M I K K E L   F L O H R ⓘ

The Populist Foundations of Democracy: A Conceptual History of "the People" [Folket] in the Constitutional Struggles in Denmark, 1830–1920

Abstract

This article reconstructs and analyses the conceptual history of "the people" [*Folket*] in modern Danish history. It applies qualitative and quantitative methods to analyze new data and archival materials and provides a detailed study of the construction, development and central role of populist conceptions of "the people" in the constitutional struggles between 1830 and 1920 that transformed Denmark from an absolute monarchy into a parliamentary democracy. I argue that these populist conceptualizations of "the people" shaped and fostered the emergence of the ideas and practices of parliamentary democracy as "the people's rule" [*Folkestyre*]. This case study thereby challenges contemporary assumptions about an inherently adversarial relationship between populism and democracy. Moreover, it makes a number of empirical and analytical contributions to the existing historiography, as well as the literature on the construction of "the people," democracy and populism.

Keywords: The People; Democracy; Democratization; Populism; Denmark; Democratic Theory; Nationalism; Constituent Power; Conceptual History; Historical Sociology.

DEMOCRACY means "the rule of the people" and presupposes a coherent conception of the particular "people" that is to rule. This article reconstructs and analyzes the conceptual history of "the people" [*Folket*] and its relationship to democracy in modern Danish history. It provides a historical and discursive analysis of the constitution, development and central role of the concept of "the people" in the constitutional struggles between 1830 and

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1920 that transformed the Kingdom of Denmark from an absolute monarchy into a parliamentary democracy. I argue that the distinctly populist conceptualizations of "the people" that emerged from and formed a central part of these constitutional struggles had a profound impact on the development of the ideas, concepts, practices, and institutions of parliamentary democracy as "the people's self-rule" [*Folkets Selvstyre*] and later as "the people's rule" [*Folkestyre*], which remains the predominant vernacular concept of democracy in Denmark to this day. I show that the concept, practices, and institutions of democracy are rooted in a populist conception of the people as a coherent and autonomous authority standing outside and above governments, parliamentary majorities and, ultimately, the constitution. On this basis, I argue that it is necessary to reevaluate the predominant understanding of a supposedly contradictory relationship between populism and democracy.

The article traces the transformation of the feudal notion of the people as a category of subjects of patriarchal authority into the sole legitimate political authority underpinning modern Danish democracy. It follows the transformation of the concept by the introduction and deployment of natural law arguments used to rationalize absolutism, through the mobilization of German Romantic nationalist notions of the people in the National Liberals' struggle for a "free constitution" between 1830 and 1849 and the subsequent transformation of these ideas in the Left Party and the wider agrarian movement's popular struggles for parliamentary democracy *qua* the people's self-rule in the last three decades of the nineteenth century, which was only cemented once and for all with the labor movement's popular mobilization against the king's "coup" during the Easter Crisis of 1920. I show how these struggles shaped and were in turn shaped by fundamentally populist conceptions of the people as an independent political subject, politically and morally counterposed to the reigning political elites and the institutions that empowered them. This in turn shaped conceptualizations of democracy *qua* the people's (self-)rule.

The article contributes to the contemporary literature on populism, providing an empirically informed challenge to the predominant assumption that "populism"—understood as politicians, parties, and movements deploying unitary conceptions of "the people" politically and morally counterposed to elites and other groups—constitutes a fundamental threat to democracy [Arato and Cohen 2017; Mounk 2018; Mudde 2004; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017; Müller 2017; Rummens 2017; Urbinati 2019; see also Kaltwasser *et al.* 2017], by showing how the construction of precisely such populist conceptions of the people were central in the sustained struggles for and establishment of

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democracy in Denmark.[1] More specifically, my conceptual history of "the people" in the constitutional struggle in Denmark shows that parties and movements that relied on discourses that conform to contemporary definitions of populism (namely the National Liberals, the Left Party, and the Social Democrats), were the main actors that fought for, shaped, and, ultimately, attained democracy in Denmark. This suggests that the relationship between populism and democracy is a lot more complex than the contemporary literature assumes, in the sense that populism and democracy are not necessarily separate or opposed, but may be compatible and, at times, complementary.

The article also contributes to the growing English-language literature on the various historical constructions of "the people" and their constitutive role in the constitution of modern democracy [most notably Ackerman 1993; Frank 2010; Morgan 1988; Olson 2016] with an analysis of the otherwise neglected case of Denmark. The Danish case is of particular interest because of the prominent role that populist concepts of the people played in the conceptualization of, struggle for, and establishment of democracy [see Nevers 2011: 119–44]. The article synthesizes and supplements the recent primarily Danish-language literature on the concepts of "the people" and "democracy" [especially Flohr 2022; Korsgaard 2004; Nevers 2011; Nevers and Skov 2019; Nørgaard 2016; 2022; Nygaard 2011] with new data, archival materials, and analysis. It moves beyond the predominant historiographical assumption that democracy was established with the June Constitution of 1849, together with a uniquely compromise- and consensus-oriented political culture, to reveal the central role that the concept of the people played in the formulation of democratic ideas and the sustained struggle for their realization, which René Karpantschof has recently shown was not successfully concluded until 1920 at the earliest [Karpantschof 2018, 2019; Karpantschof and Mikkelsen 2013].

The article is based on quantitative and qualitative analysis of previously unexplored archival materials. Most notably I use quantitative data drawn from the Danish Royal Library's digitized newspaper archive (which contains approximately 35 million OCR-scanned newspaper

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[1] Note that I reject as theoretically incoherent and historically unfounded claims that populism emerged only after and as a reaction to liberal democracy [for example, MÜLLER 2017; TAGGART 2002; URBINATI 2019; see also MUDDE and KALTWASSER 2017)]. Populism emerged as one expression of the more general principle of popular sovereignty that also informed early modern doctrines of absolutism, as well as doctrines of liberal constitutionalism and representative government that inform much of contemporary democratic theory and practice [von GIERKE 1939: 91–97; HOBBES (1651/1668) 1994; LOUGHLIN 2022; MANIN 1997; ROUSSELIÉRE 2021; TIERNEY 2008, 56ff].

pages from 1750 to the present) to show the increasing historical centrality of the terminology of "the people" in relation to other concepts of collective identity and pinpoint central periods in its historical development and deployment. This preliminary quantitative analysis is followed by a more detailed qualitative analysis of the development of the meaning(s) of the concept, in and as a central part of the successive social and political struggles between 1830 and 1920. It draws on and analyzes material from the aforementioned archive and others, in addition to collections of historical dictionaries, parliamentary records, party programs, constitutions, and a number of other historical documents.

I employ the methodological resources of conceptual history to analyze this material. Conceptual history focuses on the diachronic development of the meaning of fundamental concepts of social and political discourse through contextual analyses of their deployment, semantic investments, and relations to other concepts, which define and delimit their meaning, understood as both a reflection of and an effective factor in historical development [Koselleck 2004: 81–89; 2011: 16–22; 1996: 62–64]. This entails a commitment to the methodological view that concepts develop their meaning in and as part of particular social and political contexts and conflicts. My aim is therefore not to provide a purely linguistic history of the semantic development of the concept of "the people" but to inscribe and analyze it as part of an historical sociology of the constitutional struggles in Denmark [Abrams 1982; Calhoun 2003; Skocpol 1984].

