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## Chantal Mouffe and Albena Azmanova, Forty years after Hegemony and Socialist Strategy (a conversation)

Chantal Mouffe

University of Westminster, mouffec@westminster.ac.uk

Albena Azmanova

City St. George's, University of London, Albena.Azmanova@citystgeorges.ac.uk

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### Keywords

Chantal Mouffe, Ernesto Laclau, Socialism, Marxism

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Albena Azmanova and Chantal Mouffe

## Introduction

Over the autumn of 2025, Chantal Mouffe and I have been speaking at her flat in London's West Hampstead. Our conversation was prompted by the realization that this year, 2025, marked the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* – a book that has retained its significance and increased its influence over that time – a rare fate for academic writing. What began as queries on my side, and recollections on hers, about the book's conception, birth, and adulthood, evolved into many hours of conversations about the makings of a left intellectual and the current state of the world.

I read *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* in my early 20s when, still under the dictatorship that called itself 'communist' in my native Bulgaria, I enrolled to study political science at Sofia University. The book had a profound effect on me as it showed how one could provide a left critique of left orthodoxy, that is, without falling into the right-wing dogmas that were becoming then fashionable among us budding dissidents. This strikingly undogmatic way of reasoning made me then to long also to know Mouffe as a person.

Fast forward some forty years to 2025. My original plan to interview Chantal (who has over the years become a friend and an intellectual comrade) as a way of marking the book's anniversary failed – she has the habit of persistently reverting the talk to her interlocutors as she inquires about their life and ideas. I blame it on her love of life, people, and living. But I compiled some of our discussions in a way to foreground her thoughts in the shape of what in French one would call a 'mis-au-point', which is poorly translated into English as 'final clarification'. Parts of these dialogues will appear in consecutive issues of *Emancipations*, beginning with the current one.

Before we begin, let me add a word on the setting in which these conversations take place. Chantal Mouffe's flat's most prominent feature are the books that seem to be growing out of the walls – floor to ceiling – in the corridor, living room, her office and her bedroom; they pour out even of her wardrobes (I know this because we handled once a flood here from the flat above her bedroom, and she instructed me to save the books before the clothes). Countless wonderful artefacts from Latin America lend this home an atmosphere of magical realism. She speaks in that inimitable, typical for her English, spiced with French vocabulary, pronunciation, and cadence. I do not recall any of these meetings to have taken place in the absence of sparkling wine. And of course, she is clad in red.

Albena Azmanova,  
London, 28 December 2025

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**Chantal Mouffe and Albena Azmanova, *The London Dialogues*.**

***Part 1.***

**Albena Azmanova:** It has been forty years since Ernesto Laclau and you wrote *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*; it came out in 1985. Your book has been celebrated as a renewal of the left intellectual tradition but also demonized for betraying orthodox Marxism. Looking back at its conception, what motivated you to write it?

**Chantal Mouffe:** My curiosity has always been political in nature, that is, my thinking is driven by political concerns, by the urge to make sense of political developments, not just engage with theory. This also applies to the birth of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. It is therefore important to recall the historical juncture (*conjoncture historique*) in which we conceived the book – the particular circumstances (*circonstances*, she says) and the political issues they brought, as this is what spurred our thinking.

This was before the neoliberal hegemony set in. Back then, we were in an in-between moment: the social democratic model of capitalism was crumbling, and neoliberalism was just taking off. The crisis of industrial societies, especially after 1968 – when we began writing *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*—that was the moment when the new social movements' importance became undeniable. A transition was taking place away from Fordism and the kind of politics that corresponded to it. So, the issue was how to make sense of these changes. And new critiques emerged to reflect this – such as André Gorz's *Adieux au Proletariat (Farewell to the Working Class)*, and Alain Touraine's work on the 'post-industrial society' and the new social movements.

**AA:** What were the debates among the academic left then? What were the questions of the time that ‘hosted’ your thinking, so to speak?

