

The People and its Pitfalls: Why “People” Politics Must Reckon with its Imperial Qualities¹

Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio Cortez (AOC) are filling seats in their “Fighting Oligarchy” tour. In Tempe, Arizona, they drew a crowd of 10,000, In Denver, Colorado, the crowd swelled to 34,000, and in Los Angeles, the crowd size grew to 36,000 (Wong 2025). The two progressives courted the musical talent of Neil Young and Joan Baez (Clayton 2025). And, of course, they spoke about the dangers of an “American oligarchy” – a wealthy class of elites that earn many times more than the average American, have outsized political power, and yet do not pay taxes. This is a largely negative vision of the present. Sanders and AOC contrast this negative vision with a positive vision of the future. This positive, future-oriented hope is embodied in the Raise Gospel Choir’s song at the LA tour stop: “Power to the *People*” [emphasis mine]. Indeed, some observers, including former speech writers, note that the effectiveness of AOC’s rhetoric stems from her authentic claim to working-class peoplehood (Daron Christopher in Wong 2025). Peoplehood, here, is an ethos, but also a claim to membership in a polity with attendant expectations of rights, liberties, wealth, etc.² When AOC responded to callous remarks about her previously being an underpaid bartender, she said, “I don’t care what this woman [Alina Habba] says about me — but I want you to understand that she isn’t just talking about me, she’s talking about you. She’s talking about all of us”³ (Wong 2025).

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² Peoplehood need not require that these expectations be reasonable or realistic.

³ This exchange predated the “Fighting Oligarchy” tour but is included to demonstrate the kind of “people politics” that this paper discusses as well as its rhetorical power.

The nub of AOC's remark is that *all of us* – the real, true people who work regular jobs – are implicated in Alina Habba's remarks (Wong 2025). It is this "us" under attack by the oligarchy, 1%, etc. We, the "people" must recover our freedoms and rights from this unfair system.

This tour is one example in a long line of left strategies aimed at recovering "the people" as emancipatory agent. In practical politics, Bernie Sanders, AOC, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, and Jeremy Corbyn took up the mantle of "people" politics⁴ as an electoral strategy. In the realm of political theory, Jason Frank, Adom Getachew, and Chantal Mouffe have lent their scholarly insight to create a left "people" politics (Frank 2020; Getachew 2020; Mouffe 2018). This often gets termed "left populism." Populism itself is a contested term, and the basic premises of what a populist politics is changes from one theorist to another. One factor is common among them: the figure of the people as protagonist.

However, one should not overstate the draw of this "people"-centric politics. Left populism (the term I will use for the rest of the paper) also has its critics. Theorists often critique populism for its anti-pluralist and excluding tendencies (Urbinati 2019, 78-79; McKean 2016). Another strain of literature critiques populism's overdependence on leaders at the expense of "meso-level associational bases" (Gorup 2021, 7; Jäger and Borriello 2020).

Though both critiques are valuable for understanding pitfalls of left populism, I do not take either up in this paper. Rather, the aim of this paper is to show that left "people" politics is imbricated with what political theorist Inés Valdez calls "self-and-other-determination" (Valdez

⁴ For the purpose of this paper, populism and "people" politics are conceptually distinct, but they suffer from the same problem: they rely on the analytical purchase of the "people" for their projects. One should note that liberal democratic theorists and non-populist politicians also rely on the people. This critique also extends to those traditions as well.

2023). Her book *Democracy and Empire* shows that white working classes' historical construction of peoplehood was not benign. Claims to peoplehood were important for gaining partial (white) liberation from the vagaries of capitalism. Yet, peoplehood and partial liberation required labor, land, and nature (and thus wealth) from outside the metropole. Self-and-other-determination is still the prevailing affective orientation of Western polities. The emotional draw of the "people" is also complicit in self-and-other-determination.

Self-and-other-determination traps left populists in a double bind. They are stuck between ending injustice "at home," and ending injustice abroad that their own country is complicit in (e.g. through dependence on unregulated work in maquiladoras). Claims to peoplehood are effective at dealing with the former kind of injustice but tend to either leave the latter kind unaddressed or make them worse. One can see this double bind in theory and practice, as this paper seeks to demonstrate.

My paper proceeds in three parts. First, I further elucidate Valdez's explication of self-and-other-determination. Second, I show how left populist thinkers and politicians in the Global North are stuck in the double bind of self-and-other-determination. Finally, I explore how left politics might reckon with self-and-other-determination.

Self-and-Other Determination: How We Got Here

Inés Valdez's (2023) main argument in *Democracy and Empire* is that Western democracies civic bonds between citizens through extraction of Global South labor, land, and nature. This process entails creating racial categories to legitimate expropriation, which is global and ongoing. Valdez (2023, 33) argues that conceptions of popular sovereignty in the Global North tended toward "self-and-other determination" stemming from this historical engagement with colonialism. The

term “self-and-other-determination” denotes that Western democracies’ concept of sovereignty demanded material wealth from those outside the bounds of the nation-state (Valdez 2023, 33). Drawing on W.E.B DuBois, Valdez furthers that self-and-other determination is “excessive.” It was not merely that wealth was the foundation of peoplehood, but that excess wealth forged solidarity among white citizens through emotional/affective investment in wealth and leisure (Valdez 2023, 44). This excessive accumulation did not respect the need for reciprocity with those expropriated or the need to protect nature (Valdez 2023, 44). While I do not plan to recount the full historical argument that Valdez makes, these examples serve to show how self-and-other-determination manifested in the past so we can better see self-and-other-determination in the present.

Historical Cases of Self-and-Other Determination

One such example occurred in the British metropole and their (then) South African colony in the late 19th century. The British government increased the intensity of exploitation of South African labor and land in the lead-up to the Second Boer War to capitalize on South Africa’s large deposits of gold (Valdez 2023, 74-75). British political elites encouraged white “emigration-cum-settlement,” promising wealth to those willing to become workers (Valdez 2023, 74). However, job competition emerged between the white working class and the burgeoning number of Chinese indentured servants. White solidarity between the metropole and colony largely supported the plight of “vulnerable” white workers in South Africa (Valdez 2023, 74-75). The surprise upset victory of the Liberal Party in 1906 had much to do with its charge that the Tories wanted a “South Africa for the Chinese” rather than a South Africa for the white working class (Valdez 2023, 74). The British imperial government and capitalist entrepreneurs had to reconcile the need gold and cheap labor with growing anti-Chinese sentiment in the metropole and colony

(Valdez 2023, 76). The solution to this dilemma rested in the “settler logic” of racially stratified labor markets and a parallel discourse of racialization that justified them (Valdez 2023, 76).

