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Introduction: The Crowd in the History of Political Thought—Visions of the People

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Abstract: The article introduces the second part of a symposium, "The Crowd in the History of Political Thought," which is being published as a two-part special issue, and which explores visions of the role of the people and populism in the writings of past thinkers. The articles in this second part are by European scholars with disparate interests and approaches to the history of political thought. Populism proves difficult to define, partly because populist politicians evince different understandings of "the people" and the purpose of government. The liberal, democratic, and national visions of "the people" can be harmonious but can also become disharmonious. Untangling them by exploring how thinkers in the history of political thought distinguished between crowds and peoples can help us to better understand the ideological dynamics of our moment. Articles on Hobbes and Spinoza offer disparate accounts of the differences between peoples and crowds. Herder, by contrast, helps us understand the political self-determination of peoples, while Schmitt and Arendt offer rival visions of the tensions between democratic and liberal principles.

Introduction

The five articles in this second volume of the symposium "The Crowd in the History of Political Thought" are by European scholars with disparate interests and approaches to the history of political thought.[1] Volume 1 explored visions of the people linked to the simpler regime forms of classical antiquity,[2]

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[2]S. N. Jaffe and G. Graíño Ferrer, "Introduction: The Crowd in the History of Political Thought—A Conversation in a Socratic Spirit," *Review of Politics* 85, no. 2 (2023): 145–51.

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primarily ancient direct democracy, while this second volume contains articles on early modern and twentieth-century thinkers and examines the role (s) of the people in political modernity and liberal democracy. The articles furnish examples of how thinkers have differentiated between the concepts of the crowd and of the people, exploring the conditions that transform the former into a people which can then be served by its government.

The articles are informed by the belief that the history of political thought can help us to understand populism. In our view, the messiness of today's conversations about populism can be illuminated through encounters with thinkers in the history of political thought who reflect on the purpose and form of commonwealth as these pertain to "the people" as the source of legitimate authority. Certainly, the socioeconomic causes of populism are also crucial. The immense transformation from an agrarian to an urbanized industrial society, for example, was necessary for the development of mass politics, while globalization and international capital flows are now clearly drivers of popular discontent.[3] Nevertheless, it is in political concepts that we discover the normative and rhetorical resources that populist politicians exploit to make their claims. A turn to the history of political thought can therefore help us to better appreciate the character of various appeals to "the people."

Although the term is everywhere, "populism" itself has proven hard to define, largely because of the plasticity of its manifestations. "The irreducible ambiguity of different populisms," argues Pierre-André Taguieff, "comes from the fact that they are governed by a principle of complete syncretic freedom: they can attach to any ideology, ally themselves with any other orientation."[4] As a result of these ambiguities, it has been common to follow Cas Mudde and Cristobal Kaltwasser's account of populism as a "thin-ideology," "a kind of mental map through which individuals analyze and comprehend political reality, . . . [which] is not so much a coherent ideological tradition as a set of ideas."[5] Populist politicians, in other words, appeal to visions of a good people fighting against bad elites while drawing resources from "host ideologies."[6] In our view, these host ideologies are not simply there for the taking but also represent sources for the populist politician's understanding of the people.[7] As Yves Mény and Yves Surel correctly point out, the confusion

[3]The early diagnoses of the populist phenomenon in the United States, Russia, and the developing world tended to associate populism with the conflicts between industrialization and agrarian life and between modernization and tradition. Angus Stewart, "The Social Roots," in *Populism: Its Meanings and National Characteristics*, ed. Ghita Ionescu and Ernest Gellner (Letchworth: Littlehampton Book Services, 1969), 180.

[4]Pierre-André Taguieff, "Populism and Political Science: From Conceptual Illusions to Real Problems," *Vingtième Siècle: Revue d'histoire* 56, no. 4 (1997): 9.

[5]Cas Mudde and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 6.

[6]Ibid., 21.