**CM:** One of the big debates at the time that the new social movements prompted was ‘Do we have a new revolutionary subject? And do we need one?’ On the one hand, the new social movements were mobilizing, and on the other hand it was becoming clear that the working class, in a post-industrial society, could not play the role it had played within the standard Marxist model of progressive social change. So, the idea that the working class should be at the center of a socialist strategy was being challenged, which triggered a crisis in orthodox left thinking. You see, there was this acute conjunctural change and a need to make sense of it, and yet the classical tools of Marxism (and Ernesto and I were thinking from a Marxian perspective), with the centrality it gives to the class struggle, seemed poorly equipped to handle. For instance, I remember very well the debates that we had in the journal *m/f* (the British periodical that was published from 1978 to 1986) – that was the birth of (second-generation) feminism as a political movement, which made it clear that everything could not continue to be centered on the proletariat as the driving force of progressive change. There were forms of domination other than the ones rooted in class, there were other valid concerns with injustice apart from exploitation.

The Marxists didn’t know what to do with feminism. There was initially a strong reticence. The questions of feminism were first addressed by people who were not Marxists. When we began discussing these things, among the academic left, there were basically two positions. Some people admitted that new struggles, such as feminism, are important, but they insisted that the class struggle takes priority, it is the most important; they held that we should deal with the

problem of discrimination once we solve the problem of capitalism and establish socialism. That was the more open position. But some people were dismissing the new movements completely, saying they were a distraction from the class struggle. Others were saying the immigrants are the new working class – the new proletariat, the excluded. So, there was this debate about the revolutionary subject, and it was shaped as a sort of competition – who should lead the struggles for justice?

Our position, with Ernesto, was to say two things. First, injustice is rooted not only in class-based domination, there are also other forms of domination that we should fight against; that, for instance, feminism and anti-racism were *as important* as the class struggle. Second: We believed that we should not look for a new revolutionary subject. This was our position, the third position within those debates – with the idea that we need to construct a chain of equivalence among different actors and their struggles, not assign priority to one, and not ‘discover’ an available revolutionary subject, but construct one discursively.

**AA:** The first reactions to your book were very negative. You were accused of abandoning Marxism – for instance in Norman Geras’s response to our book in *New Left Review*, or Maar Cowling’s and Ellen Meiksins Wood’s commentaries. We were reproached for destroying Marxism’s analytical foundations, for advancing a discourse-theoretical approach that, it was said, failed to account convincingly for structures of social causation, and for pushing our critique of essentialism and class reductionism so far that no stable ground seemed to remain for socialist politics.

**CM:** Of course that was unpleasant to face, but it was to be expected – we went against a certain *strand* of Marxism that had become dominant already within the Second International – a strand marked by

determinism and economic reductionism (in the style of Kautsky and Plekhanov) – Marxism committed to the centrality of the working-class and its self-emancipation, all that based on (supposedly) ‘scientific’ reading of history that foresaw an inevitable trajectory of a transition from capitalism to socialism by force of a historical necessity. We reasoned from within a different trajectory of Marxism that was emerging, most strongly, from French scholarship, for instance through Althusser’s break with the economistic reading of Marx and his idea that multiple contradictions can converge to produce rupture.

**AA:** Indeed, after the publication of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* you were both credited and reprimanded as having launched a way of thinking that was labelled ‘Post-Marxist’. What do you think of this label?

**CM:** Well, what Ernesto and I were doing was to approach the phenomenon of the new social movements from a Marxian perspective, a perspective that could answer the questions that the historical conjunction of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century was generating, questions that the orthodox, economistic Marxism could not answer. But we did this within a Marxian *problematique*. I stand by this. In fact, my interest in the new social movements came after I had endorsed Marxism. I became first a Marxist and then a feminist. How was this for you?

