



Left Populism and the Education of Desire

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Abstract

This paper mobilises the psychoanalytic concepts of desire and enjoyment to better understand how processes of education aimed at extending and defending democratic life might respond to and engage with populist politics. I approach this task by engaging with a particular vector of Mouffe and Laclau's political philosophy, moving from a critique of liberal democracy's rationalist pretensions to their insistence that left populism and its passionate construction of a 'people' is the central task facing radical politics. This attention to the libidinal basis of political identification locates them in a community of Left Lacanian thinkers who reframe the problems of democratic politics in terms of desire and enjoyment rather than miseducation or its lack. Whilst this position might suggest a binary choice between different analytical frames, I inquire into what insights are generated by theorising left populism as an 'education of desire'. The paper is organised into four main parts: the opening discussion clarifies my understanding of education by engaging with the literature on educational agonism. The second section lays the groundwork for a critique of the way in which education is fetishized, in different ways, by liberals and radicals as a panacea for populist politics. The third section reframes democratic crisis as an enjoyment problem in order to better grasp the relationship between the liberal democratic disavowal of its own irrationality and the structure of right-wing populist enjoyment. The fourth section applies these insights to develop a critical analysis of what is at stake when we explicitly consider the left populist construction of a 'people' as an educational task. I conclude by drawing together and summarising the main features and considerations of left populism understood as an education of desire.

Keywords Democratic education · Education for democracy · Education of desire · Enjoyment · Lacan · Left populism · Radical democracy

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Introduction

This paper mobilises the psychoanalytic concepts of desire and enjoyment to better understand how processes of education aimed at extending and defending democratic life might respond to and engage with populist politics. I approach this task by engaging critically with a particular vector of Mouffe and Laclau's political philosophy, which moves from a critique of liberal democracy's rationalist pretensions to their insistence that left populism and its passionate construction of a 'people' is the central task facing radical politics (Laclau 2005, 2006; Mouffe 2005, 2013, 2019, 2022). I pay particular attention to their engagement with Lacan, whose influence on their work becomes increasingly prominent in their efforts to theorise the libidinal basis of social and political identification (Stavrakakis 2007).

For Mouffe (2022, p. 22), an enduring weakness of liberal democratic theories is their alleged "incapacity to apprehend the collective nature of political identities and their affective dimension". This critique of parochial rationalism also extends to her assessment of leftists who seek to advance their strategies and policy programmes by demonstrating their "superior rationality" whilst "neglecting to ask how to generate the affects that will give force to those policies" (Mouffe 2022, p. 30). By contrast, left populism prioritises a politics of collective identification that seeks to understand the relationship between the affects that move people and the forms of signification in which those affects are inscribed. In this sense, left populism is to be understood as a neo-Gramscian politics aimed at creating a new 'common sense' oriented around democratic values and social justice (Mouffe 2022, p. 45).

From the outset, it is important to be clear that the left populist position poses difficult questions for the place of education within emancipatory politics because it claims to reject any intrinsic link between epistemology and democracy (Mouffe 2022). This claim locates Mouffe and Laclau in a broader heterogeneous community of Left Lacanian thinkers who reframe the problems of democratic politics as problems of desire and enjoyment rather than miseducation or its lack. Whilst this broad position might suggest a binary choice between two different analytical frames—either education or enjoyment, knowledge or libidinal investment—there exists a current of leftist utopian thought which, following the socialist historian Thompson (1977 [1955]), understands emancipatory politics as the "education of desire". On the face of it, utopian socialist thought and left populism are unlikely bedfellows, since the latter is resolutely a politics of what Mouffe calls radical reformism (Mouffe 2019, 2022). Radical democracy, which provides the theoretical bedrock of left populism, is axiomatically opposed the utopian fantasy of a future free from social antagonisms. On the contrary, the project of radical democracy is to reflexively accommodate what its advocates see as the ontological necessity of antagonism and negativity in the construction of any collective identity, including a 'democratic people.' If there is shared ground, it is to be found by framing the education of desire as the Gramscian "development of an alternative common sense" required for "social transformation" (Levitas 1990, p. 147). Thus, a primary aim of this essay is to critically explore what might be achieved by theorising left populism as an education of desire. In undertaking this task, I challenge indiscriminate and cynical uses of the term populism that obfuscate ideological interests and arguably close off the need for careful theoretical engagement.

In so far as education for democracy is a normative project whose aim is to mobilise citizens around particular democratic imaginaries, the concept of identification is key. Indeed, a primary advantage of left populist theory is its recognition that the cognitive cannot be

overplayed at the expense of the affective aspects of identification. Moreover, the psychoanalytic claim that there are no essential identities but only forms of identification “is at the centre of the anti-essentialist approach” to democracy that Mouffe advances (Mouffe 2022, p. 37). However, left populism does not merely pose difficult questions for education in this context. The proposition that desire might be educated poses difficult questions for left populism itself. At the heart of these difficulties lies the longstanding question of how to relate reason to affect in any such education of desire: what are the educational implications of approaching desire as “something to be understood and subjected to the discipline of reason”? (Levitas 1990, p. 149).

By inquiring into what new insights and problems are generated by working with the presupposition that left populism might resource and enrich education for democracy, I locate its claims within broader debates on the Lacanian Left. To the extent that Mouffe and Laclau subject desire to the discipline of reason, then it is a reason sharply circumscribed by the logic of their own discourse theory. Here, I argue that to understand left populism as an education of desire requires that we reflexively examine the limits of the discursive appropriation of Lacan (Stavrakakis 2007). This involves clarifying the relationship between discourse and affect, as well as introducing Lacanian insights that more directly address the relationship between political economy, desire and enjoyment. Rather than claiming to offer a comprehensive account of the education of desire, my more modest aim is to clarify what is at stake when we explicitly consider the left populist construction of a ‘people’ as an educational task. Accordingly, I conclude by summarising what I consider to be the main considerations and features of such an education of desire, inviting others to explore what this might mean for their own specific contexts.