The article consists of five sections. Section 1 provides a quantitative overview of the use of the concept of "the people" and its semantic developments over the past 200 years. The following sections inscribe and analyze these developments in their specific historical and political contexts. Section 2 analyzes the deployment of Romantic nationalist conceptions of the people and natural law arguments in the National Liberals' struggle for a free constitution. Section 3 analyzes the Left Party's transformation of these ideas in the prolonged social and political struggle for parliamentary democracy *qua* the people's self-rule. Section 4 analyzes the further use and development of these concepts in and after the Social Democrats' confrontation with the king during the Easter Crisis of 1920. Finally, I conclude that while the interlinked concepts of the people that developed in the course of the Danish constitutional struggles from 1830 to 1920 may conform to contemporary definitions of populism, they formed a central part of the struggle *for* democracy and have since been used to support and sustain it. On this basis I proceed to reconsider the

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predominant contemporary assumptions about the negative relationship between populism and democracy.

The emergence of the people in Danish political discourse

The historian Aksel Erhardt Christensen has highlighted the some-what confounding absence of a concept designating the entire populace in its own right in the late Middle Ages, when Danish began to replace Latin as the official language of record. He points out that the Danish transla-tions of the Latin *Communitas*, such as *Menighed* (congregation) and *menige Almue* (commoners), were used solely to denote the common people and lower estates as distinct from the higher and noble estates [Christensen 1976: 265]. The concept of "people" [*Folk*] was used pri-marily in a domestic context to denote a group of individuals subject to a specific patriarchal authority within the family, household or workplace, although the concept was also extended to describe the subjects of the king or God (both commonly conceived as fathers/patriarchs). This under-standing remains evident even in later dictionaries, such as Christian Molbech's (1783–1857) *Dansk Ordbog* (published 1832–1833; second edition 1854–1859), which define "people" as "persons that make up a family, belong to a house […] in particular servants" [Molbech 1859: 526], as well as the later historical dictionary *Ordbog over det Danske Sprog*, which covers the period 1700–1950 and reiterates the definition of "people" as "persons that are united by ancestry: family, extended family" and "a collection of persons that assume the same position in relation to a particular goal or person," supplemented by the examples of soldiers, workers, and servants [Det Danske Sprog- og Litteraturselskab 2005].[2] The concept of "people," in other words, was primarily a category of subjection to a specific patriarchal authority and did not denote a people in its own right. The reason for the absence of a concept corresponding to our contemporary conception of the people is that the populace was conceived primarily in terms of its organization into different feudal estates [*Stænder*], united only in their formal subjection to the authority of the monarch [Korsgaard 2004: 40–42, 44; 2022: 96–99; Nevers 2011: 120].

However, this feudal organization and conception of society was gradually undermined. During the Reformation the clergy came to be

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[2] All quotes are translated from Danish by the author unless otherwise noted.

subordinated to the king and incorporated in the state in 1537–1539, while the nobility's political power and influence was drastically curtailed by the introduction of absolutism in 1660 [Jespersen 2013: 64–68; Korsgaard 2004: 73; Nevers 2011: 121]. However, the associated concepts retained their significance for a much longer period of time. The regional estates' assemblies [*Stænderforsamlinger*] that began to meet in 1835 broke with the traditional separation of the estates, but were still conceptualized in terms of "estates" rather than "the people," even though the social and political basis of this understanding had already begun to disintegrate and would soon be superseded [Christensen 1976: 276; Nevers 2011: 122].

The increasing centrality of the term "people" in contemporary discourse is shown by the graph below, which tracks the percentage of Danish newspaper pages referring to people and other relevant concepts of collective identity, more specifically variations of the roots "people" [*folk**], "estate" [*stand** OR *stænd**], and "nation" [*nation**] relative to the total number of newspaper pages per year between 1750 and 1950.[3]

The conceptual cluster of terms related to the estates is clearly dominant at the beginning of the period but declines up to 1814. The frequency of all three concepts began to increase from around the time that the regional estates' assemblies were announced in 1831, when public debate began to increase markedly, and the frequency and trajectory of "estates" and "people" were almost identical. However, the use of "estates" peaks in 1844 at 9.6% and then begins to decline—even though the estates' assemblies continued to constitute the only official forums of political debate—while "people" continued its ascent, culminating in the revolutionary year of 1848 at 11.8% of all registered newspaper pages referring to the people in one form or another. This constitutes the historical zenith of the 200-year timespan covered by the data. The "estates" were replaced by "people" as the primary concept of collective identity in the political discourse of this and the following period, while the use of "estates" increasingly comes to refer to "status"

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[3] The data are based on searches using Boolean operators in the digitalized media archive *Mediestream* [THE ROYAL DANISH LIBRARY 2017], containing approximately 35 million newspaper pages from 1750 to the present, scanned using Optical Character Recognition (OCR). The dataset was extracted to Microsoft Excel using *Smurf* [http://labs.statsbiblioteket.dk/smurf/]. Note that the accuracy of OCR may be adversely impacted by the older typescripts and poor print and paper quality that characterize large parts of this corpus. However, the effects should be relatively evenly distributed among the terms at any given point in time and thus the relationship between the frequency of the terms should be represented correctly. Moreover, the large quantity of data helps minimize the impact of other imprecisions.

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GRAPH I

Concepts of collective identity in newspapers 1750-1950
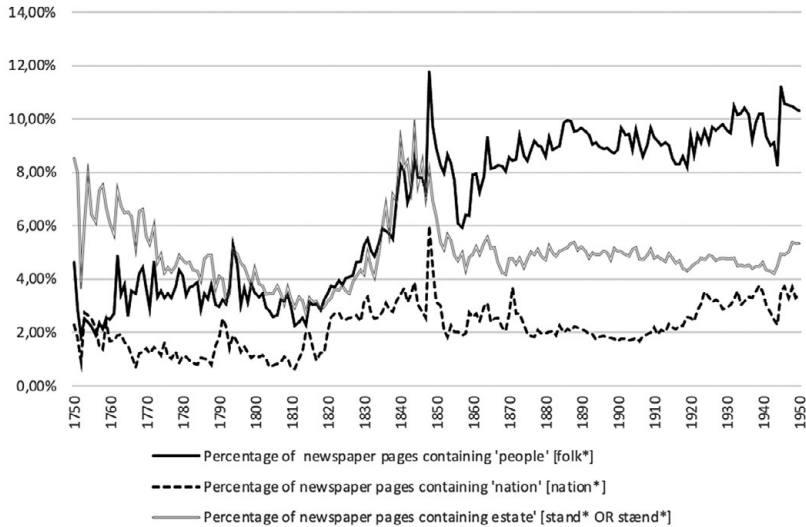
and other secondary and derived meanings. "Nation" and related terms remain the least frequent throughout but parallel the development of "people" in the run-up to 1848 without ever attaining the same popularity, in large part because its semantic content had been subsumed by the increasingly hegemonic concept of "people" early on, as I will proceed to show in the following.