**AA:** As you know I grew up in Bulgaria under a dictatorship that called itself ‘communist’. We were forced into Marxism, the economistic and deterministic variety, which came in a package with the claim that in our societies of ‘really existing socialism’ women were emancipated – so feminism was deemed irrelevant. And then I read *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (that must have been in 1987-88, when I was a first-year political science student at Sofia University), which a fellow student

lent me (through our underground networks of personal libraries). You can imagine how subversive the book was in that context. Together with Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man*, it completely reshaped not only my view of Marxism and how the world can be thought while reading Marx, but it also gave me a new imaginary of how I could be as an intellectual. It was hugely liberating and empowering.

But back to you: how did you shape up as a left intellectual? You come from a middle class (bourgeois?) Belgian family. How did you end up becoming a left academic?

**CM:** Ah, I never wanted to be an academic, I always saw myself as an intellectual, not an academic. But that's another story.

My hometown, Charleroi, in the 1940s and 50s was a strongly working-class town, mining was a core employment there, the labour movement was strong and militant, and the Communist Party had a real presence – so politics was never distant for me. Conflict was not an abstraction, not a pathology but a normal feature of social life – if you wonder where my positive attitude to conflict, and mistrust of consensus, come from. But I was first moved intellectually to the left thanks to Catholicism – as you know I went to a Catholic boarding school in Charleroi. It is through Catholicism's concerns with poverty, with economic and social justice, that I discovered the left, and then I moved to Marxism. If one is to be a good Catholic, one should become a Marxist (she laughs).

**AA:** In my life's version: if one is to be a good communist, one is to reject Marxist orthodoxy. This allowed us to fight the dictatorship in the name of communism, rather than see capitalism as the singular available historical alternative. It allowed us to read Marx free of the Marxist dogma. What was your personal path within Marxism?

**CM:** My path, my *cheminement* through Marxism, first started with Lukacs; his *History and Class Consciousness* strongly affected my perspective on the world. Through Lukacs I got interested in the formation of the subject. Then the next influence was Althusser, and then Gramsci. This is my path within Marxism – and this is a strand of thinking that takes culture seriously, that rejects the economic reductionism of orthodox Marxism.

So, as the new social movements in the 1960s and 1970s not only raised issues of injustice that were different from concerns with exploitation, this created the challenge of how to make sense of them as a phenomenon. And this was especially difficult to do within a Marxist perspective because of the centrality Marxism attributes to the political economy, to class conflict and to the proletariat as a subject of history. That is why Ernesto and I felt we needed to challenge something deeply within Marxism, while remaining within the Marxian *problematique* of fighting structural injustice.

**AA:** But doesn't indeed the shifting away from the centrality of the anti-capitalist class struggle mean also a change of direction away from socialism and even away from overcoming capitalism? This has been probably the heaviest charge against you.

**CM:** No, that's precisely the way our book was misunderstood. We did not say that we rejected socialism or the working-class struggle. We said the new social movements are not a replacement for the working class, but an *addition* to it in designing a new socialist strategy. We did not say the class struggle is no longer important, we said that other forms of domination are also important besides class, and that our historical juncture was ripe for such a shift in strategy. But many people

interpreted, wrongly, or misrepresented our position, to be 'give up socialism and go for radical democracy', replace the one with the other. For us, the radicalization of democracy by opposing the variety of forms of domination is a strategy, a socialist strategy, not a new direction.

**AA:** This is indeed important to make clear. But how do you see the articulation of a common position as part of the chain of equivalence between the concerns of feminism and those of the working class? For instance, as Nancy Fraser and I have pointed out in different critiques, feminism's demands for women's entry into the labour market strengthened capitalism. Nancy has observed that the expansion of the labour force weakened the power of organized labour. I have argued that feminism's remarkable achievements thus constitute 'empowerment as surrender' to the logic of capitalist reproduction, further strengthening the legitimacy of capitalism – one of those paradoxes of emancipation that haunt any struggles for inclusion and equality within a system that is otherwise deeply unjust. So, these are very different logics of struggle that animate various social movements. How are we to articulate an anti-hegemonic common position among them all?