Below, I begin with a concise overview of relevant literature to clarify what I understand by education in the context of democratic politics. Partially informed by radical democracy, my understanding nevertheless probes at the limits of its engagement with the political project of psychoanalysis. By political project of psychoanalysis, I mean the question of how we relate politically to the unconscious drive for enjoyment that is constitutive of the subject (Stavrakakis 2007; McGowan 2013, 2019; Dean 2016a). Therefore, this opening section has two aims: firstly, to ground the subsequent analysis by positioning it in relation to the educational literature on radical democracy. Secondly, to briefly introduce the Lacanian ideas that at once both influence the theory of left populism and animate my critical engagement with it.

Educational Agonism and the Lacanian Left

The political project of left populism, as well as its antecedent theory of radical democracy, are rooted in an anti-essentialist reading of the Gramscian formulation of hegemony (Laclau 2005, 2006; Mouffe 2005, 2013, 2019, 2022). Exacting a profound and enduring influence on critical pedagogy, Gramsci (cited in Mayo 2014, p. 386) argued that “every relationship of hegemony is necessarily an educational relationship”, with the implication that education extends beyond formal schooling, taking place across multiple sites in civil society and enacted by myriad “cultural workers”, including teachers and academics, but also community workers, social movement activists, social media influencers, digital content creators, trade unionists, journalists, artists, advertisers and the list could go on, ad nauseum (Giroux 2010, p 492; Mayo 2014, p. 387). Whilst hegemonic forms of cultural politics produce “desiring maps that exercise a powerful pedagogical force over how

people think about themselves and their relationship to others” (Giroux 2010, pp. 490-1), weaknesses in dominant discourses generate pedagogical openings to articulate new ideas, political analyses and democratic imaginaries.

The theory of hegemony thus posits a dialectical relationship between education and democratic politics. Not only do our questions about education for democracy depend on our presuppositions about the nature of democratic politics (Biesta 2011, p. 152), but the prospect that democratic politics is pedagogical suggests that political theorists who grapple with the Gramscian theory of hegemony cannot afford to ignore its educational dimension (Mayo 2014, p. 386). Despite the centrality of education to Gramsci’s conception of hegemony, it is a dimension that Laclau and Mouffe completely ignore (Snir 2017). Consequently, it has been left to other scholars to theorise the relationship between education and democratic politics through the lens of what is alternately called radical democracy or agonistic democracy (Ruitenberg 2009, 2010; Todd 2010; Biesta 2011; Snir 2017; Tryggvason 2017;; Abowitz and Mamlok 2020; Sant and Brown 2021; Zembylas 2020). Agonistic democracy proceeds from a social ontology that apprehends the construction of all social identities, including a ‘democratic people’, through the Derridean notion of the constitutive outside that makes possible any closure (Mouffe 2013). Antagonism becomes agonism when its socially productive nature is recognised rather than disavowed. From this perspective, agonistic critiques in educational theory recognise the libidinal dimension of democratic politics and often begin by deconstructing the ostensibly rational closures of liberal and deliberative democracy (Abowitz and Mamlok 2020, p. 733). As Ruitenberg (2009, p. 278) recognises, this positions agonistic critiques alongside the Freirean deconstruction of claims to educational neutrality or impartiality, which obfuscate the political nature of all education as manifested in pedagogical methods, student-teacher relationships, curricular choices, policy discourses and so on.

Beyond a commitment to deconstruction, we can look to this literature to briefly summarise the features that might characterise education for radical/agonistic democracy. For the sake of brevity, I will follow Ruitenberg’s (2009) use of the term “educational agonism.” On my reading of educational agonism, political literacy is conceived as a praxis requiring both the capacity for conjunctural analysis and the capacity for articulation (Ruitenberg 2009, 2010; Mårdh and Tryggvason 2017; Snir 2017; Abowitz and Mamlok 2020). Without explicitly using the term conjunctural analysis, Ruitenberg (2009, p. 278) defines agonistic political literacy as “the ability to read the political landscape” by historicising and analysing it “in terms of disputes about the interpretation of liberty and equality and the hegemonic social relations that should shape them.” Understood as a democratic capacity to be nurtured through educational agonism, I find the term conjunctural analysis apt here because Stuart Hall, drawing on Gramsci’s theory of hegemony, used it to describe such a process of mapping the political landscape by understanding it in its historical specificity (Grayson and Little 2017; Gilbert 2019). Conceived as an educational process, its aim is to ‘reverse engineer’ conjunctures as contingent settlements arising from the historical articulation of different currents and circumstances. As a political praxis, its purpose is to ensure that democratic interventions in the pursuit of social justice and equality are not naïve or ahistorical, and that they recognise the potential for regressive social forces to capitalise on a fragile or fractured hegemony (Grayson and Little 2017, p. 66–69; Snir 2017, p. 10). Therefore, in agonistic political literacy, the capacity to think with the conjuncture also nurtures the capacity to participate in democratic life through articulation. Articulation is a discursive process requiring considerable political nous, whereby social actors with heterogeneous concerns and interests act together as equals to connect and transform them into a coherent discourse that names a collective political actor, a programme of demands and

a common adversary (Ruitenbergh 2009, 2010; Mårdh and Tryggvason 2017; Snir 2017; Abowitz and Mamlok 2020).

This marks an important difference from forms of liberal citizenship education whose aim is to build capacity for individual or collective forms of civic participation on particular issues “within existing hegemonic relations” because it requires interpreting antagonism as agonism, such that adversaries are seen not as moral enemies, irrational others or economic competitors, but as democratic interlocutors “seeking to establish different hegemonic relations altogether” (Ruitenbergh 2010, pp. 278–280). It also marks an important departure from liberal multicultural education because the aim is not to benignly explore and empower essentialised identities, but rather, to connect and transform differences through the common project of constructing a ‘we’ that re-politicises the closures of the existing democratic order naturalised as ‘common sense’ (Snir 2017, p. 9). Most importantly, since the democratic subject emerges through the process of articulation, educational agonism rejects the socialisation conception of democratic education in favour of a subjectification conception wherein “civic learning is an inherent dimension of the ongoing experiment of democratic politics” (Biesta 2011, p. 152). In other words, the democratic citizen-subject does not emerge from education fully formed and ready to participate in democratic life, but rather emerges contingently through participation in democratic politics which, in itself, is educational.