Racialization attached certain qualities to non-white labor. Discourses about the “dignity” of white workers and the supposed “inferior scale of civilization” of non-white laborers served to assign “spade work” to Chinese indentured servants and “brain work” to white working class (Valdez 2023, 77). Affective investment in expropriation from the South African colony joined trade unions, left intellectuals, and even the Fabian society in demanding both worker protections for white laborers and continued colonization of South Africa (Valdez 2023, “Ch: 2, Section 2.2”). Karl Marx lamented that such affective investment made the British working class “a tool of the English aristocrats and capitalists against Ireland, thus strengthening their domination over himself [Valdez’s emphasis]” (Marx quoted in Valdez 2023, 77).

In the US, the same thing happened: material “needs” were satisfied by marking Mexican migrant workers as “different” and thus fit to toilsome work. In the 1920s and 1930s, Congress and capitalists circulated a racialized labor that marked Mexicans as inferior but good enough workers for “land grubbing” and “picking cotton” (Valdez 2023 106-107). The creation of the Bracero program in the 1940s facilitated migration to the US with the promise of “familial modernization” of the Mexican family (Valdez 2023, 116). In reality, the program created a precarious labor pool that white employers could exploit. Only men were allowed to enter the US under the Bracero program, thus separating Mexican families (Valdez 2023, 116). Further, employers would often hide the true wage they would pay to Mexican migrant laborers through an accounting trick (Valdez 2023, 117).

The pinnacle of white, working-class aspiration – the heteropatriarchal family – was only attained by white families from the labor of non-white migrant workers (among others) (Valdez

2023, 120-122). The precarious Mexican labor force served not only to produce essentials, but to literally produce the white, middle-class family. This is particularly evident when Valdez writes about construction and landscaping services that Mexican migrant laborers provide. In creating public spaces for white families, cheap commodities, and (beautified) affordable housing, Mexican migrant laborers reproduced the physical necessities so that white families could live not only live comfortably, but excessively (Valdez 2023, 99). These markers of prosperity – a nice house, having “enough” necessities, and nowadays the most newfangled gadgets available on the market – produce the material prerequisites for a white peoplehood.

Valdez extends this analysis of the material underpinnings of white peoplehood to other settler colonies and colonial powers. This is not merely to expand the universe of cases; her framing of this book pertains to all Western society. She clarifies,

“I am interested in conceptualizing how western peoples – not just settler ones – effectively determine other countries’ fates by appropriating resources from abroad...” (Valdez 2023, 55).

Affect is also mobilized to sustain white livability in our decaying neoliberal world order. Valdez (2023, 57) takes theorists to task for critiquing neoliberalism without noting that the post-war compromise between capital and labor was created through self-and-other-determination. For Valdez, the affective orientation which sustains material practices of self-and-other-determination, transnational domination, and imperialism is still alive today and binds Western polities together in the “post” colonial world we inhabit.

“Feeling” Imperial: Affects of Transnational Domination and their Contemporary Mold

Valdez draws on a host of black radical thinkers to derive her conception of affective attachments. She focuses especially on W.E.B. DuBois. DuBois argues that want of luxury and leisure promotes affective attachments to imperial projects which coexist with pretensions to peoplehood and democracy (Valdez 2023, 41). Valdez writes, “Politically, racial hatred allows for and rationalizes the coexistence of democratic feeling toward a smaller community and oppression internally and externally along racial/ imperial lines” [emphasis mine] (Valdez 2023, 41). This affect is not natural; it must be trained through “world campaigns that comprise the slave trade and the attribution of every bestiality to Black people” (Valdez 2023, 41).

This affect does not go away during formal decolonization but transforms during the neoliberal age. Valdez (2023, 46-47) draws on Fanon and Hartman’s theorizations about racism to make this point. Fanon and Hartman argue that racism needs to “mutate” over time to meet new material conditions (Valdez 2023, 46-47). Racism today sounds different than it did during the age of formal empire in South Africa. Its function – material and cultural deprivation – remains the same, but it now operates through Fanon’s “partial liberation.” Racism becomes less overt in the metropole, “partially freeing” black and brown people, but only because racism seeks refuge in more advanced, palatable forms (Valdez 2023, 46). New “economies of feeling” must be invented to maintain structures of self-and-other-determination (Valdez 2023, 48). Under neoliberalism, Valdez argues that overt racialization of the Global South gives way to a more “sophisticated” developmental discourse that treats Global South countries and leaders as inept, corrupt, and fiscally irresponsible (Valdez 2023, 49-50). This developmentalism serves to justify new material expropriations. Under development discourse, former colonial linkages are maintained under a new language and with a new paradigmatic method of expropriation – that being commodity chains (Valdez 2023, 49). Now, the material underpinnings of peoplehood are

guaranteed through cheap, undervalued labor. The “democratic feeling” is maintained between the white working class and capitalists.

This is the affect that gets invoked when one talks of “peoplehood.” It is also the affect that sustains self-and-other-determination. In a more recent publication, Valdez extends the critical tools she devised in *Democracy and Empire* to diagnose the resurgence of popular politics in the West. There, she argues that crises of racial capitalism⁵ propelled migrants from the Global South to the Anglo-American world, in turn fueling “a nostalgic demand for a past of “orderly,” insulated (hence, racialized) welfare” (Valdez 2024). The capitalist crisis came back to roost in the metropole. The white working class and the capitalist class risk being displaced by migrant laborers and economic globalization’s pernicious effects. Political leaders are not happy about that. In Section 1 of Donald Trump’s executive order “Protecting the American People Against Invasion” – the president describes aliens as potential terrorists, criminals, and abusers of “America’s” generosity (The White House 2025). In most of Donald Trump’s rhetoric about international trade, he invokes similar themes. In a public speech, Donald Trump thundered, “For decades, our country has been looted, pillaged, raped and plundered by nations near and far, both friend and foe alike” (France 24 2025). In both cases, “America” or “our country” (metonymically standing in for “the people”) is a figure of perpetual victimhood⁶. Migrants, international trade, and other “woke” boogeymen are mistreating the singular American “people.” The Trump playbook is putting the people (white) back on the pedestal: putting “America first.” The people are most “liberated” when they are clawing back the economic

⁵ Climate change, inflation, supply-chain shocks, etc., have made people – but especially the white working class – feel vulnerable to market forces (Valdez 2024).

⁶ Though this paper does not deal with the theme of sexualized or “gendered” victimhood, I maintain it is no coincidence that “rape” is invoked in Trump’s speech.

dominance they once enjoyed over non-white laborers and the world market (hence “Liberation Day”). This is why there is a “nostalgic demand” for the past regime of racial capitalism (and perhaps why racism seems more crude and less palatable in its Trumpian mold: it literally comes from a previous era) (Valdez 2024). Even the old colonial attachments recounted in Valdez’s book are back. Trump wanting to annex Panama, Greenland, and Gaza is a return to the era of extractive colonialism (Toft 2025).