It is also significant to note for the purposes of this article that "people" remained in frequent use in printed media throughout the following 100 years despite a trough shortly after 1848–1849, with a notable increase around the nationalist mobilization for the Second Schleswig War (1864: 9.3%). This was paralleled by an increase in the use of "nation" from 2.6% in 1847 to 6.4% in 1864, followed by another, more muted increase in the use of "people," resulting partially from the increasing amount of newspaper pages published, during the constitutional struggles of the final three decades of the century, culminating at the height of the conflict in 1885–1888 at 9.9–10%, after which it evens out with a brief increase around the time of the so-called "system change" in 1901 (9.7% compared with 8.7% the previous year), when the first government based on the composition of the popular elected lower

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chamber of parliament [*Folketinget*] was finally appointed. The graph indicates that the people became a fundamental concept of social and political discourse around 1848 as a result of the first constitutional struggle and remained central to the subsequent struggles. What this data cannot show is its semantic content and its relation to the political struggles and popular mobilizations that transformed Denmark from an absolute monarchy into a parliamentary democracy and changed the concept of the people from a category of subjection into the sole source of legitimate political authority, which will be explored in the following sections.

Two strands of thought in particular initially introduced new semantic dimensions to the concept of the people, which would eventually transform it from a feudal category of subjection into *the* central political subject and thrust it into the center of Danish political discourse: modern natural law and Romantic nationalism. During the eighteenth century, natural law theories that conceived of the power of government as based on an antecedent voluntary agreement or contract among the people found their way from wider European debates to Denmark—where they attained significant influence within the absolutist state and the opposition—via German debates and Danish-language works such as Ludvig Holberg's (1846–1754) *Introduction til Naturens og Folkerettens Kundskab* ("Introduction to the Science of Natural and People's Law") from 1716 and Jens Schielderup Sneedorff's (1724–1764) *Om den borgerlige Regjering* ("On Civil Government") from 1757. These theories resonated with the medieval tradition of elective monarchy, under which a council of nobles had elected a monarch to govern on the basis of a contract. This tradition remains evident in the Royal Law of 1665, which formed the legal basis of absolute monarchy, although the social basis was significantly widened to include "all the estates, noble and non-noble, clergy and secular," who had supposedly transferred "*Iura Maiestatis*, absolute power, sovereignty and all royal glory and regalia" to the king and his future heirs for posterity. While the modern concept of the people was not available, the basic idea that the entire populace (still conceived in terms of estates) constituted the foundation of the absolute monarchy was already beginning to show [Himmelstrup and Møller 1958: 15; Nevers 2011: 43–44]. Holberg and Sneedorff introduced the idea that it was "the people" as a whole rather than the estates that formed the origin and basis of the absolute monarchy. Their arguments were formulated in support of the absolute monarchy, and they do not seem to have considered the potentially radical implications of basing its authority on the people, which would only become evident later as liberals and democrats began

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to explore them [Holberg 1716: 251–52, 257–58; Sneedorff (1757) 1776; see also Vammen 1984: 26].

Norwegian historian Jens Arup Seip has shown the decisive influence of these ideas on the absolute state in the subsequent period, highlighting the years from the middle of the eighteenth century onwards, which he describes as "absolutism guided by public opinion." During this period the absolute monarchy was conceived as being based on the antecedent contractual transfer of power from the people to the king (rather than divine right). The absolutist state legitimized itself and its policies first and foremost by reference to the will of the people as represented by (*de facto* elite) public debate and opinion [Korsgaard 2004: 167–168; Seip 1958; Vammen 1984: 26]. Public debate was thus reconceived as a central element of good governance and restrictions on the press were relaxed, most dramatically with Johann Friedrich Struensee's (1737–1772) radical but short-lived reforms, which abolished censorship in 1770.[4] During this era of reforms public debate increased and something like a public sphere with associations, clubs, and periodicals first began to form [Engelhardt 2010: 88–90; Korsgaard 2004: 169–82, 185–89]. Natural law and social contract theories about the popular foundations of the absolute monarchy, and their adaptation by the state, provided the opposition with a language in which they could express liberal and constitutionalist aspirations without directly confronting or provoking the absolutist state. The emerging notion of the people thus came to figure simultaneously as the basis of absolute monarchy and various (indirect) challenges to it. However, the increasingly radical critiques of the absolute monarchy and the status quo that followed in the wake of the French Revolution in the 1790s provoked the authorities to restrict the freedom of the press and persecute a number of the most vocal critics, such as Peter Andreas Heiberg (1758–1841) and Malthe Conrad Bruun (1775–1826), while co-opting a number of other critics into the state [Korsgaard 2004: 168; Vammen 1984: 27–28].

While natural law theories relied on a purely political conception of the people as constituted through an initial popular agreement, another Romantic nationalist notion of the people (*qua* nation), influenced by Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803) and later Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814) became increasingly influential after the turn of the century via figures such as Laurids Engeltoft (1774–1851), Heinrich Steffens

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[4] Some restrictions were reintroduced in 1771 and 1773 but they were enforced unsystematically and removed in the 1790s before the reintroduction of censorship in 1799 [HORSTBØLL, LANGEN and STJERNFELT 2020; VAMMEN 1984: 26–27; see also MCHANGAMA and STJERNFELT 2016].

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(1773–1845), Christian Molbech, Bernhard Severin Ingemann (1789–1862), and especially Nikolaj Frederik Severin Grundtvig (1783–1872). These thinkers constructed the common language, culture, and history of the distinctly national people as the natural and organic basis of political unity and development, thereby elevating the people from a category of subjects to *the* central political subject [Korsgaard 2004: 133–41, 148–152, 199–224; Nevers 2011: 122; P. O. Christiansen 2004; see also Fichte 2008; Herder 1969]. Romantic nationalism initially developed in a literary context (from 1800 onwards) and was seized upon and used in a political context by members of the opposition only from 1830 and onwards in an effort to tip the scales between the absolute monarch and the people within the dominant discursive framework shaped by natural law, which construed them as complementary [Rerup 1992].[5] The absolutist state could not appropriate and use these ideas for its own purposes because of the multinational character of the various domains and populations united under the crown, which encompassed the kingdom of Denmark proper, Norway (until the Treaty of Kiel in 1814), the North Atlantic Isles, a number of colonies and, by personal union, the three southern duchies Schleswig, Holstein, and Lauenburg (the two former from 1460 and the latter from 1815) with large German-speaking populations. The absolutist state had been quick to anticipate and attempt to counter the rise of nationalist sentiments by supplementing the traditional conception of the population as subjects of the king with a modern political conception of the people as citizens [*borgere*] of the state, as exemplified by the 1776 *Forordning om indfødsret for embedsmænd* ("Law on citizenship for public officials"), and promoting a distinctly political notion of patriotism [*Fædrelandskærlighed*] alongside extensive and relatively enlightened reforms. Ultimately, it was to no avail as the national Romantic conception of the people subsumed its characteristics and attained hegemony [Feldbæk 1984; Horstbøll 1993; Jensen *et al.* 1984: 212ff].[6]

The semantic transformation of the concept of "the people" effected by these ideas is evident in contemporary dictionaries such as Molbech's

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[5] There is nothing inherently democratic about nationalism, as Nevers seems to imply [2011: 119; consider also NEVERS and SKOV 2019: 446–7]: while the nation is generally imagined as a cohesive and egalitarian form of community and historically this idea was central to democratizing movements, nationalist ideas can just as easily be used to support and legitimize traditional hierarchies therein [see ANDERSON 2006: 7; HALLWARD 2017: 2–4]. In a Danish context consider for instance the statements of the prominent National Liberals that we will examine later.