Of course, this makes educational agonism open to the criticism of various social actors that it reduces education to forms of indoctrination or activist training better left to social movements (Ruitenbergh 2010). Thus, arguing for its educative nature requires us to move beyond theoretical explication towards the practical politics of articulating articulation in particular policy contexts. Moreover, this theoretical and political position introduces further debates about the role and agency of the educator (Ruitenbergh 2010; Biesta 2011; Snir 2017). Whilst an exploration of these issues is beyond the scope of this paper, my position can be summarised as follows: firstly, by recognising the educative nature of hegemony, educational agonism includes within its scope both cultural politics understood as public pedagogy (Giroux, 2000) and, more specifically, forms of “popular education” understood as “educational initiatives developed by and for grassroots social movements and community organisations” (Kuk and Tarlau 2020, p. 592). Secondly, within institutional contexts educational agonism, at the very least, demands that educators reckon with the social fact of hegemony—in other words, the culturally-mediated processes of quotidian learning through which subjectification occurs (Giroux 2010; Mayo 2014)—rather than disavowing it (Ruitenbergh 2010, p. 378; Biesta 2011, p. 153).

This brings us to the final feature of educational agonism, which directly poses the question of its relationship to Lacanian psychoanalysis. Radical democracy is not a bloodless discursive process but an avowedly passionate affair. After all, one of its fundamental psychoanalytic insights is that the desire to eliminate or suppress antagonism and its associated emotions only results in deferred, more destructive, manifestations of those antagonisms and emotions (Ruitenbergh 2010, p. 272). Although “the desire for democracy... is not something that can simply be taught” (Biesta 2011, p. 153), educational agonism is concerned with how we might educate political emotions and bring affect to the fore (Ruitenbergh 2009, 2010; Mårdh and Tryggvason 2017; Zembylas 2018; Abowitz and Mamlok 2020). Given that populism itself can be understood as the political organisation of emotions around contingent articulations of ‘the people’, a growing number of scholars have turned to these ideas to critically investigate the relationship between education and populism in various contexts (Mårdh and Tryggvason 2017; Petrie et al. 2019; Zembylas 2020; Sant and Brown 2021; Horner 2022). However, as important as the focus on

emotions is in this context, it cannot be conflated with the political project of psychoanalysis, which is more directly concerned with the political organisation of enjoyment.

For example, although several theorists (Ruitenber [2010](#); Mårdh and Tryggvason [2017](#); Zembylas [2020](#)) recognise Laclau's claim that political identities require affective investment, further work is required to take full account of the theoretical implications of Laclau's statement that "[a]ffect (that is, enjoyment) is the very essence of investment" (Laclau [2005](#), p. 115). For this reason, the argument that I develop below must also be understood the context of literature that places critical pedagogy and Lacanian psychoanalysis more directly in dialogue. The central problematic that psychoanalysis presents to the project of critical pedagogy, broadly conceived, "is how to deal with the traumatic underside of its endeavour to build thinking subjects" (Armonda [2022](#), p. 135), namely, the disavowal of traumatic knowledge that must occur in order to maintain the fantasies through which subjects maintain enjoyment and a sense of self-consistency (Cho [2007](#); McMillan [2015](#); Armonda [2022](#)). It is within this literature that I situate the following critical discussion of left populism as an educational project.

The Lacanian definition of enjoyment differs from its colloquial usage because it is an unconscious drive, distinct from the notion of conscious pleasure, which supplies its alibi (McGowan [2019](#), p. 218). Although the unconscious drive for enjoyment has to partially succeed in delivering satisfaction, enjoyment is located at the point where pleasure is suspended. Operating beyond utility, we 'suffer' enjoyment in the repetitive pursuit of an impossible completeness. For the Lacanian subject, the drive for enjoyment emerges from the constitutive alienation that occurs when it is cast into the universe of language: the subject is said to be 'split' between its own lived experience and the inescapable necessity of inadequately representing it through the other's language, or put another way, within the coordinates of the symbolic order (McMillan [2015](#); Armonda [2022](#)). The subject's unconscious sense of alienation and loss is said to be constitutive because it sets desire in motion. Once set in motion, the drive for enjoyment sustains desire because it is "what we want but can't get and what we get that we don't want" (Dean [2016b](#), p. 1). Enjoyment can also be described as the dialectic between symbolic prohibition and its attempted transgression—it can't function by 'pushing against an open door', as it were. This is a point I shall return to in my discussion of democratic crisis as an enjoyment problem, since it has important implications for the notion that perceived irrationality can be displaced by better knowledge. Firstly though, I move on to argue that education for democracy must begin with an immanent critique of liberal democracy and, by extension, the educational institutions and practices through which it is reproduced. The purpose of this discussion is to lay the groundwork for a critique of the way in which education is fetishized, in different ways, by liberals and radicals as a panacea for populist politics.

Populism and the Discontents of Liberal Democracy

Prior to the covid-19 pandemic, the general claim that global democracy was experiencing a 'populist moment' (Mouffe [2019](#)) had gained much currency in and beyond academia. In public discourse, the adjective populist has been ascribed to democratic movements, processes and institutions that paradoxically threaten liberal democratic institutions, values and norms. Right-wing populism is closely associated with a process that Appadurai ([2017](#)) calls "democracy fatigue", whereby citizens, frustrated and fed up with the status quo, are willing to vote for leaders who will abrogate liberal practices and norms in the

name of ‘getting things done’ and enacting the will of ‘the people’. Recent empirical examples abound: Trump in the US, Bolsonaro in Brazil, Modi in India, Erdoğan in Turkey, Orbán in Hungary, Duda in Poland, Duterte in the Philippines and the list could, of course, go on.

It is not my intent to survey the voluminous literature on populism, with which I assume readers are conversant. What animates my argument is the theoretical and political intervention of left populism as a response, not only to right-wing populism, but also new configurations of neoliberal techno-authoritarianism gaining power in the wake of the pandemic (Mouffe 2022). Right-wing populism is fundamentally a politics of resentment: it is a revanchist form of right-wing politics which capitalises on raw expressions of discontent with the status quo by opposing racist, nativist and xenophobic constructions of ‘the people’ to a conspiratorial relationship between liberal elites and ‘favoured’ minority groups (Mudde 2013; Judis 2016). Right-wing populism is also constituted by a performative hostility towards ‘intellectuals’ and ‘experts’—one which eschews complexity in favour of ‘common sense’ solutions, particularly in the face of intractable crises (Moffit and Tormey 2014).