Aggrieved loss and pathological yearning for an already past era typify the affective mutation in right-wing populism. Self-and-other-determination is wrought from “American made” business bereft of its connections to the rest of the world. Access to American markets is used as leverage against all other countries’ economies, large and small. In other words, “The United States will no longer put itself last on matters of international trade in exchange for empty promises” (The White House 2025b). Jobs will go back to the true “people” that used to be occupied unfairly by undocumented migrants. It matters not if these policies are rational. The point is not to make sense; it is to play off the racialized imaginary of old, it is to take from racialized populations what “rightfully” belongs to the American “people.”

The Double-Bind of Self-and-Other-Determination

Of course, it is easy to find examples of Donald Trump participating in self-and-other-determination. What is more surprising is that contemporary left populists have the same affective investments in the “people” that depend on the Global South’s wealth. However, leftist theorists and politicians are less coherent defenders of self-and-other-determination. While there are leftists who oppose migration in all forms, who are nostalgic for a bygone imperial era, and who tout the “people” as the rightful recipient of ill begotten wealth, they are far in the minority. Left populist theorists like Chantal Mouffe and left politicians like Jean-Luc Mélenchon do not

openly endorse self-and-other-determination. Rather, they are stuck between raising concern about transnational domination that the “West” is broadly complicit in and downplaying those concerns by fostering peoplehood. In Mouffe’s case, this is often seen through elision. She holds both that transnational domination exists, *and* that “people” politics is necessarily inwardly oriented toward national histories, liberal-democratic symbols, and domestic demands. How this “people” politics gets reconciled with transnational domination is not obvious. Jean-Luc Mélenchon, on the other hand, vacillates between endorsing a “global humanity” inclusive of migrants and the Global South, and his more parochial stances indicative of self-and-other-determination.

My claim is not that Chantal Mouffe and Jean-Luc Mélenchon are bad populists. Indeed, this paper should not be taken as a wholesale rejection or critique of either person. Rather, my claim is that the notion of the people does not give them the critical resources to mount an emancipatory politics. Such an emancipatory political movement pays attention to the domestic *and* transnational register. Both Mouffe and Mélenchon are clearly worried about the former, but neither know how to resolve transnational domination that one’s own country is complicit in. They are stuck in the double-bind of self-and-other-determination. Confronted with the twin demands of ending domination at home and abroad, they, consciously or not, can only choose one when endorsing a “people” politics: ending domination at home. The problem is not the populists, the problem is “the people” and its imperial imbrications.

Chantal Mouffe’s Left Populism: Mobilizing the Nation-State

Among the theorists of left populism, the most well-known is probably Chantal Mouffe. Her and Laclau’s book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* published in 1985, and the further clarification of their works in solo projects, inspired real world populist parties including Podemos, SYRIZA,

and La France Insoumise. I focus on Mouffe's later works, in the 1990s and early 2000s, as they are more representative of left "people" politics today. Mouffe's later works showcase how she elides the issue of self-and-other-determination in her work on populist politics, but she does tackle self-and-other-determination in her work on cosmopolitanism and multipolarity. However, her critique of self-and-other-determination and its affective dimension evinced in her work on the international realm is not reconciled with her populist project. This elision occurs because of the double bind: forming a "people" politics on nationalist grounds makes it difficult to deal with both domestic domination and transnational domination, even if Mouffe is worried about both.

Hegemony, Articulation, and "the People"

Mouffe's left populist project is a battle for "hegemony." What hegemony means in this context is that a series of practices have "sedimented" so that their contingent, *joined* articulation is hidden⁷ (Mouffe 2018, "Theoretical Appendix"). It thus becomes possible for one to take as a natural, trans-historical truth that certain practices must be articulated together. For example, free market rule (termed "economic liberalism") and democracy are not incommensurable (as Schmitt would argue) or necessarily linked (as Habermas would argue): their co-existence is the result of powerful forces and leaders suturing them together (Mouffe 2018, "The Populist Moment"). This hegemony is established within a historical bloc of material relations and ideas (Mouffe 2018, "Ch. 1 The Populist Moment"). For years, neoliberalism enjoyed hegemonic rule over the Western world, where Mouffe situates her critique (Mouffe 2018, "Introduction"). In Britain, and the rest of the world, powerful political actors like Margaret Thatcher articulated a

⁷ This is similar to Gramsci's view, which is not surprising given the extent to which *The Prison Notebooks* influenced Laclau and Mouffe, but also a little different. For Gramsci, a hegemonic formation obtained when the dominant class imposed a "general direction" of social life (in terms of both base and superstructure) that was spontaneously consented to by the masses (Gramsci 1992/1971, 12).

blend of pro-capital policies, social conservatism, and promise of “individual rights” (under threat by statism) that became idealized as a “truth” (Mouffe 2018, “Ch. 2 Learning from Thatcherism”). The motto of neoliberalism “There is No Alternative” is the ultimate expression of hegemony (Mouffe 2018, “Introduction”). The articulated practices of the dominant class are taken as necessary, and the masses consent to these practices because any other social order (or disorder) exceeds their political imagination.⁸ Mouffe seeks to disarticulate the hegemonic order in its moment of crisis (Mouffe 2018, “Ch. 1 The Populist Moment”). The legitimacy of the neoliberal order is giving way to various alternatives. The Mouffean alternative seeks to disarticulate the “necessary” practices of neoliberalism and articulate them anew.

For example, the discourse of “rights” (one element associated with democracy) in the neoliberal order was deployed to protect the right to participate in the market at the expense of the right of people to real alternatives besides the center-left and center-right (Mouffe 2018, Ch. 1 “The Populist Moment”). This is only one interpretation of what “rights” can mean (and a limited one at that). Redeploying the discourse of “rights” to mean something else, perhaps the right to an actual choice outside of neoliberalism, can win over people who would otherwise be opposed to political change. One of the reasons for Thatcher’s success in mobilizing the working-class despite them arguably not benefitting from her austerity policies was her resignification of “liberty” against the civil bureaucracy (Mouffe 2018, “Ch. 2 Learning from Thatcherism”). For Mouffe, the language and symbols of democracy are central to winning hegemony (Mouffe 2018, “Ch. 3 Radicalizing Democracy”). Equally important, however, is the reconstitution of the agent fighting the counter-hegemonic struggle: the people.