[6] The law described the subjects as "citizens" for the first time based on their place of birth but did not confer any particular rights on them on this basis [KORSGAARD 2004: 168–169].

Dansk Ordbog, which supplements the classical feudal definition of "people" with the definition: "a society of humans that have language and ancestry in common, and that also commonly live in one country and one state; a nation" [Molbech 1859: 526]. The historical dictionary *Ordbog over det Danske Sprog* added two modern definitions of a people as a "group of humans that inhabit the same land, have a common government, language, history, culture etc.," which is explicitly identified with "nation" [*Nation*] and "[the majority of] a particular nation's members, constituting a totality, domestically, as citizens of the state; subjects in relation to the head of state" and notes that this concept is used almost exclusively in the definite singular form, in other words, *the* people [Det Danske Sprog- og Litteraturselskab 2005].

Historian Ove Korsgaard's extensive lexical analysis shows that the initial feudal meaning of the concept of people, understood as a collection of individuals subject to a specific patriarchal authority—for example, the father in the household, the king of the country (commonly described as the father of the land [*Landsfader*]) and God (the holy father)—was supplemented and gradually replaced by the import and use of these new and distinctly normative meanings of "the people" in the course of the eighteenth century, which eventually supplanted the feudal conception of society as composed of estates [Korsgaard 2004: 40–44, 107, 109]. The new meanings of the concept of the people can be grouped into three primary semantic clusters (that often overlapped in practice): (1) a political definition that identified the people with the citizenry, the individuals living within a state's territory subject to its authority and laws (irrespective of status and language), which drew primarily on natural law and social contract theories; (2) a Romantic nationalist definition, which identified the people as the pre-political unity of the nation based on common ancestry, culture and especially language, upon which political community and structures were constructed; and finally (3) a social definition of the people as the subordinate classes and/or masses, initially associated primarily with the peasantry and later the working class. This latter definition drew heavily on the previous historical connotations of the people as subjects [Korsgaard 2004: 110; 2022: 101–102; Nevers 2011: 120; see also Canovan 2005; Crépon, Cassin, and Moatti 2014; Stenius 2013: 93–95, 100–101]. These new conceptions of the people were quickly put to use: the absolutist state championed a political conception of the people as the citizenry of the multinational state united under the absolute authority of the monarch, while the liberal opposition increasingly orientated itself towards a Romantic nationalist conception of the people as the basis of their demands for a free constitution

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[Horstbøll 1993; Nørgaard 2022: 114–117]. However, the latter maintained a certain duality in their invocations of the people, related to previous and contemporaneous social conceptions of the people, insisting that the commoners and lower classes could be included politically only by way of representation and guidance by their natural superiors so as to ensure that their particular interests and ignorance did not trump the common good of the people as a whole based on their numerical superiority. This sentiment was already contested by some more radical groups in 1848–1849, who emphasized elections based on the widest possible franchise as the sole legitimate source of political authority and the only means of ascertaining the common good [Nørgaard 2022: 120–124]. This contradiction would go on to become a central point of contention in the subsequent constitutional struggles initially led by the Left Party and later the Social Democrats, who politicized the social conception of the people, identifying it with the peasants and later the workers, who constituted the vast majority of the population, and insisted on their right to self-rule over and against dominant economic and political elites [Flohr 2022; Hansen and Hovmøller 2021].

The rise of the people and the fall of the absolute monarchy

The most significant political development in the *Vormärz* period in Denmark was the introduction of regional estates' assemblies. In the wake of the 1830 July Revolution in France and some controversial calls for a constitution, King Frederik VI (1768–1839, reigned 1808–1839) was convinced by members of his government to introduce four regional estates' assemblies, located in Schleswig By (for Schleswig), Itzehoe (for Holstein), Viborg (for Jutland), and Roskilde (for Zealand and the islands). Together they covered the absolutist state's central territories, excluding the North Atlantic Isles and the colonies [Jensen 1931: 73–135; Møller 2014: 548–49].[7] The members of these regional estates' assemblies were elected by highly restricted franchise (approximately 2.8% of the population) and met asynchronously every other year from 1835, so as to avoid any coherent collective representation of the realm that might challenge the status quo. The assemblies were only consultative and did not hold any real power. However, they provided a forum for

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[7] This also served to resolve Holstein's claim to an estates' assembly as a member of the German confederation [CONGRESS OF VIENNA 1839: 123 (art. iv), 128 (art. xiii)] without undermining the political coherence of the absolutist state's different territories.

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formulating, debating, and mobilizing around common political demands. Moreover, the records of the assemblies were published (more or less completely) and widely discussed in an emerging public sphere that facilitated the growth of (both German and Danish) nationalism, as well as a number of political movements [Christiansen 1999: 26; Horstbøll 1993: 468; Knudsen 2006: 110].

The most significant political movement to emerge in this context was the liberal opposition, united by their aim of achieving "a free constitution," a relatively amorphous reform program that included the constitutional delimitation of the king and his ministers' powers, some sort of representative assembly with influence on taxation, state finances and legislation, the rule of law, civil rights (especially freedom of speech) and the introduction of universal conscription [Hansen 2012: 75; Mikkelsen 2018a: 29; Møller 2014: 550–551].[8] The liberal opposition initially consisted primarily of members of the educated and upper middle class—bourgeoisie, public employees, lawyers, newspaper editors and academics—and was geographically centered in Copenhagen. However, during the 1840s this group forged a strong alliance with the emerging peasant movement, representing the vast majority of the population, which had been alienated by recent state repression, resulting in the establishment of the "Friends of the Peasants Society" [*Bondeselska-bets Venner*] in 1846. This group began mobilizing on a Romantic nationalist basis around the so-called "Schleswig question," demanding the incorporation of the duchy of Schleswig, with its relatively large Danish-speaking population, into the Kingdom of Denmark under a common ("free") constitution. This garnered wide support among the Danish-speaking population across the state (and provoked strong opposition and countermobilizations among the German-speaking population). This built the foundations of the powerful "National Liberal" movement that would become the primary force effecting the soft fall of the absolute monarchy in 1848 [Horstbøll 1993: 469–71; Mikkelsen 2018a: 27–28; Nørgaard 2015; Skrubbeltrang 1954].