In this context, one of the refreshing features of Mouffe’s recent left populist interventions is her insistence that the progressive left must urgently recognise the legitimacy of the widespread affective desire for security and protection in the face of overlapping economic, environmental and public health crises, whilst understanding that such “common affects” can be “addressed in different ways, progressively or regressively” (Mouffe 2022, p. 14). The specific term illiberal democracy is useful for understanding the regressive articulation of common affects precisely because it highlights the contingent relationship between liberalism and democracy. Commonly ascribed to Zakaria (1997), this term has been mobilised widely in contemporary discussions of democratic recession as a description of states which, despite adhering superficially to democratic rituals, threaten civil and political liberties and claim the ‘will of the people’ as a democratic mandate to act with impunity between elections (Nyyssönen and Metsälä 2021, p. 274).

The argument that the relationship between liberalism and democracy is a historically contingent formation, fundamentally at odds with itself, is what Mouffe (2005) has in mind with what she calls the democratic paradox. Liberal democracy represents a contingent historical settlement between two different traditions: one the one hand, constitutional liberalism (rule of law, separation of powers and individual rights) and on the other, the democratic tradition of popular sovereignty (Zakaria 1997; Mouffe 2005, p. 18). Liberal democracies, in their commitment to freedom of expression and association, must face the reality of pluralism within the demos. The paradox that Mouffe identifies lies in the seemingly irresolvable contradiction between democracy’s communitarian commitment to popular sovereignty and liberalism’s commitment to securing and defending individual and collective forms of pluralism. Mouffe’s next move is crucial for understanding the discontents of liberal democracy, how liberal democracies attempt to address them and, crucially, the role of education in such efforts:

What cannot be contestable in a liberal democracy is the idea that it is legitimate to establish limits to popular sovereignty in the name of liberty ... [O]nce it is granted that the tension between equality and liberty cannot be reconciled and that there can only be contingent hegemonic forms of stabilisation of their conflict, it becomes clear that, once the very idea of an alternative to the existing configuration of power disappears, what disappears also is the very possibility of a legitimate form of expression

for the resistances against the current power relations. The status quo has become naturalised and made into ‘the way things really are’. (Mouffe 2005, pp. 4–5)

The argument that Mouffe is developing here moves in two steps: firstly, if there is no rational resolution to this contradiction, all we are left with is hegemonic struggle—a passionate politics of contestation between different ideological articulations of the relationship between the values of freedom and equality, which provide the minimum ethico-political bedrock of liberal democracy. Secondly, since the articulation of liberalism with democracy is historically contingent, it follows that other articulations of democracy (both progressive and regressive) are possible (Laclau 2005; Mouffe 2005).

The relevant insight here is that education for democracy cannot be solely content with debunking ‘post-truth’ populist representations. It must also make space to interrogate representations of populism, whereby ‘populist’ becomes a pejorative adjective indiscriminately attached to any grassroots challenge to the disavowed irrationalities of the liberal democratic status quo (Petrie et al. 2019; Sant and Brown 2021). In such contexts, the rhetorical force of the adjective ‘populist’ is used to position oneself as rational and pragmatic in contrast to the irrational and emotively charged bias, partisanship or dangerous utopianism of one’s opponent. For example, Sant and Brown (2021, p. 416) cite media depictions of Jeremy Corbyn’s supporters as irrational and angry partisans to illustrate how this dynamic was used to dismiss left populism in Britain. In both theory and practice, liberal democracy—and its hegemonic formation combining constitutional liberalism with economic neo-liberalism—spuriously claims the ‘rational’ ground such that subject positions excluded from the demos are *de facto* cast as the ‘irrational’ Other.

Consider the obvious affinity between the logic of right-wing populism and liberal democracy: on the one hand, right-wing populism is premised on an organic version of ‘the people’ that, in its purity, is not marred by internal contradictions or antagonisms. Therefore, threats to the established order are constructed as an ‘external intruder’ (Muslims, migrants, the European Union and so on) to an otherwise smoothly functioning society. On the other hand, the consensus of liberal democracy is premised on the myth that society is a rational ensemble, unmarred by internal contradictions or antagonisms. Therefore, threats to the established order are constructed as an ‘external intruder’ (‘irrational’ right-wing populists, ‘indoctrinated’ socialists and anti-capitalists, ‘extreme’—as opposed to ‘moderate’—anti-racists, environmentalists and so on) to an otherwise smoothly functioning society. At the risk of over-formalising, one democratic paradox (citizens giving up freedom to autocratic leaders and populist ‘strongmen’ to protect freedom) is explained as the denial of another foundational paradox elucidated by Mouffe (2005).

At this point, it is instructive to clarify the ideological conception of freedom at work in this apparent paradox since, in my view, it only serves to strengthen this unlikely analogy between right-wing populism and liberal democracy. With right-wing populism, the democratic freedoms ensured by constitutional liberalism are arguably sacrificed in order to cling to the freedoms promised by the particular brand of economic liberalism that we associate with neo-liberalism (McGowan 2016; Blühdorn 2020; Swyngedouw 2022): neo-liberal citizens are promised the negative freedom of emancipation from the state and the contractual freedom to enjoy the fruits of one’s participation in the free market as a worker, consumer or property owner. Since (neo-)liberal democracy is manifestly not economic democracy in the sense of workers’ rights and meaningful citizen agency to influence the distal economic forces that determine their life chances (Malleon 2014; Wesche 2021), liberal democracy arguably produces its illiberal counterpart through an obfuscation and denial of its own irrationality.

