

Hope, Passion and the New World Order. Mary Zournazi in conversation with Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau

Chantal Mouffe, Ernesto Laclau, Mary Zournazi

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The following is a modified extract and introductory conversational notes from Mary Zournazi's forthcoming book, *Hope—Conversations on Revolution and Revolt* (Pluto Press). The conversation was held between Mary Zournazi, Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau in Sydney, September 2000. This extract reflects an on-going dialogue on the politics of hope. The full conversation that appears in Zournazi's book explores the role of a new socialist imaginary, and provides an analysis of the interconnections between hope, class and politics.

MZ: In your collaborative writings and in your separate works you have called for the urgent need to find new ways of conceiving democracy, the political and politics. You've stated that there is no possibility of a renaissance of the Left without the construction of a new social imaginary. I want to invite you to think about how the concept of hope might fit into this idea of a new social imaginary that is so essential to the Left.

CM: I think it is very important for people to believe in some kind of future and that there are alternatives to the current political situation. I think even in the ordinary realm of life there is a need to look forward to something and to feel some kind of meaning in life. In the field of the political, it is very important that people think that their present condition could be better and this is something which has been lost today. In the past, there was the idea of a socialist future for some people and this horizon has now been

smashed for many people. In many respects, it's not so bad that we have a completely new start, but of course there are many dangerous ways to understand that. But now we have gone too far, people are told, 'there is no alternative to the neo-Liberal hegemony' and that it is here to stay. I have been arguing that this is very negative—as many people are no longer interested in politics because most democratic parties don't offer them any alternatives. But the whole question of the rise of the right-wing populist Haider movement in Austria, for example, is linked to this lack of hope that can be found in the democratic system. In fact, all my work about passion could be seen in a way as about hope, or the horizon of expectation and the lack of it.

EL: I would like to add something to that: the notion of hope is to some extent linked to the question of human emancipation. People feel that they are curtailed in their possible developments in a variety of directions and they create an imaginary of transcending these limitations and that is what the place of hope could have been. Now I think there is in some sense an end of hope if by *hope* we understand something which is transcending all possible human conditions—in terms of the fulfilment of a perfect state of liberation, emancipation etc. But, on the other hand, there is a proliferation of new hopes, new demands, and these demands can be put together to create some kind of more cessable social imaginary. This is not to say that our expectations are any less than in the past, but that at any moment in time we have to construct partial social imaginaries of transformation that can push emancipatory politics in many directions. But we no longer have these eschatological notions of hope—yet hope is something which is very much populating our dreams, present in our struggles and so on. So I think the task of the Left is to provide some more global notions of emancipation. But these notions have to be constructed around a particularized item rather than in terms of an ultimate fulfilment of a post-human society which is presupposed in the classical emancipatory position.

MZ: Could you tell me about the idea of passion, then, in terms of another way of conceiving hope and the links between passion and this notion of a different social imaginary?

CM: Well, I think that when you speak of the need for a social imaginary you are already implying that what moves people are not exclusively interests or rationality but what I call passion. But people who are rationalists do not believe in the role of the social imaginary. They believe that people need to find ways to act rationally according to their interests in a rationalist choice model or to find moral universal rules in another model. What they don't believe in is the process of symbols or in the construction of personality—because it is a different way to think about the construction of human identities. When you introduce this notion of social imaginary it implies that you are leaving the rationalist perspective behind. The term passion is some kind of place

holder for all those things that cannot be reduced to interest or rationality—you know, fantasies, desire, all those things that a rationalist approach is unable to understand in the very construction of human subjectivity and identity.

EL: Also, I think that one has to point out that whenever there is an attempt at transcending a certain social system there exists in the discursive elements which organize it something which is given through empty terms. For instance, if you say you want something like human liberation in a certain context it is going to be an empty term, but the *content* is going to be provided by a plurality of demands which establish an equivalential relationship between them (and this has been a key point in our analysis). So the more the social demands are organized in an equivalent way, the more empty the discourse of liberation will be, but this *emptiness* is the source of its force. I take a position here which is diametrically opposed to rational choice theory because they believe the ideal of emancipation has a final and definable content. On the contrary, emancipation for me is to put together some kind of dream which becomes more and more empty as new demands become associated with it. For instance, when people thought about the socialization of the means of production in classical socialist discourses, or when people thought about the market in Eastern Europe after '89, these were very concrete forms of the organization of the social. But, for the people, they evoke a much larger set of elements and this is what I would call an empty signifier which can evoke different demands in different situations. For instance, every oppressed group in a situation in which a repressive regime falls maximizes its expectation because what is falling is not that particular form of oppression—it's oppression in general. So there is a wide development of hopes coming from different groups and, I think, hope is something which is ineradicable and is inherent in any kind of political or social mobilization.

CM: Yes, hope is ineradicable but it can be mobilized in many different ways and that was the point I was making with respect to right-wing movements. The desire for something different for hope is ineradicable, but if democratic political parties and democratic systems do not provide a vehicle for this, then we are in the situation in which other forms of hope are articulated. I think this is very important to analyse. For instance, in the context of what I call a deficit of democratic politics to address this question of hope, we can understand the different forms of fundamentalism. For instance, in terms of religious fundamentalism because they offer precisely a discourse of hope which is something that people can't find in politics or the hope that can be found in nationalist movements. And, of course, right-wing parties in the context of politics are offering a discourse to articulate, to give sense, direction, to this demand for something new. So hope can be something that is played in many dangerous ways.