⁸ In the case of neoliberalism, the articulated practices are “democracy” with “free markets” – one cannot have one without the other.

The Chain of Equivalence: Suturing a People

Mouffe's "people" is sutured together from various interests in what is described as a "chain of equivalence" (Mouffe 2018, "Ch. 4 The Construction of a People"). A chain of equivalence refers to how various democratic demands are linked together from social groups, including anti-racist, queer, feminist, and others to form a broader movement (Mouffe 2018, "Ch. 4 The Construction of a People"). The mighty "chain" linking these groups together is not merely a hodgepodge of various groups with similar commitments⁹. The process of struggle and designation of a common enemy helps fashion a "peoplehood" out of already circulating discourses – just articulated differently. The right can mobilize a "people" out of xenophobic discourses. However, "peoplehood" can be articulated with respect to different themes and demands. Mouffe reasons that the left populist movement she wants is not at odds with existing institutions. Rather than a total refoundation, she argues for an "immanent critique that mobilizes the symbolic resources of the democratic tradition" (Mouffe 2018, "Ch. 3 Radicalizing Democracy"). This means making the argument that the democratic tradition is right, but its promise of popular sovereignty and equality (Mouffe 2018, "Ch. 3 Radicalizing Democracy"). The kind of peoplehood that Mouffe wants is altogether different than its right-wing or traditional Marxist version, instead drawing on the notion of "citizenship." In Mouffe's other work, *The Return of the Political*, this "chain of equivalence" is given a more thorough treatment. I turn to that book next.

⁹ Indeed, Mouffe (2018, "Ch. 4 Constructing a People") stresses that the chain of equivalence does not create a homogenous group identity that reduces difference. This is why each democratic demand for her (and Laclau) requires an enemy to activate the common element within them: that being opposition to a discourse or constitutive "outside."

In *The Return of the Political*, Mouffe introduces her “radical democratic citizenship” (Mouffe 1993, 69-70). Mouffe draws on Oakeshott’s conception of *societas* and *res publica* in creating her ideal version of citizenship (Mouffe 1993, 69-72). *Res publica* in Oakeshott’s theory literally translates to “public things,” and it constitutes a set of moral considerations all members of a given *societas* – a formal association of people – subscribe to as a basis for belonging (Mouffe 1993, 66-67). While Oakeshott’s *res publica* is socially conservative, Mouffe (1993, 68-72) argues that the specific content of *res publica* can be more democratic. Thus, Mouffe (1993, 69-70) conceives of a version of citizenship that encompasses “democratic principles” familiar to Western democracies *and their revolutionary past*: equality and liberty for all. These principles are contestable, which means that there are “as many forms of citizenship as there are interpretations of those principles” (Mouffe 1993, 71). While there are many interpretations of these familiar slogans, Mouffe takes a very specific approach to them. She interprets them to conduce a “radical democratic citizenship.” Radical democratic citizenship is defined in terms of its goals – of joining together different demands peoples and groups to eliminate domination (Mouffe 1993, 6). Its defining quality – what it intends to do with the “people” it constructs – seems to be that it “will emphasize the numerous social relations where relations of domination exist and must be challenged if the principles of liberty and equality are to apply” (Mouffe 1993, 70). In drawing together multiple groups, even if these groups vary in their interpretation of the democratic principles set forth, they can still be articulated in tandem against the “others” not included in the movement (Mouffe 1993, 70). Mouffe is careful to maintain the heterogeneity of the movements because, as she notes, the rights of some people are constituted by the exclusion of others’ rights (Mouffe 1993, 70).

Affective Attachment to Nation

To form this chain of equivalence is no easy task. Mouffe uses affective appeals to suture her chain of equivalence together – often through a charismatic leader (Mouffe 2018, Ch. 4). The hope is to create a common feeling amongst adherents to a democratic *res publica*, even if interests and interpretations of the democratic principles are heterogenous. To bring this about, populist leaders and groups need to start their hegemonic struggle at the national level, where most people experience and expect their popular sovereignty to be exercised. Mouffe warns that “a left populist strategy cannot ignore the strong libidinal investment at work in national forms of identification and it would be very risky to abandon this terrain to right-wing populism” (Mouffe 2018, Ch. 4). Staying invested in the national tradition means creating a more inclusive “patriotic identification with the best and most egalitarian aspects of the national tradition” (Mouffe 2018, Ch. 4).

In Mouffe’s 2023 work *Towards a Green Democratic Revolution*, she argues further for an affective approach to political mobilization. She observes that national identification remains a prominent site of affective attachment not just because of its symbolic importance, but because it is moored by passions (Mouffe 2023, 33). This, for Mouffe, is why the “European identity” does not “succeed”: it is based on rational policy and institutions, and thus lacks an affective, passionate dimension (Mouffe 2023, 32-33). She worries that the lack of affective engagement means that we cede ground to people like Donald Trump who is quite adept at this (Mouffe 2023, 35). Mouffe further grounds this concern when she cites Ernst Bloch. Bloch argued that one reason for Hitler’s successful ascent to power was that he, unlike his fellow Marxists, addressed hunger, security, home, and community (Mouffe 2023, 35-36).

Taken together, Mouffe’s project is a nationalist project. Her aim is to mobilize already existing discourses on democracy, liberal-democratic principles, and national histories (and

symbols) to create a new hegemonic formation. This hegemonic formation is the sum of various practices, discourses, and affective attachments articulated together. On face, her left populist movement is parochial but also motivated by ending domination. On one hand, it relies on the historical and theoretical resources of the revolutionary, liberal-democratic tradition, but does not consider their reliance on transnational domination. She is concerned with the “affective” dimension of politics but does not reckon with the potential for reinforcing imperial affect even in its attempts to end domination (Mouffe 2023, 35-37). After all, “hunger,” “security, home,” and “community” can be reconciled with domestic social justice even if the means used are imperial (Mouffe 2023, 35-36). Valdez’s (2023) case studies of Chinese labor in South Africa and Mexican migrant labor in the US proves it can. Hence, it seems self-and-other-determination cannot be effectively fought against with the left populist playbook. Then why is Mouffe so adamant that transnational domination exists?

Mouffe on Cosmopolitanism and the Multipolar World

According to Mouffe (Mouffe 2018, “Ch. 3 Radicalizing Democracy”), the “national” is where the left populist project “must first be posed,” and “It is only when this collective will has been consolidated that *collaboration with similar movements in other countries can be productive.*”

This, to my knowledge, is the only passing reference in her 2018 book to her critique of cosmopolitanism and her support for a “multipolar” world order. The root of her critique in both works is that cosmopolitanism, regardless of its form, tends toward establishing itself as a hegemony. For Mouffe “every order is by necessity a hegemonic order” (Mouffe 2005, 106). This dictum means that any cosmopolitan order establishes a hegemony of some kind, delegitimizing dissent that threatens the beneficiaries of the world order (Mouffe 2013, 20).