Crucially, the affective desire to secure and protect this particular articulation of freedom depends on a presupposition of economic and material scarcity that is embraced by right-wing populists and (neo-)liberal democrats alike. The “politics of fear” that underpins right-wing populism is closely associated with a discourse of scarcity: jobs, welfare and public amenities, food, raw materials, energy and so on (Wodak 2015). This manifests in the securitisation of policy discourse that we currently see in the tendency to talk in terms of bio-security, food security and energy security. What is striking here is that liberal democrats and economists never question (or perhaps more accurately disavow) the presupposition of scarcity underpinning this right-wing populist politics of fear. In fact, one could argue that scarcity is the central presupposition upon which mainstream liberal economics rests (McGowan 2016). Rather than questioning this presupposition at a structural level, the approach of hegemonic liberal democracy is to read the misdirected fears of right-wingers as the unfortunate product of an education deficit, all the while assuming the moral high ground. This is precisely what Sant and Brown (2021) call the fantasy of the populist disease and the educational cure. However, if right-wing populism and its relationship to neo-liberal capitalism is reframed as a problem of the desire for enjoyment under conditions of ostensible scarcity (Žižek 1989; Copjec 1994; Tomšič 2015; McGowan 2016), then the entire premise of education as solution is fundamentally challenged, if not undermined.

Democratic Crisis as an Enjoyment Problem

To conceptualise democratic crisis as an enjoyment problem one must begin with the Lacanian insight that the subject is constituted through, rather in spite of, a sense of lack or absence such that “the subject is always attempting to cover up its constitutive lack through continuous and partial identifications” (Mouffe 2022, p. 39). Central to Mouffe’s approach to left populism is a recognition of the need to positivise the constitutive lack of the social subject through some form of identification. More so than in earlier writings, her work on left populism recognises that counter-hegemonic democratic politics must offer access to what Stavrakakis (2007, p. 269-9) calls “an enjoyable democratic ethics of the political”. McGowan (2013, p. 173) takes up this position in his own Lacanian analysis of right-wing enjoyment where he argues that, whether or not emancipatory politics offers a “truer version of the world”, the Right “offers a superior way of enjoying.” Given the significance of this insight to the argument I’m developing, it is important to explicate the idea of right-wing populist enjoyment.

To explain right-populist enjoyment, it is imperative to firstly clarify the means by which it appropriates leftist enjoyment. McGowan (2013) argues that, historically, left enjoyment is derived from challenging and subverting authority, whilst right enjoyment is derived from identifying with exclusive symbols of authority because of the social harm they cause, even to those who identify with them. Nevertheless, as progressive politics becomes increasingly associated with forms of expert knowledge and technocratic authority (the ‘liberal elites’), right populists are able to “convince their adherents that they are challenging social authority even at the moment when they cede themselves to it” (McGowan 2013 p. 190-1). This enjoyment is sustained in fantasies of return to these ‘lost’ halcyon days of ‘common sense’ conservative values. Importantly, right-wing populists enjoy this melancholic longing—this implied satisfaction of desire—which, if realised, would inescapably

disappoint (Stravrakakis, 2007; McGowan 2013). Therefore, the right-wing fantasies and forms of identification constituting the ‘people’ are sustained only through the figure of ‘they’ (the ‘liberal elites’ and ‘favoured’ minority groups) who apparently block the satisfaction of their desire. Secondly, to apprehend right-wing populist enjoyment more fully, it is important to understand the relationship between these right-wing fantasies and the disavowed failures of neoliberal capitalist fantasy at work in liberal democratic orders.

In *Capitalism and Desire*, McGowan (2016) seeks to explain the otherwise unlikely staying power and appeal of capitalism through the Lacanian position that our desire is reproduced and sustained through its partial fulfilment and by the compulsive repetition of failure and loss. Although this Lacanian theory of subjectivity exceeds (and is prior to) a specifically capitalist or neo-liberal form of subjectivity, it is easy to understand how the structural dynamics of capital map onto it. Capitalism—in its constant efforts to overcome its own limits—requires the constant reproduction and invention of wants, needs and desires (Harvey 2017). As such, capitalism beguiles us into thinking that the repetitive failure to fulfil our desire is merely contingent rather than constitutive of subjectivity itself (McGowan 2016, p. 38). But the capitalist injunction to ‘enjoy’ is also counterintuitively positioned alongside the presupposition of scarcity discussed above: an important component of the ideological justification for capitalism has always been to maximise the production of value under conditions of scarcity (McGowan 2016, p. 199). Thus, one of the fundamental contradictions of capitalism is its insistence on scarcity as a precondition whilst promising ultimately (in a future that never quite arrives) to overcome it. Since right-wing populists and (neo-)liberal democrats both cling to the presupposition of scarcity without questioning its rationality at a structural level, the introduction of desire and enjoyment as political factors poses a grave challenge to those who would prescribe education as a panacea for democratic crisis.

If, as Mouffe suggests, liberal democracy’s contradictions and exclusions are disavowed through spurious claims to superior rationality, then it follows that this lack of democratic reflexivity will, to some extent, extend to educational institutions and processes within such liberal democratic orders. My argument is that this leads inexorably to a situation where education becomes complicit in an institutionalised disavowal of the “post-truth inflected ‘facts’ and ‘arguments’ [that] underpinned part of the success of the neoliberal fantasy” (Swyngedouw 2022, p. 64). In fact, education itself becomes the *obet petit a* of anti-populist fantasy around which liberal enjoyment is organised, through promising epistemological, economic and political wholeness (Sant and Brown 2021). This fetishization of education—and fetishistic disavowal *within* education—is counterproductive and dangerous since it merely cedes the ground of critique and enjoyment to the populist Right.

This analysis doesn’t only present challenges for education circumscribed by the liberal democratic status quo, it also presents challenges for those on the Left who seek to challenge it. The displacement of a particular conception of education as ideological demystification, by desire and enjoyment, introduces a theory of ideology which, to paraphrase Žižek, inverts the Marxist aphorism that ‘they know not what they do but yet they do it’ to ‘they know it but yet they do it anyway’ (Žižek 1989; Tomšič 2015; McGowan 2016). The typical intervention of critical pedagogy is to suggest that since citizens vote or act against their ‘objective’ interests, a process of rational ideological demystification is necessary even though the “failures of consciousness raising are everywhere” (McGowan 2013, p. 173). From a psychoanalytic perspective, what this position misses is that we enjoy our cathexis in objects of desire because of the harm they cause and because of their failure. As McGowan (2016, p. 31) argues, “subjects undermine themselves and self-sabotage not because they are stubborn and stupid but because this is their path to satisfaction.” On this

reading, right-wing populist enjoyment functions because of knowledge, not in spite of it. Or, put differently, by occupying the position of knowledge, forms of critical education attempting to provide reasons against politically problematic or harmful beliefs unwittingly offer libidinal rewards for the believers (McGowan 2013, 2019).