At the beginning of 1848, only eight days after King Christian VIII's (1785–1848, reigned 1839–1848) death on 20 January, his son King Frederik VII (1808–1863, reigned 1848–1863) announced plans for a transition towards a joint constitution for Denmark and the duchies,

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[8] Note that the concept of "democracy" was associated primarily with the perceived excesses of the French Revolution and was therefore rarely championed in its own right by the opposition, with the exception of some radicals towards the end of the 1840s [NEVERS and SKOV 2019: 443–445; NEVERS 2015; NØRGAARD 2016; SVENSSON 2012; see also KURUNMÄKI, NEVERS and TE VELDE 2018].

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which would ensure representation for all of them in a single estates' assembly with a very vague mandate [full text reproduced in Neergaard 1973: 112–13]. The announcement had been anticipated and failed to satisfy liberals and nationalists on either side. But the promise of reforms, coupled with the lifting of censorship, inspired widespread debate and significant political mobilizations as the revolutionary wave of 1848 reached Denmark. The National Liberals organized a number of mass meetings in the capital throughout March that culminated, after rumors of Schleswig-Holstein's secession, in a procession of approximately 15,000 to Christiansborg Palace on March 21, to deliver a petition to the king that had been formulated by the leading National Liberal Orla Lehmann (1810–1870) in the name of "the people" (deployed interchangeably with "nation" and "Denmark"), which had become the primary figure of political legitimation. The petition declared "the advisors your majesty has inherited from your predecessor are not trusted by the people" and demanded a new government that could "save Denmark's honor and institute the country's freedom." In other words, the petition called for the appointment of a new National Liberal government that could express the people's will as well as the unification of Schleswig with the Danish kingdom under a free constitution. The petition concluded with a thinly veiled threat of revolution: "we implore your majesty not to drive us to desperate measures of self-help" [*Fædrelandet* March 21, 1848: 583].

The threat was never realized. Chairman of the municipal council Lauritz Nicolai Hvidt (1777–1856) who delivered the petition to the palace personally, was informed by king Frederik VII that he had already dismissed his government. The king added "when you, gentlemen, have the same confidence in your king that I have in my people, I will be a true leader in honor and freedom," which illustrates the widespread reliance on the concept of the people as the basis of political legitimacy [*Fædrelandet* March 21, 1848: 583]. The assembled crowd greeted the news with jubilation and acclamation for the king. The following day a new government was formed, which included prominent members of the National Liberal opposition. King Frederik VII informed them that he considered himself a constitutional monarch and instructed them to compose a constitutional draft to be discussed by an elected constituent assembly [Müller 1869: 157; Jørgensen 1954: 116; Bjørn 1998: 82f].

Meanwhile, representatives of Schleswig and Holstein's estates' assemblies formed a provisional government on March 23 and proceeded to secure control of the fortification and armory in Rendsburg. This marked the beginning of a civil war that also came to involve the German

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Confederation and Sweden and continued until international pressure made the former withdraw their forces in 1850, allowing the Danish Government to suppress the secessionists. In 1852 the London Protocol was signed by the major European powers, Sweden and Denmark. It formally affirmed the *status quo ante bellum*, ensuring the continued territorial integrity of the multinational state but without resolving the question of the duchies' complex legal and political status, which would lead to the Second Schleswig War only twelve years later.

The constitution was passed by the 152 members of the constituent assembly (114 elected, 38 royally appointed) on May 25, 1849 and signed by the king on June 5 (known as the "June Constitution").[9] It has often been interpreted in terms of the subsequent development towards parliamentary democracy.[10] And while the constitution was, undoubtedly, a major democratic advance, recent research has emphasized the fact that it established a constitutionally delimited monarchy (as stated quite clearly in §1), whereby the king appointed the government and legislative capacities were shared between him and a bicameral parliament [*Rigsdagen*]. This was conceived on the model of a mixed constitution with a balance between aristocratic and democratic elements in the form of the two chambers of parliament. The indirectly elected upper chamber, *Landstinget* ("Assembly of the Country"), was composed of older members of the economic elite, and was supposed to act as a moderating influence on the potential popular excesses of the directly elected lower chamber, *Folketinget* ("Assembly of the People"). The franchise for the election of members of the two chambers of parliament was based on the predominant patriarchal conception of household representation, namely men over 30 years of age with their own household and without a criminal record or unreturned financial aid. They accounted for approximately 14–15% of the adult population. Moreover, the king continued to appoint the government [Himmelstrup and Møller 1958: 61 (§1), 63 (§19), 64 (§29), 66 (§§48, 34–35, 37, 39–41);

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[9] Men over 30 with their own households were allowed to vote for candidates at public assemblies within their electoral district.

[10] This interpretation remains implicit in large parts of the historiography, including Ove Korsgaard's otherwise erudite conceptual history of the people, leading him to (mistakenly) suggest that the modern concept of the people and democracy developed synchronously [KORSGAARD 2004: 167, 465]. This threatens to obscure the central role that the concept of the people played in the conceptualization and struggle for democracy (*qua* the people's self-rule) that continued until 1920 [KARPANTSCHOF 2018; 2019; KARPANTSCHOF and MIKKELSEN 2013]. Tim Knudsen has suggested that the origin of this widespread myth is the rhetoric of the Left Party in the constitutional struggle [KNUDSEN 2016; see also MØLLER 2013, 198; WARRING 2004, 53ff; *pace* FRIISBERG 2008; 2013].

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Karpantschof 2018: 35–36; Nevers 2011: 95–114; 2015; Svensson 2012; 2013; Horstbøll 1999].[11]

The June Constitution of 1849 did not introduce parliamentary democracy, but a constitutional monarchy devised on the model of a mixed constitution. However, it represented a major democratic advance and was consistently regarded as a victory of "the people," although both terms remained absent from the constitution itself. Nonetheless, the concept of the people became a ubiquitous but ambiguous part of Danish political discourse in the following period, what Reinhart Koselleck describes as a "fundamental concept" [*Grundbegriff*] [Nevers 2011: 119; Nørgaard 2022; Koselleck 1996: 64; 2011: 7, 32–33]. The conception of the people championed by the National Liberals between 1830 and 1848 was populist before it became the hegemonic (self-)conception of the political community in the following period. It was defined first and foremost in national Romantic terms, based primarily on language and in opposition to other peoples, especially German-speaking populations and states. This opposition was cemented by the outbreak of civil war in 1848 and the subsequent intervention of the German Confederation. This national liberal concept of the people was initially counterposed, politically and morally, to the reigning political elite and the governments of the absolutist state and, at times, the entire governmental form of absolute monarchy, but rarely the king as such. This was in line with predominant natural law theories and continued popular reverence for the king, which was only strengthened by his rapid accommodation of the National Liberals' demands in March.[12]

The people in this sense were generally not conceived as an independent subject capable of acting or, for that matter, ruling in their own right without proper guidance and leadership by the educated and propertied classes, not to mention the king. This predominant conception of the people retained traces of the feudal conception of the people as a category of subjects of a patriarchal authority. As already mentioned, this leadership was considered necessary to ensure that the particular interests and impulses of the numerically superior lower classes did not trump the

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[11] Only the Friends of the Peasants Society pursued an explicitly "democratic" program, which they identified with universal (male) suffrage and a unicameral parliament, but ultimately they conceded and supported the National Liberals' proposal [Bjørn 1998: 82–98; Nevers 2011: 128–29]. For an overview of the political debates in this period about "the people" see Anne Engelst Nørgaard

[2022] and for the related debates about "democracy" 1848–1849 see Bertel Nygaard [2011], Palle Svensson [2015] and Anne Engelst Nørgaard [2016].

