verso, 2011 [1977]), 143 – 200. [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
64. For a criticism of Laclau’s conflation of populism and the struggle for hegemony with the political more broadly, see Benjamin Arditi, ‘Populism is Hegemony is Politics: On Ernesto Laclau’s *On Populist Reason,*’ *Constellations* 17/3 (2010), 488 – 497. [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
65. Anton Jäger and Arthur Borriello, ‘Left Populism on Trial: Laclauian Politics in Theory and Practice’ *Theory & Event* 23/3 (2020), 740 – 764 at 755. [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
66. Lasse Thomassen, ‘Representing the People: Laclau as a Theorist of Representation’ *New Political Science* 41/2 (2019), 329-44; Lisa Disch, ‘The Impurity of Representation and the Vitality of Democracy’ *Cultural Studies* 26/2-3, 207-222. [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
67. Urbinati, *Democracy Disfigured*, 20-1, 52-69, 80. [↑](#endnote-ref-68)