To summarise, we might say that the psychoanalytic lens, attuned to “read desire”, helps us to understand “how a society could be founded on a non-recognition of the contradictions it contains” (Copjec 1994, p. 154). This insight is crucial for understanding how failure to apprehend the necessity of loss leads to an investment in anti-populist fantasies, which posit education itself as an *objet petit a* (Sant and Brown 2021), as well as right-wing populist fantasies of the traumatic desire of the Other, such as the immigrants or ‘welfare scroungers’ coming for our scarce economic resources (McGowan 2016, p. 44). Once we arrive here, the question becomes how to locate education in a triadic relationship with democratic politics and desire. What I would like to explore from here on is what can be achieved if we approach this question by conceptualising left populism as an education of desire.

Left Populism as the Education of Desire

For Laclau (2005, 2006) and Mouffe (2019, 2022), constructing ‘a people’ is both the central task of radical politics and a precondition of all democratic politics, more generally.

[D]emocracy is grounded only on the existence of a democratic subject, whose emergence depends on the horizontal articulation between equivalential demands. An ensemble of equivalential demands articulated by an empty signifier is what constitutes a ‘people’. So the very possibility of democracy depends on the constitution of a democratic people. (Laclau 2005, p. 171)

Laclau (2005, p. 69), for his part, glimpses in populism “the royal road to understanding something about the ontological constitution of the political as such.” Mouffe’s (2019, p. 82–4) advocacy of left populism builds on this work by “resignifying” populism “in a positive way, so as to make it available for designating the form of counter-hegemonic politics against the neo-liberal order” and for “equality and social justice.” It is important to reemphasise that this project was motivated their respective frustrations with leftist incredulity towards the ‘uneducated’ masses who act against their objective interests. In the words of Mouffe (2019, p. 50), the mistake of such leftists is that “they do not engage with how people are in reality, but with how they should be according to their theories. As a result, they see their role in making them realise the ‘truth’ about their situation.” Instead, Mouffe (2019, p. 76) returns to Gramsci in order to argue that left populist strategy cannot abandon the terrain of affect, desire and ‘common sense’ to the right but must instead engage in cultural practices that “connect with aspects of popular experience”, “resonate with the problems people encounter in their daily lives” and “start from where they are and how they feel.”

For both Mouffe and Laclau, hegemony is first and foremost about the interplay between the universal and the particular: a hegemonic relation is one in which “a certain particularity assumes the role of an impossible universality” (Laclau 2005, p. 115). Moreover, their formulation of hegemony is a theory of radical negativity based on the premise that antagonism is constitutive of all social identities, such that the moment of closure required to create an ‘us’ (whether ‘society’, the ‘demos’, or ‘the people’) is necessarily secured by

the exclusion of a ‘them’. Ensembles of heterogeneous demands and identities are connected contingently, rather than logically, through shared opposition to a ‘them’ and by sacrificing some of their particularity through a shared affective investment in one particular demand or identity that comes to ‘speak’ for the others. For Laclau and Mouffe, the struggles around these inescapable moments of closure are constitutive of the ‘political’. Although a fuller explanation is beyond the scope of this paper, what matters here is how this logic of hegemony maps onto an understanding of populism.

Laclau (2005, p. 72) terms “democratic demands” those which can be absorbed—at least partially met—by the state. For example, local demands relating to housing, greenspace, health and social care, education and so on. The potential for populist identities is said to emerge when unfulfilled isolated demands addressed to institutional power proliferate until, at a critical mass, they find common ground (become ‘equivalential’) in their opposition against institutional power. This shared opposition must be represented by an empty signifier, so called because, as stated above, the isolated demands are not joined together logically (through some objective sociological explanation for the relationship between these various unmet demands) but contingently through their shared opposition to the external blockage. However, the adversary must be named, as must the emergent ‘people’, and this naming happens when one particular demand becomes capable of hegemonising the social space. For example, the demand for a ‘Green New Deal’ is an aspiring empty signifier for a left populism, combining a plethora of environmental and social demands around climate action, energy security, sustainability, affordable housing and meaningful and secure work involving a ‘Just Transition’ away from a hydrocarbon economy (Mouffe 2022). These demands are articulated in opposition to the extractivist neo-liberal oligarchy blocking their fulfilment.

This left populist concept of strategically articulating and connecting demands is unquestionably relevant to education for democracy since, as previously elaborated in the discussion of educational agonism, political literacy requires the capacity for conjunctural analysis and articulation (Ruitenbergh 2010; Mårdh and Tryggvason 2017; Snir 2017; Abowitz and Mamlok 2020). Moreover, Mouffe’s (2019, p. 76) insistence that those working for social justice must engage in cultural and artistic practices that “resonate with the problems people encounter in their daily lives” and “start from where they are and how they feel” speaks strongly to practices of Freirean popular education and critical pedagogy (Mayo 2020). Nevertheless, on initial approach it is difficult to apprehend how constructing the unity of ‘the people’ might be educate desire by subjecting it to the discipline of reason, since it is purely nominalist: ‘the people’ is a retroactive effect of naming that requires a radical affective investment in a partial object (Laclau 2005, pp. 110–115; Mouffe 2019, pp. 70–78). In other words, what Laclau (2005) calls the necessary simplification of the political space raises legitimate educational questions about how it would avoid a parallel simplification of the epistemological space, with potentially deleterious consequences for the capacity of learners to engage in deliberative dialogue. For Mårdh and Tryggvason (2017, p. 611), this concern misses the point because “a simplification of politics does not reduce the differences between political demands, but instead makes the demands equivalential to each other.” Although this is an important clarification, my view is that it doesn’t fully address the concern raised for two reasons. Firstly, although it is true that placing differences in relations of radical democratic equality allows for an exploration of those differences through educational dialogue, educators and learners must look beyond left populism’s ontology to ground any such dialogue about the distinct social logics underpinning different forms of social injustice. The second issue concerns the nature of the relationship between discourse and affect. This is important to clarify because to educate desire is to

frame it as “something to be understood and subjected to the discipline of reason” (Levitas 1990, p. 149). Despite Mouffe’s claim that left populism denies an intrinsic link between epistemology and politics, it does appear to subsume affect within the epistemological horizon of their own discourse theory of democracy.