MZ: Yes, that's why I am interested in the mobilization of hope, because there is a

lack of hope for people in terms of future possibilities. So those people who have been disenfranchised whether it is economically, culturally or socially do tend to move toward, as you say, right-wing parties that offer them some other form of hope. This hope provides a re-confirmation of their identity in some form and I think that is the kind of danger—once you start to essentialize those hopes by identification. That is one point, the other issue is that the idea of hope may not necessarily always be about the future—a utopic dream and ideal we must attain, but in terms of democracy it is about a ‘future to come’. That is, as you have both written, the radicalization of democracy is never complete and never totalized. It is always, in a sense, both possible and impossible. But the first part of the question to you both is that idea of the mobilization of hope.

CM: That is why I insist on the need for political theory to recognize this dimension of passion and the fact that people need to have those affects of their imagination mobilized toward something. In fact, even people who are not having many problems in terms of security etc. also require this mobilization of passion. Because theorists tend to believe that if you are satisfied, you know, if you have enough to eat, then you don’t need to look toward something new. I think that is wrong because it’s not simply the poor who want to get a better situation but people in general need to have that hope of something different to look forward to. And, in fact, I do think we are in a dangerous situation today. I think it is very important to realize that in circumstances in which the future seems so bleak for people, this is the moment when right-wing movements are the ones who provide hope. In fact, recent studies about the rise of Hitler in Germany, for instance, have shown that one of the attractions of his movement was that he was the one who was offering German people a new idea about what Germany could be; he was bringing hope to German people. That is really terrible to realize but this has been a very important element in the rise of this movement. At the beginning many people were attracted by that because it gave them hope. And, you know, I am looking at Russia today and I am really afraid. Because one can see many analogies between the situation of the rise of Hitler in Germany and the situation in Russia today. So right-wing movements can come and capture the imagination of the people because they are the ones who say now, ‘we are going to be able to make you proud of being Russian again’. And, of course, the situation in democratic countries is less dramatic, but is also very worrying in exactly that same direction.

EL: Yes, it is important to see what the structure of hope is as a type of discourse. Hope is always related to something which is lacking. For instance, you hope for order if you are confronted with a situation of radical disorder. You hope for justice if you are confronted with a situation of radical injustice. It is always related to a certain lack which is the reverse of the discourse of hope. The point is, and here I agree very much with what Chantal has said, that the concrete content which is going to incarnate that

need for something which is unspecified is not given from the very beginning. To give you an extreme case, Hobbes' *Leviathan* where you have a civil society which is confronted with a situation of a radical lack of order—which is the state of nature. So the will of the ruler, whatever the content of the will is, is going to be good insofar as it can establish some order because when people are confronted with radical disorder any order will do insofar as it is an *order*. Now, who contributes to that order can change at any time and this is where you can have right-wing populism or you can have a left-wing possibility and so on. What we have to define in this hegemonic game is the attempt to channel this particular content and this broad social hope which has no precise content of its own. Now the drama of the Left today is that it has a certain handicap in the hegemonic game; and other discourses like moral majority and so on have had the upper hand in the last few years simply because the discourse of the Left has been associated with contents that are very difficult to put together in terms of a more widespread social imaginary. So, without hope there is no society because no society is able to cope with what simply exists. But to say we are going to administer what exists a little bit better is not a strong enough response. And, if you have a discourse in which the Left is seen as one more administrative discourse for something that the Right is doing anyway—without contributing to this dimension of a new social imaginary—then what you are going to have is the aberrant emergence of right-wing discourses.

CM: One of the reasons why I think there is no hope today for future possibility is precisely because people feel there is no alternative to the capitalist system; and even more to the neo-liberal form of capitalism which is dominant today. And the Left is in great part responsible for that because they seem to have capitulated to this dominance of capitalism and they are not thinking of another alternative. What I think is really missing is an analysis of the problem caused by capitalism and the neo-liberal form of capitalism. For instance, there is the belief that because of globalization nothing is possible and this has become the dominant discourse. For instance, socialist parties in Europe today say, 'well, because of globalization we cannot really do anything fundamental in terms of changing the discourse of Blair, capitalism and the neo-liberal hegemony'. Of course, they don't call it that but for them it is basically the acceptance of this situation because of globalization. What we need in this new socialist imaginary we were thinking about is the mobilisation of passion in a different way; different from right-wing populism. And that is the very condition of possibility—that an alternative is going to be imagined to the present neo-liberal system. If there is no possibility that things could be different, then one is not going to be able to oppose globalization. There are different strategies within globalization and I think this is what the Left should be able to offer. They should be able to say, 'well we are going to accept globalization because there are many important and positive things in globalization but we are going to propose another strategy to organise it'. Of course, this includes certainly a critique of some of the modes of regulation in the capitalist system. Because when we speak of

a critique of capitalism, we must be aware that we cannot go back to the language of before, 'smash the capitalist system and establish a completely new socialist system'. This is not a discourse which can be acceptable because capitalism is such a simple word to refer to many different modes of regulation. I mean it questions that we should accept the market economy, but we shouldn't see that everything is going to be organized around the law of the market. For instance, in France, they have a slogan, 'The market economy, yes. But market society, no'. Because what neo-liberalism wants is to have not only the market economy but also to transform the whole of the society into a market. And this is where I think the Left can really come up with some new strategies and proposals. We have to accept that we are not going to dream of a completely different system but that there are certainly many different forms of regulation of capitalization which are possible, and certain forms which are more compatible with the struggle for equality and so on. And this should constitute the nucleus of a Left-wing project. So I think that redefining those socialist lines is really what is needed today.

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