**CM:** Yes, to take for example the way Nancy Fraser and Alex Honneth twenty years ago approached this matter of the diversity of justice claims in their book *Recognition or Redistribution* – as logics in competition with each other, pressing for a choice to be made. And within this debate, Ernesto and I were presented (wrongly) as being the ones who wanted to replace or displace the working class. But we were saying something quite different – that the very thinking in terms of a choice is wrong. We rejected this binary thinking. The choice was not redistribution vs recognition. We believed we needed to put this in a different *problematique* – in terms of articulating a chain of equivalence between

struggles against various forms of domination – against patriarchy, race, class.

**AA:** And this is possible because the feminist struggles against the social oppression women suffer cannot be reduced to a deficient recognition, redistribution, or representation – as at one point Nancy Fraser formulated the range of the struggle for justice. Because that formula still works within the logic of seeing justice as a matter of inclusion, on equal terms, within a system that might be otherwise unjust. Women's subjugation is only the more visible harm inflicted by a form of domination that oppresses both men and women. This is my reading of Bourdieu's *Masculine Domination*, where he notes that patriarchy and the type of masculinity it validated – as the form of domination he studied in Algeria's Kabyle communities in the late 1950s and 1960s -- is oppressive also for the men, not just for women. So the conflict is between the system of patriarchy, on the one hand, and men and women, on the other, not between men and women. This insight led me to formulate my notion of 'systemic' domination (in contrast to both relational domination that stems from inequalities and structural domination, one rooted in the class structure) – there are dynamics in the political economy of capitalism that cause harm other than exploitation and inequality, such as precarity and the environmental trauma. This is domination generated by capitalism's key operative principle – the pursuit of profit to which almost all – both capital and labour – are subjected. Generalised precarity and the deepening of the ecological trauma, which have affected the great majority of people, even those who profit economically from the system. These people have come to resent the lives they have to live in order to be 'winners' in that system. So we can construct, discursively, a chain of equivalence of all

victims of the system, even if we are in the bad habit of calling them 'class enemies'.

**CM.** I was coming from a different angle with the idea of a chain of equivalence. Still to this day what interests me is the question of the identification of political subjects. And there culture plays a big role. The political economy is always secondary to culture for me.

**AA:** But isn't the economy-vs-culture dichotomy in explaining human motivation too crude, and a false one? The way people engage with their social environment is through practices with economic and cultural dimensions that cannot be neatly distinguished. Marx spoke of "practical, human-sensuous activity'. Take our livelihoods – the way we provide for the essentials of life – how we perceive the future has much to do with how we manage our livelihoods. What brought me to investigate precarity – the insecurity of livelihoods, for instance, is exactly the question of why the working class acquired a right-wing political subjectivity; why it was abandoning the left and moving to the right. My answer is 'experiences of precarious livelihoods' which is neither a purely economic nor a cultural entity – how people 'make their living', how they perceive their future, what worries them, what they anticipate, and how they translate this into political choices. The fear of losing your livelihood is a psychological experience that currently engenders right-wing subjectivities. The way people make sense of their 'material', daily existence, and how on that basis they see the future, and how this shapes their capacity to be an agent navigating that future: Is this culture? Is this economy? I think it is both at the same time.

**CM:** These questions become meaningful only from the point of view of the issue of how to think of the subject of history, of the revolutionary

subject. But do we need a subject of change? Why do we need that? Most people are not discontent with the status-quo. The way I was brought up, for instance, was to endorse the status-quo.

**AA:** One can be discontented and feel that you have no agency, that you cannot make the decisive step from discontent to action – a step which is the essence of agency – don't you need a subject for that kind of move?

**CM:** No, I mean something else, I mean that there is no readily available subject of history that can simply be 'discovered'. It is not that there are different versions of the subject (e.g. the working class, the feminist movements), the very thinking in those terms is flawed. First, I prefer to speak about the collective agent, not a 'subject'. 'Agent' can accommodate the multiplicity, 'subject' has an individualistic connotation to me.