[7]Taggart distinguishes between the "secondary features" that different populisms adopt from other ideologies and a common core. Cf. Paul Taggart, "Populism and

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originates from "the fundamental ambiguity of the main and ultimate reference, 'the people.'"[8] Although blurred together in political life, we can nonetheless distinguish between liberal, democratic, and national visions of the people.

Liberal democracies base their legitimacy on (1) the protection of citizens' rights, (2) the will of the majority, and (3) the national distinctiveness of political communities. These principles have been combined in many functional ways. The protection of rights, for example, has often been best ensured by a political form that adheres to the will of the majority. And it can be plausibly argued that it is only liberal constitutionalism that makes pluralistic democracy possible. Moreover, in liberal democracies, the national community has consistently served as the means of defining political boundaries. Yet democratic majorities can also become captive to visions of national identity which can be more or less exclusive. Even if these conceptions of the people have frequently proved harmonious, they can also become disharmonious. Tensions in contemporary liberal democracies, especially those fueled by populism, involve urgent claims about the proper balancing or relative priority of distinctive visions of the people: the people as the whole sovereign body, the people as the majority, the people as the national community, the people as a particular political class, or the people as the full group of rights bearing individuals.

It is the dynamic tension and messy entanglement of these competing interpretations of the people which, in our view, makes contemporary populism so difficult to diagnose. To untangle matters theoretically, we can simplify and say that liberalism depends on one vision of the people, democracy another, and nationalism still another. Despite this, for every vision, legitimate power flows only from the people. The populist politician claims that the existing order is broken, which necessitates that they speak for the people, that they stand for its interests. Their own legitimacy as a leader is thus linked to the declining legitimacy of the regime. But how and why such politicians claim the existing order is broken depends on their background vision—or rhetorical articulation—of what constitutes "the people" in the first place, and on their related understanding of how the interests or rights of "the people" should be ensured by the political order in question.

Certainly, populist politicians today often appeal to nationalism, while many oppose the limitations of liberal constitutionalism, claiming allegiance to an unmediated democratic principle. As a result, many students of populism associate it with what we are calling the democratic and national visions

'Unpolitics,'" in *Populism and the Crisis of Democracy*, vol. 1, ed. Gregor Fitzi, Juergen Mackert, and Bryan Turner (London: Routledge, 2019), 79–87.

[8]Yves Mény and Yves Surel, "The Constitutive Ambiguity of Populism," in *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*, ed. Yves Mény and Yves Surel (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 6.

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of the people. Our contention, however, is that populism can also appeal to the protection of rights over the expression of the will of the majority without abandoning "the people" as a legitimizing principle. Rights talk, in other words, allows politicians to critique the performance of existing institutions with reference to safeguarding the rights of "the people." And since a right is something owed, the denial of a fundamental right generates popular anger and imbues such claims with a nonnegotiable and urgent character.

To return to Mudde and Kaltwasser's thin definition, populism is "an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus the 'corrupt elite,' and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people."[9] Because of framings of this sort, populism has often been linked to claims of the primacy of the democratic principle over the liberal one. Populist rhetoric, then, generally appeals to a vision of democracy that clashes with those constraints on the popular will inherent in the liberal-democratic synthesis. Margaret Canovan, for example, argues that "although populist movements are usually sparked off by specific social and economic problems, their common feature is a political appeal to the people, and a claim to legitimacy that rests on the democratic ideology of popular sovereignty and majority rule."[10] Canovan is correct, but we believe her assessment is partial in considering popular sovereignty and majority rule to be the only claims to legitimacy available to populist politicians. Again, there are other appeals to "the people," including liberal ones.

In addition to tensions between the liberal and democratic conceptions of the people, there can also be frictions between the principle of national self-determination and cosmopolitan liberal visions. For example, certain populist energies can be understood as responses to the perceived movement of the moral and political center towards a universalism that is difficult to harmonize with genuinely democratic decision-making, which for now at least remains irreducibly national. Pierre Manent, for example, maintains that both the Left and Right were originally populist, at least to some extent. They possessed identifiable visions of the people, for the Right, the nation, for the Left, social class. For Manent, the pejorative use of the term "populism" is linked to the abandonment of these two referents and the attendant embrace of a newly respectable cosmopolitanism, according to which "peoples or classes—indeed, human communities or associations in general—do not have any sovereignty or intrinsic legitimacy. They cannot make up the framework of human action. The only humanly significant realities, the only ones which are entitled to incontestable rights, are the individual on the one hand

[9]Mudde and Kaltwasser, *Populism*, 6.