Moreover, cosmopolitanism “dilutes” affective attachments to individual communities of which one is a part to make room for a cosmopolitan world order (Mouffe 2013, 22).

There is much to agree with in this critique dispersed across Mouffe’s texts. Western hegemony is not benign, and power disparities between nation-states at the U.N. make this case better than anyone could. However, the solution Mouffe comes up with elucidates a tension between the national left populist movement she supports and transnational domination (the latter of which she recognizes). She argues for a “multipolar world” of various regionalisms – thus pluralizing hegemonic orders (Mouffe 2013, 22; Mouffe 2005, 115-116). This would be accomplished through culturally diverse regional blocs (she draws on ASEAN and BRICS as examples) that would be “autonomous of each other” (Mouffe 2005, 116).

First, there is no explanation here concerning domination between regions. A multipolar world might scale up the problem of domination, but it remains unclear if it can resolve trans-regional domination.

Second, Mouffe’s nationalism is in tension with the “multipolar” world that Mouffe envisions. Patriotism orients one toward their “own” nation. This orienting happens because the nation-state is where people “feel” most attached, and where they feel they can control their political destiny (Mouffe 2018, “Ch. 4 Constructing a People”). The affective dimension of patriotism explains why Mouffe wants the left-populist movement to start at the level of nation-state. However, these strong investments in the nation-state, its history, and its traditions may come at the expense of other countries in and outside one’s regional bloc. How exactly movements that are dedicated to “one’s own” link up transnationally in support of one another is left unclear. It may be possible, but this is not a question that Mouffe convincingly answers. This elision suggests that when patriotic attachments outweigh concerns of global justice, the seizing

of foreign “others”’ wealth for the enjoyment of one’s fellow citizens can become an exemplarity among left populist movement’s members.

Elisions: Irreconcilability of Left Populism and Self-and-Other-Determination

Both temporally (since the regional movements are deferred until the collective will “consolidates”) and theoretically (since it is unclear how one moves from nationalist project to regional hegemony) Mouffe’s writings on the international realm seem removed from her left populist project (Mouffe 2018, “Ch. 3 Radicalizing Democracy”). They may be able to get at the problem of self-and-other-determination, but this requires extra leg work because Mouffe addresses the issue in her writing on cosmopolitanism, but not populism. For example, Mouffe argues that an interregional bloc born from a common affective bond of civic “love” can integrate Europe insofar as enmity is checked by the creation of institutional fixes (Mouffe 2013, 47-48). This is no answer to the question of how one links together movements transnationally. From whence does a bond of civic love emerge if movements are national in origin?

In *Agonistics*, she basically recognizes that “advanced industrial societies... prosperity and high level of welfare have always been dependent on the exploitation of nonWestern societies” (Mouffe 2013, 63). This is the problem of self-and-other-determination. She goes on to argue that radical change is necessary in our ways of life as “consumers” to address global inequalities (Mouffe 2013, 63). And yet, as much as she argues for a break from domestic redistribution of resources as a political priority on the left, this runs counter to her largely nationalist populist movement. If the articulation of various domestic, democratic “demands” is the basis for suturing together her peoplehood, then it is an open question as to how they can be articulated in a manner that does not reaffirm self-and-other-determination. While Mouffe’s project focuses on drawing together demands, her left populist leader is not doing much

transnational moral guardianship. Rather, in hearing only domestic demands, in rejuvenating the national spirit, and in foregoing transnational cooperation until the “collective will” is attained in the nation-state, Mouffe seems to foreclose moral reforms needed to reorient ourselves away from imperial personhood.

At best, there is a tenuous connection between Mouffe’s left-populist movement and her multipolar world order which leaves open more questions than answers. She recognizes that self-and-other-determination exists. She even recognizes that the West needs to change its affective attachments to domestic wealth. But she does not explain how ending self-and-other-determination is possible through left nationalist-populist politics. This is not Mouffe’s fault. The problem is still the double bind. Mouffe is stuck between wanting to end domestic domination and transnational domination, but popular politics is only good for solving the former. Her work on multipolarity deals with the latter. However, linking it to the former through her “people” politics raises questions for which there are no good answers. In the realm of practical politics, some of these questions *do* need answered.

Jean-Luc Mélenchon and the Universal Nation

Jean-Luc Mélenchon and his political party La France Insoumise (LFI) posit a French “universal nationhood” which is porous, accepting, and non-exclusive. However, Mélenchon and LFI MPs are not always consistent in positing the French identity as truly “universal.” They vacillate between a universal vision of peoplehood and a parochial vision that aims to protect that universal peoplehood against various boogeymen. In some ways, then, there are similarities with Trump, but this connection is attenuated by Mélenchon’s effort to address transnational domination. Whereas Trump is not overtly interested in addressing domination that his own country is complicit in, Mélenchon is deeply concerned. However, the double bind of self-and-

other-determination forces Mélenchon to vacillate between ending transnational domination through a global identity and protecting the “nation-state” from its enemies. These enemies do not only exist in the international realm. Migrants, Muslim women who veil, and others who are marked as “foreign” to Mélenchon’s global humanity are all disqualified from claiming said identity. This occurs even when the “enemies” in question exist in the domestic realm.

Mélenchon’s Global Humanity: The Enemy Comes Home to Roost

Mélenchon’s tenure goes back to the French Trotskyist international party called, aptly enough, the “Organisation Communiste Internationale” in the 1970s and 80s (Marlière 2018, 5). From the 1990’s to the early 2000’s, Mélenchon played a leadership role in the Socialist Party (PS), and the Left Front (FDG) (an electoral alliance between the French Communist party (PCF) and the Socialist Party (PS)) (Marlière 2018, 5). In 2012, he ran for president as an FDG candidate. However, disillusionment with Hollande’s presidency and the party apparatus as whole led him to run as a presidential candidate in 2016 and launch LFI. This thumbnail electoral history is meant contextualize what form LFI took – an organization opposed to formal political parties. Mélenchon’s antipathy toward political parties as method of progressive political organizing is perhaps best summed up by his expletive-laced text to Pierre Laurent, the leader of the PCF, after the PCF voted for Macron in the second round of the 2016 presidential election: “it took you ten months to decide to support me, but only 10 minutes to decide to decide to vote for Macron. You, communists, are death and nothingness!” (Mélenchon in Marlière 2018, 15). More than mere insults, however, Mélenchon and his supporters conceive of political parties as outmoded, belonging to a veritable “ancien regime” which must be swept away by new political forms (Marlière 2018; Garrido 2017).