So, the issue is how to conceive of 'agency'. It is not just standing there available around some essence that gets to be expressed. The agent is not given by the economic circumstances, there is no privileged ontological subject; it is constructed, articulated discursively. In some circumstances the proletariat can be such subject, but it is not predestined for such a role. So, the agent is not simply available as an agent, it is born in its very *articulation* as an agent. It is through discursive articulation that agents come into being – this is the anti-essentialist understanding of agency that we developed in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.

**AA:** Tell me more about the articulation of agency. To take an example: the feminist movement can be articulated as competition with men for access to the labour market I mentioned earlier, and this is how many

men saw it at the time. Alternatively, it can be articulated in a solidaristic and collaborative manner. Is this what you mean?

**CM:** Yes, the demands of the working class are not necessarily progressive; it is the way that these demands are articulated that matters – they can be articulated in a right-wing way and in a left-wing way.

**AA:** How are we to articulate an anti-hegemonic common front nowadays? For instance, in *Feminism for the 99%: A Manifesto*, Nancy Fraser, Cinzia Arruzza, and Tithi Bhattacharya propose to build, to put it in your language, what you had called ‘a chain of equivalence’ among the various versions of feminism within a common anticapitalist struggle. Is this the way to go? Is this how you mean the articulation of a common revolutionary subject? Doesn’t the Manifesto enact what you had advised in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*?

**CM:** No. When Nancy sent me the manuscript of *Feminism for the 99%: A Manifesto*, about ten years ago, she said, “you will find it too Marxist”. It is true, the *Manifesto* basically treats the oppression of women as a side-effect of capitalism. Capitalism surely has many different consequences, and of course capitalism *articulates* the oppression of women in a certain way. But if you eliminate capitalism, you will not necessarily eliminate the oppression of women. There is not one single source of domination, and we cannot trace it all down to the political economy of capitalism. This is too simplistic. Building a chain of equivalence does not mean reducing all to one struggle. So, I agree that we do need a common struggle, but we also need different strategies within that struggle, a multiplicity of struggles; you cannot subsume all into one (e.g. the anti-capitalist strategy). What is important is the way ‘the common’ is understood. It can be one struggle.

**AA:** Indeed, under the so called ‘really existing socialism’ in which I grew up, women’s discrimination in the sphere of professional life was eliminated, but the social subjugation of women persisted – as they were expected to do all the unpaid reproductive labour and to service men. This pervasive patriarchy is still felt in Eastern and Central Europe where traditional gender roles remain more prominent and there is often less concern regarding systemic sexism – in contrast to Western Europe’s egalitarian dynamics regarding gender roles.

But let’s get back to the issue of articulation of a counter-hegemonic front. You must admit that this economic reductionism that you reject in *Feminism for the 99%* is helpful in articulating such a common front. How else will you bridge the grievances of diverse actors into a common struggle? If we admit, as you do, that there are various forms of domination and diverse struggles for justice, how do we build solidarities and articulate a common stance? Nowadays, such a common front is emerging from the right and is taking a reactionary form – all kinds of social groups – men, women, rich, poor, capital, labour, all sorts of ethnic groups, are forming a new hegemony that is replacing neoliberalism with something even nastier.

**CM:** That’s of course the most important strategic question. But you cannot have a theory about how to do that. There is no recipe, because it depends on the specific conjuncture. The ‘war of position’, to put it in Gramsci’s terms – the slow, strategic struggles over the terrain of hegemony -- takes place in many different forms. What we can do is distinguish different forms of *articulation* of these struggles according to the social formation. The way in which this articulation takes shape is important – women’s oppression is articulated in a neoliberal system differently than it was in earlier formations. It is not even enough to speak

of the logic of capitalist formation, or of neoliberalism. You cannot have one single answer that is valid for all capitalist societies. For instance, women's subordination is articulated differently in the U.S. and in Europe – because the hegemonic formations differ – the legal frameworks, social programs, and cultural narratives through which subordination is experienced and challenged differ significantly. In the US, it is woven through market individualism and racialised labour; in Europe, through welfare-state arrangements, care regimes, and culturalised conflicts around migration. In other words, the multiplicity of different forms of domination means that we need different forms of struggle.

*To be continued.*