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# illiberalism

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Emmy, let's start with a question about the broad conceptual framework on which your work is based, namely the role of emotions in politics and its connection to populism. Could you talk about how you see that relationship?

I see emotions as an intrinsic part of politics and of the development of any political identity. When people say that some actors are emotional and some are rational, I find that to be problematic and a bit strange. I come from the tradition of radical democratic theory, where affect and emotions play a much more prominent role than they do in other theories. This has really helped me articulate my research, but I also find that it's very applicable to the current context and the way that we look at populism now. I have been influenced by the work of Ernesto Laclau, an Argentinian political philosopher who has written several different

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identities. This is the beauty of Laclau's theory—he takes a psychoanalytical theory that is often very centered on individuals and puts it up on a collective level: “How can we understand affect in relation to politics and groups more generally?” Affect becomes the driving force behind politics. It is that desire to pin down your identity, to understand what you are, to realize your goals and desires, but according to psychoanalytical theory, this will never happen. It's always something that is in the process of happening; we want to feel complete. Laclau states that we often attach meaning to certain empty signifiers that are supposed to fill the constitutive lack, to make our lives complete—something that allows us to reach that unreachable part of ourselves.

These empty signifiers can be politicians, like Peron in Argentina—which is an example that he uses a lot—or Donald Trump. They can also be slogans or ideologies. They can be singular words. And I would also say that they can be non-material things: art, a protest movement... We attach meaning to these empty signifiers. Everyone has an affective investment in a certain leader or political ideology or program. This is what forms collective identities and it



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thought to be good if they're seen as rational—the problem of course being that we have a certain, quite narrow, concept of rationality, which is afforded to some people but not others.

For example, it is more often afforded to men than women, to people that are white than those that are non-white. By labeling some people as rational, we are immediately saying that these people are legitimate holders of power—they should be part of the hegemonic order—whereas the emotional bit is a marker of being an outsider. I think that this has been very obvious in U.S. politics in the past few years. People threw these accusations at Hillary Clinton: because she was a woman, she would be too emotional. They have also been directed at Trump and at other Republicans. This sensible/non-sensible, emotional/rational divide remains understudied even though it is key in our political debates as a proxy for saying that some people don't belong in politics.



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there is also xenophobia coming from leftist audiences in Europe. How can leftist populism be multicultural in some respects yet nationalist or xenophobic in others?



**Within the European populist left, there is a very strong commitment to the European nation-state order: nationalist identities are seen as vehicles through which to further the progressive political struggle.**

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## What about a leftist populist narrative that sees migrants both as victims of big, globalized corpora ^ ,s looking for cheap labor and as “culturally different”?

You're absolutely right here. If you're really against capitalist exploitation of cheap labor, then the solution should be to legislate against that, not to close borders. The answer from the populist left is sometimes to close the borders and to take care of domestic workers first—the claim being that we first need to implement socialism nationally and then build socialism internationally. I find that this type of narrative goes against a lot of left-wing thought, and it's been debated within the left in Europe since the Second International—it's like a 100-year battle. It is fascinating that this is still presented as a very progressive thought, even though one can see very strong similarities to the right-wing vision. This is not to say that the left and the right are the same or that the extreme left and the extreme right are the same. I do not want to endorse in any way any type of horseshoe theory that says that extremism looks the same wherever you turn. What I want to say is that in the European context, the narrative of the nation is sometimes stronger than particular ideologies on the left and right.



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of years and it's worked surprisingly well. There aren't any extreme differences between them.

So Podemos is definitely left and Vox is definitely right. For me, the emergence of Vox is less of a movement to the right of the political spectrum and more of a split in the main conservative bloc. Many of those voters who now vote for Vox used to vote for Partido Popular. I don't think that they have changed massively in terms of what they think; the programs and policies that Vox represents have been present in the Partido Popular ever since the transition to democracy in the late 1970s. The old ideas of glorifying the dictatorship, being against migration, being very hostile to any sort of progressive social policy, being very much against the Catalanian independence movement....Partido Popular has campaigned on these for the past 40 years.

Therefore, the rise of Vox is not as surprising as some people make it out to be. It's more that Partido Popular isn't holding onto those voters as well as they have in the past. So I would

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participating in the decision-making process? Podemos has embraced digital tools to ensure the involvement of their membership, which is completely free—you can just sign up at any time and there are no barriers to membership of Podemos of the kind that sometimes exist in other parties. So it is not just about Facebook and Twitter, but the deeper question of “How can we vote on new policy proposals online? How can we make sure that more people put forward proposals for us to consider at our party congress?” This is a very important part of the discussion: How do we increase deliberation and participation?

On the other hand, it’s important to bring up the connection between the online and the offline, because it isn’t a sharp distinction. A lot of the work that is done online mirrors what is happening offline and the occupations of squares that we’ve had on the left mirror things that are going on online—they feed into one another. A lot of people would like to think that because of the rise of social media, we now have this very different political landscape. I think it’s more accurate to say that online and offline are co-constitutive; social media is yet another tool that political actors have for organizing—and they’re using it—but that doesn’t






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