LFI, thus, offers a new model for political organizing: one that is porous, accepting various civil society groups, and even members outside of France's territory. To be a formal member of LFI is simply to sign up online (Marlière 2018, 15). While members of other parties can join LFI, they must do so as individuals and not as members of their chosen political party (Marlière 2018, 16). Mélenchon (2018) wrote that "we are not a classical political party that leads society, but rather a movement that is itself part of the life of society, and totally porous to engagement with society." Being porous with society means allowing the regular, non-engaged citizen to claim membership and participate in decision-making (Mélenchon 2018; Marlière 2018, 10-11). LFI directly aims to mobilize the "disgusted" independents who are sick of the political establishment (Garrido 2017). LFI effects this transformation of the political establishment through their "citizen revolution." The citizen's revolution is a popular deliberative tribunal (composed of ordinary citizens) meant to establish new "universal rights" – thereby founding the 6th Republic of France (Bekhtari 2017).

The porousness of Mélenchon's broad coalition also means allowing hitherto opposed right-wing populists and non-left citizens to join the movement (Marlière 2018, 10). For LFI, the goal is not to revive "the left," but to wage a war that the "people" can win. Raquel Garrido, a former LFI legislator in the National Assembly, noted that the party and its spokespeople "rarely speak about the left" but rather about the "1%" and the "99%" (Garrido 2017). Indeed, Phillippe Marlière observes that Mélenchon, after the 2012 election, banned communist "red flags" at his rallies and stopped singing the "Internationale" at the end of his public meetings, instead substituting them for the tricolor French flag and the French National Anthem "La Marseillaise" (Marlière 2018, 9). Civic patriotism is a defining feature of Mélenchon's media strategy and his party's priorities. For Mélenchon, France is a "universal nation" – and membership of this far-

reaching identity is constitutive of a common humanity among all people (Mélenchon 2013; Mélenchon 2018). The citizen's revolution, according to Mélenchon, is not for the inhabitants of the contiguous territory of France, but for the "common good of humanity" (Mélenchon 2018). In fact, Mélenchon characterizes the "citizen's revolution" as part of a "new humanism" – drawing on "French traditions of humanism" and Enlightenment thought (Mélenchon 2018). Mélenchon argues that the French revolutionary tradition, especially its three principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity, is not consigned to the West, but universal (Mélenchon 2013).

On the campaign trail and in his recently published book, Mélenchon bases his universalism on "creolization" – a term he borrows from Édouard Glissant (Mélenchon 2025, 237). Creolization refers to a process of cultural evolution through mixing together elements of different cultures, ultimately producing something new and something in *common* with others (Mélenchon 2025, 238-239). Mélenchon adduces the use of "loanwords" between languages as an example of creolizing, but also musical borrowings across cultures, too (Mélenchon 2025, 238). Mélenchon sees creolization as bridge to establish a common (though not homogenous) "future cumulative culture" that exceeds the need for integration or assimilation (Mélenchon 2025, 239). On this basis, a truly universal humanity is established.¹⁰

Mélenchon's "Foreign" Policy

The basis of Mélenchon's foreign policy is spelled out across multiple blog posts, speeches, and interviews. For example, Mélenchon promises in his 2018 essay that once "we are in power in our country... we will make an offer that speaks an international language common to all humanity... the people of the United Kingdom like us are human beings sharing in a collective

¹⁰ Jane Anna Gordon (2014, 183-184) warns against prescriptive creolizing projects.

consciousness – a consciousness that forms a whole political program” (Mélenchon 2018).

Speaking on South Africa’s case against Israel’s genocide, Mélenchon celebrates the application of international law to Israel “[b]ecause it’s the return of humanity. We only see this one human people through international law” (Mélenchon 2024). Arnaud Le Gall, an LFI MP, argues that foreign policy needs to be conducted through “common causes” with other countries, including the defense of peace (Le Gall 2023). Thus, LFI supports ending the genocide in Palestine despite the political costs of doing so (Mélenchon 2024; Le Gall 2023). Indeed, on the French left, there are few other parties that vocally defend Palestine (Le Gall 2023). Coming out as a supporter of Palestine or a skeptic of the Israeli government can be costly. For example, an LFI MP was censured simply for waving the Palestinian flag in the National Assembly (Le Monde 2024).

Taken together, these quotes suggest that universal humanity extends the world over. On face, this common humanity should address the problem of self-and-other-determination. The universal values of the French republic should be able to address transnational domination if they are seriously held and inform the law. If humanity is “common,” there would be no basis for expropriating from others. The problem is that, despite its promise, universalism does not reconcile the double bind. This becomes evident in Mélenchon’s positions on laïcité, regional languages, trade, militarization, migration, and colonialism.

Mélenchon’s “universal” French republicanism prompted him to lambast the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages for promoting “divisions” among the French people by allowing them “To testify, sue, or sign contracts in a language other than French [which] would represent a step backwards from the Ordinance of Villers-Cotterêts, a fundamental breakthrough in the equality of the French people...” (Mélenchon in Roger 2019, 321-322). In his 2013 essay and interview, Mélenchon furthers his nationalist and “universalist”

discourse by defending laïcité, (France's relegation of religion to the "private" realm) which, in turn, Mélenchon and others used to justify France's burka ban (Mélenchon 2013). For Mélenchon (2013), laïcité demands that, in pursuit of "one common interest," we must leave our own private reflections on religion before joining public discussion. This common interest can be spelled out in those revolutionary words: liberty, equality, fraternity (Mélenchon 2013). A commitment to these principles at the very least demands, for Mélenchon, that women not be allowed to veil: "even if the women are ok with the mistreatment, we are not ok with it. This is not a prejudice, it's a philosophical presupposition about the way we ought to live" (Mélenchon 2013). The universal common interest of humanity goes so far as to prevent people from donning clothes that might signal their inequality¹¹ and non-liberty.

Here, the revolutionary principles are refashioned as a defensive form of nationalism against markers of difference and "foreignness." Different languages, a hallmark of creolization in Mélenchon's other writings and speeches, here signal an "outside" that the "people" cannot incorporate. On the campaign trail his interpretation of creolization was decidedly different, giving more support to a restrictive "common humanity." In a televised debate, Mélenchon argued that creolization, while separate from assimilation "comes in stages" the first of which is "integration of those who arrive" (France 24 2022). Here, the pendulum swings toward disciplining migrants so that they can be recognizable to a common humanity, rather than toward a common humanity that can reconcile the problem of self-and-other-determination.