[12] Even the aforementioned Friends of the Peasants Society appealed to the authority of the king in order to legitimize their democratic political program [Nørgaard 2004].

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common good of the people. The National Liberals saw it as their task to ensure that "it is the people as such, as a concept, as a whole, that is to say, its public and rational will, that must be represented and neither this nor that estate" [*Fædrelandet* February 10, 1848: 278]. Thus, while the leading National Liberal Ditlev Gothard Monrad (1811–1887) had long insisted that politics ought to reflect the will of the people, he simultaneously insisted that this will had to be articulated and guided by "the core of the people," consisting of the well-educated and wealthy. Orla Lehmann similarly insisted that "the right democracy" should produce an "aristocracy of the spirit" [Monrad 1842: 5–7, 13; Lehmann 1873: 146; see also Nygaard 2009: 104–106]. Despite the threat of popular revolt implied in the 1848 petition, the idea of the people as a coherent subject capable of acting in its own right developed and spread only as part of the series of political struggles and popular mobilizations from below that characterized the last three decades of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth.

The relatively peaceful political transition, combined with the outbreak of civil war and the subsequent intervention of the German Confederation, united otherwise antagonistic political actors around a Romantic nationalist conception of the people and its harmonious relationship with the king, exemplified by the constitution as the patriotic basis of the war effort, the so-called "spirit of 1848." The June Constitution therefore did not face a strong reaction or reversal after 1848, in contrast to what occurred in many other European countries [Bregnsbo 1998]. Popular participation in elections remained relatively low, however, and in practice the organization and distribution of power between government, parliament, and the bureaucracy remained unclear. This resulted in a strange power vacuum that allowed King Frederik VII to begin to reassert his power over and against parliament and to appoint a highly conservative royalist government, headed by Anders Sandøe Ørsted (1778–1860) in 1853. This prompted fears of a return to absolutism. In response, the National Liberals and the Friends of the Peasants Society organized a massive march and festival in the capital on June 5, 1853, celebrating the anniversary (and principles) of the June Constitution. It was attended by upwards of 50,000 people and repeated the following year across the country. The king eventually conceded and dismissed the Ørsted government towards the end of 1854, which was greeted by major public celebrations. After this episode the National Liberals returned to government, where they pursued the integration of Schleswig into Denmark [Karpantschof 2018: 44–45; Neergaard 1973: 668–72, 818–830, 923–925; Nevers 2011: 129; Vammen 2011].

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The June Constitution applied only to the Kingdom of Denmark. Its extension to Schleswig was postponed until the end of the ongoing war [Himmelstrup and Møller 1958: 61 (preamble)]. However, the international agreements that ended the war explicitly prohibited the integration of Schleswig into Denmark under the June Constitution and committed it to adopting a federal constitution for all of its territories [Korsgaard 2004: 289]. In 1855 a federal constitution was passed for all Danish territories, which allowed the duchies' estates' assemblies limited autonomy under the absolute authority of the king and established a common legislative council [*Rigsråd*], consisting of 80 members to deal with common issues pertaining to financial, foreign, and defense policy [Himmelstrup and Møller 1958: 95 (§§24, 21–2)].[13] Holstein opposed this constitution and appealed to the German Confederation, which voided it in 1858. The National Liberals continued to pursue the incorporation of Schleswig into Denmark, with popular support. After being beset by large demonstrations for three days and rumors of a palace coup, the newly anointed King Christian IX (1818–1906, reigned 1863–1906) signed a federal constitution (the so-called "November Constitution") that the National Liberal government had prepared for Denmark and Schleswig – excluding Holstein and Lauenburg – on November 18, 1863 [Himmelstrup and Møller 1958: 95 (§§24, 21–22)]. This was in contravention of international agreements, however, and led to the Second Schleswig War with the German Confederation in 1864, in which Denmark suffered a swift and overwhelming defeat and was forced to cede all three duchies, constituting approximately two-fifths of its territory and a third of its population. This was a political catastrophe that marked the end of the National Liberals as a central force in Danish politics [Karpantschof 2018: 45–46; Korsgaard 2004: 289–291].

The people's self-rule and the popular breakthrough

The 1863 November Constitution had established a common (bicameral) parliament for Denmark and Schleswig, which supplemented the existing Danish parliament and the Schleswigian estates' assembly. The loss of Schleswig thus left the kingdom of Denmark with two different constitutions and legislatures for the same territory and population. The

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[13] Twenty appointed by the king, thirty appointed by parliament and the duchies' estates' assemblies and twenty directly elected by highly restricted franchise.

November Constitution had introduced economic qualifications for enfranchisement for elections to the upper chamber, which the conservative forces that gained the majority there wanted to maintain [Himmelstrup and Møller 1958, 104 (§22)]. Negotiations about the integration of the two constitutions concluded with an agreement to introduce a privileged franchise for the economic elite (especially landowners) in the indirect elections for the upper chamber of parliament, *Landstinget* in addition to which the king would appoint another twelve of its 66 members. This was meant to restrict the influence of the peasantry and other commoners via the popularly elected lower chamber of parliament, *Folketinget*, whose representatives continued to be directly elected in accordance with the June Constitution of 1849 [Himmelstrup and Møller 1958: 17–19 (§§29–40)].

The Constitution of July 28, 1866, also known as the "Revised Constitution," produced a very clear class cleavage within the political system, whereby the upper chamber was dominated by landowners (supported by an alliance of civil servants and burghers, including many former National Liberals) later organized in the Right Party [*Højre*], who made up almost all governments appointed by the conservative King Christian IX up until 1901. Meanwhile the lower chamber was dominated by representatives of the peasants and commoners, who made up the majority of the population and were *de facto* excluded from any meaningful political influence under the Revised Constitution of 1866 and the king's consistent support for the Right. These representatives would later form the (liberal) Left Party [*Venstre*] (Karpantschof 2018: 46–47).[14]

This constitutional class division framed the political struggles from the 1870s onwards. Ostensibly they concerned defense spending but on a more fundamental level they were about who had the authority to form and dismiss governments. The Left fought for government to be formed based on majorities in the popularly elected *Folketing*, which they argued should be "the highest authority in the country, with no superior or equal," in the forceful and implicitly republican words of the leading Left politician Viggo Hørup (1841–1902) [*Morgenbladet* December 31, 1878: 2]. They described this goal in terms of both "democracy"[15] and the vernacular synonym, the "self-rule of the people" (and later the "rule of the people"), which they rhetorically (and wrongly) claimed was

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[14] Note that they were not parties in the modern sense of the word but relatively loose associations of politicians that frequently split and recomposed in varying configurations.