[10]Margaret Canovan, "Taking Politics to the People: Populism as the Ideology of Democracy," in Mény and Surel, *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*, 25.

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and humanity on the other."[11] We agree with Manent that populist claims are often based on democratic or national appeals that respond to cosmopolitan visions. But left populist logics can also arise from the defense of an extended understanding of rights typical of the "expressive individualism" of modern societies, which right-wing populists then counterclaim violates the democratic will of the majority. In whatever way we label these movements, they all involve clashing claims about "the people" and about the legtimate purpose of government.

Our goal is not to assess which of these arguments, if any, is normatively correct or even descriptively accurate, but rather to identify the contested ways in which conceptualizations of "the people" issue forth in rival conceptions of the purpose of government. It is the failure (or perceived failure) of a political order to satisfy the imperatives of one or more of these principles which then affords politicians the ability to speak for "the people," and which gives populist arguments their urgency and nonnegotiable character. This is the case because the claims involved go down to the very foundations of political legitimacy. Our schematization, then, captures ways modernity has conceived of the purpose of politics as it relates to the idea that power arises from the people, which gives birth to forms of populism rooted in distinctive conceptions of the people.

This schematization is itself a simplification, albeit a useful one, because there are multiple democratic visions, liberal visions, national ones, and so forth. While these elements combine in the complexity of actual politics, they enable disparate populist claims and so can be theoretically teased apart. What unites them is that populist politicians characteristically arrogate political authority to themselves by denying legitimacy to a political order that has failed to safeguard the true interests of "the people." In focusing on thinkers who conceptualize the role of "the people" in politics in novel ways, the articles of this second issue can help us to see with greater clarity what the messiness of political life often obscures.

Luc Foisneau's "The Hobbesian Crowd Problem" scrutinizes Hobbes's conception of the crowd as it relates to his understanding of the people. Here, the represented people rules while the subjected crowd refers to the same group as subjects. They are the obverse and reverse of a single coin, the same people understood in a double sense. Foisneau's examination is revelatory of Hobbes's highly individualistic conception of what only appears to be

[11] Pierre Manent, "Populist Demagogy and the Fanaticism of the Center," *American Affairs* 1, no. 2 (2017): 10–11. Like Manent, Canovan has linked populism to a reaction against the so-called vanguardist assumptions of our political culture, while Chantal Delsol claims that contemporary populism represents an angry response to the allegedly "idiotic" character of the preference for one's own community. See Margaret Canovan, "Populism for Political Theorists?," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 9, no. 3 (2004): 241–52; and Chantal Delsol, *Populisme: Les demeurés de l'histoire* (Paris: Éditions du Rocher, 2015).

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group behavior. Upon scrutiny, collective agency proves to be an aggregate of individual wills, magnified deceptively by the numbers of the multitude. Foisneau also explores Hobbes's fear of the dangers posed by seditious crowds and those demagogues who falsely claim to represent the people.

For Hobbes, the people living in a tyranny are no less a people for living under a tyrannical regime. According to Spinoza's quite different view, a tyranny is characterized by a crowd whereas democracy is defined by the higher social existence of a people, who are capable of rationality, of an enlightenment distinguishing them from the superstitious mob. Carlo Altini's "The Crowd, the People, and the Philosopher in Spinoza's Political Philosophy" compares "the people" and "the crowd" and locates Spinoza's account of tyranny and democracy within his higher perspective on the contemplative wisdom of the philosopher. The space democracy provides for rationality and freedom renders democracy more powerful—and more effectively stable—than theocracies and tyrannies, which are defined by an unstable irrationality. Here, we observe an identifiable antecedent to the claim that liberal democracies simply work better than other regimes, especially authoritarian ones. Nonetheless, despite their differences, tyrannies and democracies are both deficiently wise from the perspective of philosophy. Spinoza retains the Socratic view of the contemplative life as transcending the political one, while affording democracy a justification more robust than that provided by any classical thinker. Democracy facilitates reason as well as freedom in ways that matter, and it provides durable goods that require protection, even if true freedom and wisdom remain the purview of the rare few.