My claim is that, in order to understand left populism as an education of desire, it may be necessary to inquire into the limits of what Stavrakakis (2007) terms the discursive appropriation of Lacan. Stavrakakis uses this term to express concern about the way in which the subsumption of affect under discourse makes it difficult to tease out the crucial theoretical and political implications of affect—particularly enjoyment—in its own right. In the same way that Mouffe and Laclau refuse to draw dualistic distinctions between the material and the discursive, they refuse to draw dualistic distinctions between the discursive and the affective: as Laclau (2003, p. 283) puts it, “[t]he complexes that I call ‘discursive’ include both affective and linguistic dimensions, and, *ergo*, they cannot be affective or linguistic”. The problem with such a strategy is that “[t]o view discourse and the signifier in such an all-encompassing way ... makes it very difficult to theorise in any productive way the interrelation between them.” (Stavrakakis 2007, p. 99). To be clear, it is not that Mouffe or Laclau deny the material or affective dimensions of what they call ‘discursive complexes.’ Rather, it is that in the main, their theoretical apparatus tends to focus predominantly on the semiotic aspects of democratic politics at the expense of the material, the affective and the relationship between the two. Moreover, the refusal of dualisms appears to justify these analytical blind spots.

Perhaps this limit is most obvious in their concept of symbolic dislocation. Dislocation is a concept in discourse theory that accounts for the failure of a signifying system to represent social reality or hegemonise the social space. It is a disruption in identification where an empty signifier no longer functions as an effective ‘quilting point.’ Moments of dislocation are simultaneously moments of agency where political frontiers can be productively re-articulated. Nevertheless, it has been noted by several sympathetic critics that dislocation functions as discourse’s index of its own limits (Glynos and Stavrakakis 2004; Stavrakakis 2007; Carpentier 2022). A crisis of symbolisation bears the trace of the extra-discursive dimensions of affect and materiality but can only be understood within discourse as its subversion or resignification. If we insist on making affect co-extensive with discourse then we lose sight of the autonomy of affect and, more specifically, enjoyment in the investment with or divestment from particular forms of democratic identification. As Lacan (in Stavrakakis 2007, p. 101) argues, affect is what often remains “unmoored” in the face of failed attempts to represent it symbolically: “one finds it displaced, mad, inverted, metabolised, but it is not repressed. What is repressed are the signifiers that moor it.” In order to conceptualise the left populist construction of a ‘people’ as an education of desire Mouffe and Laclau’s political philosophy would arguably be enriched by insights from other Lacanian political and educational theorists who, in addition thinking expansively about the critical pedagogical implications of enjoyment and desire (Cho 2007; McMillan 2015; De Lissovoy 2018a; Armonda 2022), more directly address the relationship between political economy and enjoyment (e.g. Žižek 1989; Tomšič 2015; Dean 2016a; McGowan 2016).

As we have seen, Laclau (2005, p. 112) understands that enjoyment works by sublimating a partial object—what Lacan calls *objet petit a*—that promises fulfilment at the conscious level whilst sustaining desire at the unconscious level. This concept of the partial object contingently representing the whole ultimately leads Laclau to make the unequivocal claim that the “logic of the *objet petit a* and the hegemonic logic are not just similar: they are simply identical” (Laclau 2005, p. 116). However, whereas Laclau simply asserts

this as the ontological dynamic driving political life, it is left to others to work through the problematic of what it might mean to reflexively mobilise such psychoanalytic knowledge as part of an educational project. Here, we must look to scholars who, in different ways, explicate a psychoanalytically-inflected critical pedagogy oriented around a reflexive coming to terms with lack as an internal limit that constitutes of our subjectivity (Cho 2007; McMillan 2015; De Lissovoy 2018a; Armonda 2022). If we can understand political literacy in terms of articulation (Ruitenber 2010; Snir 2017; Abowitz and Mamlok 2020) then the critical pedagogical purpose of psychoanalysis lies in ‘traversing’ the political fantasies that misrecognise this constitutive lack as an external limit or blockage to be overcome—including the others (e.g. racialised others, authority figures, experts and so on) who steal our enjoyment and keep our desire “stuck in place” (Armonda 2022, p. 134). As an affective process, confronting the constitutive lack requires us to sustain the anxiety that “causes the learner to seek more secure narrative terrain” in order to then “direct this anxiety away from the safe haven of existing hegemonic constructions and into an exploration of those points of impossibility that are propelling the learning process” (McMillan 2015, p. 556).

Educating desire in this context is consonant with the left populist cultivation of a “multiplicity of discursive/affective practices that would erode the common affects that sustain the neoliberal hegemony” (Mouffe 2019, p. 77). However, the education of desire cannot merely revolve around a predominantly discursive strategy which reduces affective investment to a glue that contingently sutures multiple demands around a common signifier. The difference between regressive populism and emancipatory populism is more than the difference between right-wing articulations and left-wing articulations. It involves reflexively mobilising psychoanalytic knowledge about the difference between right enjoyment and left enjoyment such that the “external limit would no longer stand in for a repressed internal one” (McGowan 2013, p. 283). This education of desire is necessary for left populist forms of enjoyment based on what Fernandez-Alvarez (2020, p.159) calls, a politics of the “not-all” that is “attentive to the traumatic residues that exceed any given actualization of the universal.” Moreover, the education of desire must cultivate a reflexive awareness of the structural necessity for neoliberal capitalism to educate our desire in a particular way by reducing a constitutive lack (meaning a lack that is constitutive of the subject as such) to the lack of a particular product or commodity (Glynos and Stavrakakis 2004; McGowan 2016). Otherwise, right-wing populist discourses are well poised to provide alternative explanations for why the fantasies of neoliberal capitalism are unable to generate the enjoyment they promise. In doing so they construct their own racist and ethno-nationalist fantasies that generate their own forms of enjoyment. To reiterate McGowan’s arguments, failing to grasp the necessity of failure “looks for the secret key to the object [cause of desire] in the other” (McGowan 2016, p. 35). This, in turn, is what fuels fantasies of the traumatic desire of the Other (who comes for our scarce resources and threatens our enjoyment).