[15] Additionally, they used "the democracy" [*Demokratiet*] to denote the progressive forces fighting for parliamentary democracy [NEVERS 2011: 136–137, 128].

guaranteed by the June Constitution of 1849 *and* was the inherent "moral right of the people" [Flohr 2022: 140–149; Friisberg 2015; Himmelstrup and Møller 1958: 115 (§13), 63 (§19); Korsgaard 2004: 364; Venstre 1872: 1; see also Clemmensen 1999: 199; Hvidt 1971; Nevers 2011: 132–136]. The prominent Left leader Christen Berg (1829–1891) succinctly summarized the party's strategy and aims: "active and passive suffrage will together create a *Folketing* with the inner power to accomplish the main political task: the people's self-rule and on this constitutional ground advance the cause of freedom" [Berg 1879: 51].

The emerging Right Party emphasized the continuity between the June Constitution and the Revised Constitution, and insisted on the equality of the two chambers and the king's right to appoint the government in accordance with §13 of the Revised Constitution (corresponding to §19 of the June Constitution), which also constituted the basis of their political power. They rejected the Left's ideas of the people's self-rule as unconstitutional and dangerously close to subversive notions of "popular sovereignty" [*Folkesouverænitet*] [Matzen 1873a: 3–4, 9, 17–18; Himmelstrup and Møller 1958: 115 (§13), 63 (§19); Flohr 2022: 142–143; see also Warring 2004: 77–78]. The notion of the people that they invoked in order to legitimize their policies was largely continuous with the nationalism advanced during the Schleswigian Wars, emphasizing the unity of king and people under the constitution and the threat from Germany that made national defense a top priority [Warring 2004: 67–68; Christiansen 1992: 165].

The "United Left" [*Det forenede Venstre*] was formally founded in 1870 by a number of members of *Folketinget* to fight for "what in constitutional states is understood by 'the people's self-rule,'" which they explicitly identified with "the implementation of the parliamentary form of government" [*Dagbladet* July 1, 1870: 2; see also Flohr 2022: 140–142]. The peasantry and lower classes quickly rallied around the party, which attained an absolute majority in the 1872 *Folketing* election [Karpantschof 2018: 49]. The following year they sent a deputation to the king, requesting that "government be made to correspond to the popularly elected chamber of parliament and that its preparation and leadership in legislative affairs, accordingly, reflects the aims of the people, as expressed through the election of their representatives" [Rigsdagstidende 1873: 212]. The king rejected their demand with reference to his constitutionally guaranteed right to appoint his ministers [*Rigsdagstidende* 1873: 3885–3886] and in 1875 he appointed a new government composed of members of the upper house headed by the deeply conservative landowner Jacob Brønnum Scavenius Estrup (1825–1913). Estrup was and remained vehemently opposed to the

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idea that the lower chamber should exert any influence on the composition of the government over the next 19 years and 57 days where he stayed in office [Karpantschof 2018: 49; Fink 1986].

During this extended time in opposition, members of the Left and the wider agrarian movement began to build social and political organizations, associations and institutions [Korsgaard 2004: 310]. Most significantly, the Grundtvigians, followers of the highly influential Danish Romantic nationalist writer, Protestant priest and politician N.F.S. Grundtvig, built up a whole network of non-state associations, churches, and educational institutions. Their aim was to cultivate national and civic consciousness among the peasantry and lower classes, to make them into a coherent "people" capable of self-governance and freedom; a task that for practical and ideological (liberal) reasons could not be entrusted to the state but had to be accomplished by the people.[16] The Grundtvigians conceived the people in a fundamentally national Romantic manner, but unlike the National Liberals, they primarily identified the people with the peasantry and the lower classes (in line with the social conception of the people), *and* conceived of it as being outside of and in opposition to the state and the elites [Korsgaard 2004: 342–343, 264–267, 337–338; 2022: 105–108; Nevers and Skov 2019: 438, 433; see also Damsholt 1999]. This populist conception of the people corresponded to and shaped the Left's struggle against king and government to transform their popular support and electoral majorities in *Folketinget* into practical political power [Korsgaard 2004: 346–362; Nevers and Skov 2019: 437].

Many of the discourses that emerged from the constitutional struggle bore the imprint of the Grundtvigians: the Left and the agrarian movement, as well as the emerging labor movement mobilized around Grundtvigian conceptions of the people and its representatives in *Folketinget*, while the conservatives and their supporters rallied around king, country, and government. They thereby became implicitly counterposed in parts of the Left's discourse [Korsgaard 2004: 339–346, 375–376;

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[16] Grundtvig was initially hostile to ideas of democracy and the political inclusion of peasants and commoners. However, he eventually accepted it as inevitable and sought to educate them to bear this responsibility. At the age of 83 he returned to politics in order to oppose the elitism of the 1866 Constitution in the name of the people. This was the multifacetted background of the political Grundtvigianism that developed into a mass movement and became a central part of the Left Party over the following years, although many Grundtvigians continued to be suspicious of the Left Party's pursuit of "democracy" (which they continued to associate with political divisions within the people), preferring "the conscious popular power" [*den bevidste Folkemagt*] and variations of the (self-)rule of the people [Nygaard 2018; Korsgaard 2004; 2012; Nevers 2011; Jespersen 2013; Østergaard 1990; Nevers and Skov 2019].

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Jespersen 2013: 285–287; Nevers and Skov 2019: 437, 435–436; Østergaard 1990: 98].[17] Viggo Hørup's dramatic words at a public meeting in 1883 clearly illustrate the emerging discursive opposition between the king and the (self-rule of the) people: "And the word that unites us shall be the people's self-rule [acclamation]. It is no royal concept. It is a word born of peasants. It is born in the struggle. It is heavy with a whole people's righteous anger" [*Morgenbladet* June 26, 1883: 2]. The populist construction of an authentic people, identified with the peasantry, politically and morally counterposed to the reigning political elite becomes more and more evident in the Left Party's discourse throughout this period.[18]

In 1881 the government called and lost two elections for the lower chamber in a row without ceding and Christen Berg attacked them for "confusing the power of certain classes in political life with the good of the country […] by staying in [their] position and proposing the finance bill, in opposition to the Danish people, who have denounced the government more strongly than ever since 1848." He also announced a new strategy whereby the Left would use its majority in the lower chamber to block government legislation, particularly the annual finance bill, which according to §48, had to be passed by the lower chamber before reaching the upper chamber, in an attempt to force the government to resign [*Rigsdagstidende* 1881: 5976; Himmelstrup and Møller 1958: 120 (§48)].[19] The strategy was implemented in 1884 after the Left Party secured 81 out of 102 seats in the lower chamber and Christen Berg managed to unite the party's members behind it. Only eleven laws were passed by *Folketinget* the following year [Karpantschof 2018: 50].[20] In response the government initiated professor of law Henning Matzen's (1840–1910) plan to use the king's constitutional right to dismiss or dissolve parliament (or either of its chambers) at will, in combination with his right to issue provisional legislation when parliament was not assembled; a practice that would become the primary means of governing

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[17] The Left Party was divided on the issue of nationalism. It contained both a nationalist tendency that primarily conceived the people in terms of the unity afforded by its shared history and language and an anti-nationalist tendency, which conceived the people primarily in social and political terms, as composed of the peasants and commoners (and their various allies), united in their struggle for popular self-rule *qua* democracy. These two tendencies were united in their common struggle for popular self-rule against the Estrup government and as such the latter tendency was practically dominant [Warring 2004: 69–72].