The same is also true in the case of Muslim veiling. The universal principles of the French republic are turned against Muslim women. The recognition of one common humanity

¹¹ I make no case for this even if Mélenchon does.

excludes Muslim women if they choose to adopt something that is “foreign” to the secular French republic. Self-and-other-determination, though not predicated on material rule necessarily, still demands the elimination of non-foreign markers so that Muslim women and non-French-speaking migrants can be reconciled with the “norm” of white comfortability. More familiar self-and-other-determination also obtains in Mélenchon’s writings on migration, colonialism, and militarism.

Trade, Militarism, Migration, Colonialism: Self-and-Other-Determination’s Contemporary Mutation

Despite the global posturing of LFI, the common French humanity so touted by Mélenchon and his allies is not truly universal, nor is it necessarily auspicious for resolving transnational domination. The humanity of diplomacy and international law has not breached concerns about Muslim woman who veil, nor concerns over regional languages. This has implications for transnational domination too. For example, LFI’s projection of national values on the rest of the world does not square with its military buildup, nor its defensive posture toward its own corporations. Critics are right to wonder why Mélenchon wants to pursue militarization with “collective enthusiasm” (Morrow 2020).

Mélenchon shared an eyebrow-raising sentiment during Covid-19 when he lamented the “shame” in France’s nation on account of having to depend on China for masks and Covid-19 tests, advocating in the future for “reshoring” economic activity (Morrow 2020). This seems a reversal of the common humanity that Mélenchon believes links multiple polities together. What happened to one “human interest?” Why must there be “shame” on having to rely on global partners? What happened to nonalignment? There are no good answers to these questions, which is the point: universalistic French values are propped up as a rhetorical resource to close the

distance between “cooperators,” but these values are still self-serving, still invested in the interests of French citizens, and thus still prioritize the nation-state over the rest of “humanity,” even as Mélenchon is serious about ending transnational domination.

Lurking in the background of reshoring and military modernization is the question of who is ultimately affected (Mélenchon 2020). Reshoring, for example, might mean a trade slump for Global South countries involved in French supply chains. Militarization – even if it sometimes leads to employment merely in “national service,” still has the potential to feed into military conflict (Morrow 2020). Mélenchon’s remark at LFI’s summer school, where he discussed matters of war and military, was simply: “When it is a matter of protecting the state and Republican norms, we come together with the right and I’m not afraid to say it” (Lantier 2018). Here, France’s universal values are used to sever connections with other countries, especially those that threaten the “state.” The “Republican” norms that allow him to proclaim France a non-Western, “universalist” identity also serve to protect that identity with hi-tech military weapons (Mélenchon 2013).

The contradiction in French universalism’s bridging and nation-defending operations is also seen in Mélenchon’s comments on migration. Despite supporting the “regularization” of undocumented workers in France, and voicing concern about racist invective against them, Mélenchon still sees migrants as “enemies” with respect to domestic workers. On France 2, Mélenchon criticized migrants coming to France for jobs “because we [they] already have the people we need” (Mélenchon in Torron 2023, 24). Implicitly, this is an argument about how undocumented migrants might “take” jobs that do not belong to them, but to the “rightful” citizens of the republic. Of course, one must then ask: why are undocumented migrants excluded from universal humanity? The answer is quite unclear.

Mélenchon's musings on colonialism also speak to the inability of his universal humanity to reconcile self-and-other-determination with his popular movement. Speaking with a British journalist, Mélenchon (2013) contends,

“The French colonial system was meant to be done with a clear conscience. It was supposed to be liberating the people and giving them extra rights... decolonisation... was never the family affair for you [the English] than it was for us.”

To speak of colonialism as a “family affair” is to conceive of the French colonies as always part of the universal French identity. But this recognition of a common humanity is not liberating. It implicates the French colonies in the same historical story as the French revolution, the formulation of the three revolutionary principles, and the “unity” of a common humanity that paints over the different and divergent paths that the French colonies took because France *did not* bestow rights on them. Furthermore, the promise of a common humanity is duplicitous. In respect to former colonies, universal humanity is deployed to end transnational domination, but this is often hedged by the need of the nation-state. On his personal blog, Mélenchon affirmed the need for “material reparations” with Haiti (Mélenchon 2025b). However, these material reparations needed to be sought in the field of “well-understood, mutual interest” with Haiti¹² (Mélenchon 2025b)

Even when paying for moral crimes one's own country committed, the mutual interests of France and Haiti – oppressor and oppressed – must be assured in Mélenchon's formulation. The universal values here are circumscribed; they cannot fully service a “repair.” Such a demand may

¹² “Mais des réparations concrètes seront aussi à l'ordre du jour à rechercher dans un champ d'intérêts mutuels bien compris comme la création d'un fonds de coopération pour le développement, la promotion des produits haïtiens et l'appui à la jeunesse haïtienne dans sa quête de reconstruction nationale” (Mélenchon 2025b)

be unthinkable to make of an elected leader. However, the principles of a “common humanity” do not respect the requirements of realpolitik or the duties one has to their elected office, perhaps not even the duty to one’s constituency unless that constituency is thought in global terms.

Almost identical themes come up when comparing the universal humanity of Mélenchon with Valdez’s conception of self-and-other-determination. Migration, militarism, and trade policies are maintained paradoxically in respect to the interests of the white masses. Despite his paeans to universal humanity, Mélenchon’s invocation of the job-stealing migrant is a one-to-one recreation of the same discourse that Trump and Valdez’s imperial, white working class participates in. Mélenchon’s militarism serves to safeguard the same universal humanity, but against whom? If universal humanity is actually universal, then enemies could not possibly exist. Instead, Mélenchon’s latent militarism serves to protect universal humanity against its non-universal foes. Terms of international trade also shore up “French” jobs to stave off the “shame” of relying on China for critical goods during Covid-19. Finally, colonialism posits an encroaching universal humanity that both sees its colonies as a “family affair” and yet cannot make good on reparations promise unless the French state’s interests are considered too. Determination of “others” affairs is baked into the promise of reparations.

Vacillating between People and the Universe

It is not my intent to portray Mélenchon as racist or prone to colonizing. Indeed, the portrayal of his political commitments is incomplete. This paper sets out not to capture Mélenchon’s or LFI’s policy platform but rather explore the slippage between universalism and parochialism that takes place. As was the case with Mouffe, the problem is not Mélenchon (or at least, not *just* Mélenchon). The problem is the double bind: relying on a “people” politics does not offer the tools necessary to combat transnational domination, and in the case of Mélenchon, it may not be

able to reconcile domestic domination either. The migrant, post-colony, and veiled Muslim woman function as domestic enemies that signify foreignness. Universal humanity cannot reach them.