To summarise, it is tempting to posit that for left populism to function as an education of desire, its Lacanian influences should extend to interpreting the status of theory itself: that is, to consider left populism (and its underpinning political philosophy) from this perspective is to commit to moving it forward by “entering into a continuous and tortuous negotiation of its own limits” (Stavrakakis 2007, p. 87). An education of desire doesn’t merely oppose affect to epistemology, or enjoyment to knowledge. Rather, its task is to reflexively mobilise psychoanalytic knowledge about enjoyment in the service of emancipatory politics. For this reason, I am not so certain about the claim that “no a priori rationality” pushes unfulfilled democratic demands to “coalesce around a centre” (Laclau 2005, p. 169). Whilst I sympathise with the critique of incredulous educators and activists who cannot understand why people act against their ‘objective’ interests, left populism must

allow for reflexive examination of “the distinct impact of objective social relations on ... unconscious impulses and affective expressions” (Peterson and Heckler, 2022, p. 94) if it is to function as an education of desire.

This concern is highly pertinent given the epistemological tendency of right-wing populism to simplify complex realities, as well as its organisational tendency to channel the will of ‘the people’ through populist leaders. Given left populism’s stated commitment to the local concerns and lived experiences of ‘the people’ (as opposed to disconnected leftist intellectuals), it can ill afford to reproduce an elitist cognitive distinction between intellectuals who orchestrate the strategy and the masses who are unable to interpret and understand abstract social circumstances (Arditi 2010, p. 496; Peterson and Heckler, 2022, p. 97). For the construction of ‘the people’ to be an educational task, the artistic and creative practices that Mouffe sees so much potential in (because of their ability to mobilise affect) must also be coupled with a presupposition of intellectual equality in relation to ‘the people’s’ ability to subject this affect to the discipline of reason (Levitas 1990). Below, I conclude by drawing together and summarising the main considerations and features of such an education of desire.

Conclusion

Heretofore, I have argued that if illiberal right-wing populism is reframed as a problem of the desire for ‘enjoyment’ under conditions of ostensible scarcity then the premise of education as solution is fundamentally challenged, if not undermined. This is true, albeit in different ways, for education circumscribed by the (neo-)liberal democratic status quo as well as critical pedagogies aiming to challenge this same status quo. The analysis of democratic crises as enjoyment problems laid the groundwork for an analysis of left populism as an education of desire. I’ve argued that left populist theory offers a promising basis for the education of desire, provided that it is open to the continuous reflexive examination of its own theoretical presuppositions in the same way that it relentlessly, and rightly, insists on defending the radical reflexivity at the heart of the democratic project.

Ultimately, radical democracy, from which the left populist project emerges, seeks to institutionalise democracy’s unrelenting questioning of its own power relations and closures. Increasingly, Mouffe has turned to psychoanalytic insights following the realisation that the institutionalisation of antagonism—so-called ‘radical negativity’ with no end point—poses a difficulty in terms of how to mobilise and sustain affective investment in the democratic project. Given this challenge, I’d like to end by summarising the main considerations and features of the left populism as an education of desire. My hope, in clarifying what is at stake if we conceptualise left populism in such terms, is that this modest contribution inspires others to develop the argument that has been adumbrated in this essay by exploring its implications, both in theory and practice, for their own specific contexts.

The education of desire involves the reflexive mobilisation of psychoanalytic knowledge about enjoyment in the service of emancipatory politics. Firstly, to the extent that the populist right offers a superior way of enjoying, it is imperative to understand that it is predicated on appropriating left enjoyment and recasting progressive politics as the ‘elite’ imposition of expert authority that prohibits enjoyment (McGowan 2013). In this way, right-wing populism offers a double enjoyment: it mimics the left enjoyment that comes from challenging and subverting unjust structures and institutions, all the while tacitly

allowing the enjoyment that comes from identifying with right-wing symbols of belonging, protection and security.

Secondly, this form of right enjoyment is fuelled by (neo-)liberal democracy's disavowal of its own fantasy structures under the pretence of its superior rationality. If, however, the repetitive failure to fulfil our desires is understood as a source of enjoyment constitutive of our subjectivity, then we are better positioned to understand how neoliberal capitalism educates our desire by reducing a constitutive lack to a contingent lack, which can be remedied through participation in the 'free market'.

Thirdly, the education of desire involves mobilising this knowledge in order to cultivate a specifically left populist enjoyment of defiance against right-wing populist and neoliberal authority. However, as Mouffe (2019, 2022) cogently argues, left populism also requires that we recognise that the desire for security and protection can be articulated in leftist forms of identification, rather than dismissed as 'irrational'. In this sense, the education of desire speaks strongly to practices of popular education and cultural work that "resonate with the problems people encounter in their daily lives" and "start from where they are and how they feel (Mouffe 2019, p. 76). Through such processes, peoples' desire to express dissent and for security might be 'educated' such that their lived experience resonates with, and generates affective investment in, aspiring left populist empty signifiers. Since the education of desire is about paying attention to what would produce a broad ranging libidinal investment in policies for social justice and equality, educational work lies in 'filling' these empty signifiers with content by connecting affect with political analysis via psychoanalytic knowledge. To return to the example of the Green New Deal as a left populist empty signifier, the common affective orientation towards protection and security that Mouffe describes might be articulated within a discourse that identifies the extractivist growth model as a threat to security rather than a source of protection (Mouffe 2022).

A primary advantage of this left populist education of desire, as I see it, is to refuse the essentialist temptation of attributing particular affects to particular social groups and their ideological alignments. By rightly challenging the pseudo-rationalism papering over (neo-)liberal democracy's own fantasies, this approach challenges the liberal politics of moral condemnation and 'educated' condescension that accompanies it. Left populism intrinsically differs from its right-wing counterpart because of this anti-essentialist approach: in the final analysis, the education of desire is about cultivating a reflexive awareness of the dialectic between lack and desire such that negativity is recognised as generative of the desire for new democratic imaginaries and social configurations. In this sense, at the heart of the education of desire lies a radical commitment to critique any attempt to rationalise a final closure of the demos, whether the pseudo-rational justifications of liberal democrats, or the racist, xenophobic nostalgia of right-wing populists.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

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