In "Herder on the Self-Determination of Peoples," Eva Piirimäe explores the writings of Johann Gottfried Herder with a focus on his understanding of the alignment or misalignment between peoples and their governments, with the hope of bringing Herder into the philosophical story of the genesis of the Enlightenment idea of self-determination. The question of how one people is distinguished from another emerges, along with the related question of the mutually constitutive relationship between a people and its government. Unlike individualistic strains of liberal contractualism, Herder conceives of human beings as sociable and peoples as something closer to wholes, emerging through shared experiences over time. While other thinkers stress the rational and instrumental—and abstract regime types, tyranny, democracy, etc.—Herder focuses on the affective and poetic, as well as on the notion that a healthy politics involves continuous evolution, or self-constitution, between a people and its government. This is not to say that Herder advocated direct democracy. Instead, he hoped for aristo-democratic leaders. Piirimäe explores Herder's diagnoses of the lifelessness of artificial "state-machines" as these relate to his organic, vitalist conception of peoplehood. Despite his focus on the distinctiveness of peoples, Herder also entertains forms of collective self-government compatible with overlapping European identities (or a common European spirit) nourished by his

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underlying belief in *Humanität*. In short, he wishes to do justice to particular visions of the people as well as universal ones.

With Montserrat Herrero's "Carl Schmitt on the Transformations of the People in Modernity," we move into the twentieth century. Schmitt is wrongly if commonly interpreted as a partisan of authoritarian populism. Instead, Herrero maintains, he believed modern politics inevitably slides toward authoritarian populism given the character of political modernity itself. On her reading, Schmitt is genealogist of the modern condition. It is the nature of the people as the constituent power, a revolutionary power, that enables populism. It is the need to represent a whole or totalized people with a single voice, a problem Hobbes also wrestled with, that gives modernity its populist totalitarian character. But unlike Hobbes, Schmitt isolates dynamics within the arc of historical experience, beginning with the French Revolution, that buttress his claims about the effectual truth of the revolutionary conception of the people. This conception opens space for populists to claim to speak for the true people, which they exploit to seize power. Schmitt's critique of parliamentarianism, according to Herrero, is not that it necessarily fails but that it was only truly suited to the medieval world. Similar procedures will therefore fail in the modern one, that is, they will become subverted by majorities driven by demagogy or become problematically captured by minority alliances. Herrero provocatively suggests that, according to Schmitt, it is only by renouncing the constituent power of the people that the populist condition can be escaped.

Lars Rensmann's "Illusions of Sovereignty: Understanding Populist Crowds with Hannah Arendt" assembles elements of Arendt's thought into a comprehensive diagnosis of the conditions and character of authoritarian populism, rooted in her account of organized mobs and their strongman leaders, her treatment of the illusions of sovereignty, which involve an abstract, exclusionary conception of the people, and her account of the dangers posed by the loss of factual truths which anchor our shared world. It serves, at least in part, as a critical rejoinder to Herrero's Schmitt. Lies and propaganda are moreover accelerated by changes in our modern information ecosystem. Contra Schmitt, authoritarian populism is emphatically not the fate of constitutional democracies but a reality to be resisted forcefully. Constitutional democracy is properly bound up with intermediary institutions and accountability mechanisms that diffuse power and protect rights, which facilitates that pluralism which is the hallmark of true democracy. Arendt shines light on the wider dynamics of modernity, exacerbated by a growing sense of uprootedness and the ever more rapid transformation of our digital public spheres, all of which nourish authoritarian populist tendencies.

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