Mélenchon vacillates between his universal humanity and the demands of peoplehood that make universalism impossible. In fact, he often invokes common humanity to place limits on its universality. Mélenchon bars women from veiling in the same speech, indeed nearly the same sentence, where he also invokes the universal principles of common humanity (Mélenchon 2013). Then, he dismisses veiling as an unimportant issue and relates that, "...the real challenge we have before us today is not Islam. It is the *unity* of the French nation." (Mélenchon 2013).

Unity of the French nation is not the same as a creolized, diverse, but common humanity. Indeed, the question of why the Muslim women should not be allowed to join the creolizing process through their own cultural contribution is not taken up. It almost seems that Mélenchon is struggling to reconcile universal humanity with people politics in real time as he is speaking. Other examples of this include Mélenchon's checkered past with migration: both as a supporter and skeptic. On one hand, creolization gives him the resources to support migrant workers, especially those fleeing from climate emergencies (Mélenchon 2025, 214). On the other hand, migrants are also stealing our jobs. In 2019, Mélenchon put this into even starker words: migrants were "stealing our bread" (Adler 2019). When Mélenchon discusses France's colonial past, he articulates a "mutual" interest between France and Haiti which at once recognizes (though unequally) the state of the post-colony as well as the interests of the French nation-state. This unequal recognition is reinforced when Mélenchon writes that "nobody" on "either side" of

France or Haiti is seriously envisioning a “full repayment¹³” of the debt owed to Haiti (Mélenchon 2025b). Universal humanity here serves as a recognition of harm done, while also recognizing French *realpolitik*. Paying off the debt is not practical. The “people” of France might not be able to pay up to the non-French-people of Haiti.

Rather than elision, Mélenchon’s invocation of universal humanity vacillates between the domestic and transnational registers. Mélenchon may have good intentions in his common humanity, but the double bind obstructs his common humanity from addressing self-and-other-determination in an unqualified way. Instead, Mélenchon plays off the affective dimension of “self-and-other-determination” to endorse a “people” politics that cannot resolve transnational domination. In light of Mélenchon’s failure to overcome the double bind, I turn now to possible solutions endorsed by Valdez.

Transnational Training of Affect: A New Peoplehood

Valdez draws on W.E.B. Du Bois, Martin Luther King Jr., and Frantz Fanon to construct a new version of peoplehood based on transnational solidarities rather than affective attachments to imperial wealth (Valdez 2023, 169). In drawing together these various figures, she articulates how a “people” politics can be practiced without the double bind of self-and-other-determination.

King’s essay “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence” critiques ongoing support of the Vietnam War (Valdez 2023, 177). He conceives of this support as “blind” and ignorant, predicated on an insufficiently worldly perspective which places the “people” on the anti-liberatory side of the war (Valdez 2023, 177). Without a worldly perspective and a precise understanding of the imperial affective investment that the people share in the Vietnam War, no

¹³ Personne n’envisage sérieusement de part et d’autre le remboursement complet (Mélenchon 2025b).

moral calculus or politics can come about. He goes on to draw together how domestically, the poor are harmed by the ongoing policies of conscription to fight an ill-conceived imperial war, and that the connection between the domestic trauma and the imperial trauma inflicted on Vietnam are connected (Valdez 2023, 180). Valdez writes that it is on the polities themselves to account for their unjust orientations toward racism, militarism, and materialism (Valdez 2023, 182).

Despite being on the opposite side of the anti-colonial violence debate, Fanon also contributes to the transnational mobilization of affect by redirecting energies of the European masses away from imperial affect and towards reparations (Valdez 2023, 188). For Fanon, reparations and actual historical and worldly acknowledgement of the plight of colonialism and the post-colony (Valdez 2023, 188). Moreover, Fanon points us toward new resources in creating a “people” by redirecting affective energies against the global oligarchy – encompassing what Fanon calls our “common master” in Europe, but also opportunists in the Global South. Moreover, worldly events like the victory against the US at Dien Bien Phu can orient us to a new symbolism and “history” entirely aside from one’s national history (Valdez 2023, 188).

Du Bois articulates a similar theme – that the US’s affective attachments to imperialism need to be retrained in worldly matters (Valdez 2023, 160). He contends that the higher education system creates undergraduates who are disconnected from the everyday concerns of people and who “unthinkingly participate in the industrial machine in which they were born” (Valdez 2023, 160). Valdez writes: “Such is the kind of education that prepares subjects to grow into citizens, and their voices to guide political development and contribute to the “reformation of the present social conditions” (Valdez 2023, 161). What this means is training the people’s

affect and reorienting it away from self-and-other-determination so that a transnational bloc can better combat the forces of the global oligarchy (Valdez 2023, 172).

While Mouffe argues for this kind of moral reformation, her “people” politics is not expansive enough to consider transnational linkages. Indeed, while Mouffe attempts to articulate a more benign nationalism, she never questions the role of the nation-state in her theory. She only interprets it differently. This leaves scant room for critique of the nation-state itself and only offers various interpretations. While Mélenchon tries his best to reconcile people politics with ending transnational domination, his popular politics is not coherent precisely because it is ahistorical, unworldly, and mired in national defensiveness. Instead of using moral guardianship or the bully pulpit to reconstruct how people orient themselves toward the Global South, his politics merely links demands together.

Conclusion

This paper argues that the resurgence of left “people” politics suffers from a double bind. “People” politics in its current iteration does not have the theoretical resources necessary to address transnational domination, though it might be able to (in some circumstances) eliminate domestic domination. Self-and-other-determination wherein the domestic sphere’s self-determination and peoplehood is sustained through stealing the wealth of the Global South cannot be addressed without rethinking our affective investments in the nation and in imperialism, at least in previous imperial powers.

This paper contributes to ongoing critiques of left populism that tend to focus on building meso-level associational bonds (Gorup 2021). This paper points us toward a transnational way of developing these bonds that are emancipatory on the domestic and transnational register. One

should be encouraged by the flourishing of work on transnational mobilization evidenced in Valdez's work, but also Adom Getachew's and Nazmul Sultan. These works cannot provide prescriptions for transnational mobilization but nevertheless point us in interesting directions and force us to ask how we could make a world without imperialism, without transnational domination. Additional work should be done, of course, on the practical difficulties and potential solutions to effect/in effecting transnational affective mobilization, and what an affective reorientation of values might look like.

The "people" is the preeminent virtue of democracy, populism, and countless programs today that aim at ending domination. It would behoove us to remember, however, the history of the people and the affect invested in the people as a revolutionary agent. One does not imagine that the "people" goes away any time soon. The occupation for theorists of the future will be figuring out how to make the people revolutionary.

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