[18] Note that large parts of the Left Party remained somewhat more conciliatory, rhetorically, towards the king, having faced sustained criticism from the Right for attempting to subvert the constitution after 1873 [Friisberg 2015: 448–450].

[19] Claus Friisberg highlights that even though the Left focused rhetorically on bringing down the Estrup government, their overall aim remained the people's self-rule [2015].

[20] A previous attempt in 1883 had failed because of internal divisions [Nevers 2011: 132–33; see also Friisberg 1975: 145–149].

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until 1894 [Matzen 1873b; 1873c; see also Himmelstrup and Møller 1958: 116 (§22), 117 (§25)].

The Left Party had denounced these plans as unconstitutional in advance and the day after the king signed the Estrup government's first provisional finance bill on April 1, 1885, the Left Party's parliamentary group urged "the people to unite around its constitutionally guaranteed right in this struggle, which places undeniable demands on all good forces" on the front-page of the newspaper *Politiken* (April 2, 1885: 1). The front-page of *Dagbladet* carried a similar proclamation by the Right to their fellow citizens: "we will stand firm in this struggle and urge you to stand by us and spare no effort to bring our fatherland out of the mess that the Left's unconstitutional pursuit of power has placed it in" [*Dagbladet* April 2, 1885: 1]. The Left organized massive rallies of tens of thousands of people across the country to protest the dictatorial measures of the Estrup government, while the Right mobilized in support of king and government [Karpantschof 2018: 51]. Moreover, the nascent labor movement and the Social Democratic Association (founded in 1878) confronted supporters of the Right in a major industrial dispute, aligning them with the Left Party in an alliance that Hørup described as "uniting the whole people, citizens and peasants, workers and students, the like of which we have not seen since 1849" [cited in Karpantschof 2018: 54].

In this very tense situation, a lone Left Party supporter Julius Rasmussen (1866–1899) tried to shoot Estrup outside his home on October 21, 1885. The government quickly initiated a number of measures, expanding the police force and creating an armed gendarmerie, both of which were deployed to suppress opposition across the country. The government also passed provisional legislation to outlaw "agitational excesses" and jailed a number of prominent opposition politicians and newspaper editors, including Christen Berg. The repression escalated the conflict between government and opposition even further and led to larger and larger mobilizations and occasional clashes. The years 1885–1888 constitute the zenith of the constitutional struggle and one of the most turbulent periods in modern Danish history. René Karpantschof has documented and analyzed the unprecedented scale of the popular mobilizations during this period, which he characterizes as a "popular breakthrough" that permanently increased participation in political organizations, parties, elections, and demonstrations: "Danes had in earnest become a modern and active 'demos', which understood itself as being a political subject, and which the country's governments and parliamentarians had in the future to take into account," as he

summarizes it [Karpantschof 2018: 52, 57; see also 2006: 229–290; 2019; Karpantschof and Mikkelsen 2013].

This popular breakthrough corresponded to the increasing hegemony of the Grundtvigian conception of the people as a collective actor independent of state and government, which had lost its association with Grundtvigianism and Romantic nationalism and come into much wider political use. This notion of the people also shaped the notion of democracy as the "people's self-rule," subsequently shortened to "the people's rule." This became the predominant vernacular conceptualization of democracy from the turn of the century and remains so to this day [Nevers 2011: 119; Nevers and Skov 2019: 440, 435–436]. The people's self-rule was first and foremost used to describe parliamentary democracy as a constitutional form, conceived in terms of the people (as opposed to reigning economic and political elites) ruling from the bottom-up through the election of representatives to *Folketinget*, who would in turn appoint and dismiss government. To many of its adherents, however, it also carried connotations of a certain authority and capacity for self-determination cultivated in and by the people that was separate from and ought to be superior to the institution of the state and government, which found its foremost expression in the popular movement fighting for democracy, commonly referred to simply as "the democracy" [*Demokratiet*].[21] The people's self-rule, in other words, came to imply not only that the people ought to rule through the mediated election of government by representatives in *Folketinget* but also, much more fundamentally, through the determination of the form of government itself. The Left had initially legitimized the people's self-rule based on their peculiar interpretation of the June Constitution over and against the Revised Constitution, but this was soon supplemented by what they described as the inherent "moral right of the people" [*Dagbladet*, 1870: 2; Venstre 1872: 1; see also Flohr 2022: 140–142, 145–150].

This conception of the people as a form of underlying constituent power, relied on and radicalized elements of previous natural law and social contract traditions, supplemented by the Grundtvigian idea of the people as a coherent and autonomous entity outside and above the institutions of the state and even the constitution. One of the leading figures in the Left Party, philosophy professor Harald Høffding (1843–1931), summarized this distinct conception of democracy as the people's self-rule in his Constitution Day speech in 1889: "Democracy is not a constitution that you can just pass. Parliamentary activity alone is not

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[21] See footnote 16.

enough to constitute it" and proceeded to explain that "it is the accomplished work in the small circles of civic life, the power and wisdom that grow there, that awaken the self-consciousness and sense of freedom in a people and lead to the imperative of self-rule." He also insisted that "as long as there lives a people in Denmark with a strong will to be itself, to work to the best of its capacity in life's different situations—in good and bad times—to speak its own language, make up its own mind and follow its own heart, Danish democracy will continue to exist" [*Politiken* June 6, 1889: 1]. The people figure here as a form of constituent power and an extra-institutional democratic force ("the democracy") moving towards self-rule (*qua* parliamentary democracy) independently of the constitution. While the Left Party continued to invoke the June Constitution, this distinctive understanding of the people and its self-rule as a form of constituent power, shaped by the Grundtvigian movement and the popular mobilization and political struggles of this period, supplanted liberal and constitutional ideas to become the primary ideological basis of the struggle for and the establishment of parliamentary democracy in Denmark [Flohr 2022: 145–150; Nevers and Skov 2019: 432–434, 442].

The escalating popular mobilizations of 1885–1888 and the concomitant fear of them escalating into civil war or revolution compelled moderate Left Party members and conservatives to negotiate and they concluded a political agreement to withdraw their supporters from the streets in 1894. The Right conceded that Estrup would resign and that they would stop relying on provisional legislation, while the moderate Left acknowledged the equality of the two chambers of parliament and the king's right to appoint the government. Many Left Party members saw this as a betrayal and left to form the "Left Reform Party" [*Venstrereformpartiet*] under Jens Christian Christensen (1856–1930), which won a majority alongside the Social Democrats in *Folketinget* the following year. This made it hard to claim any popular legitimacy or support for the agreement. Finally, after the election of 1901, in which Christensen's Left faction won 76 mandates and the Social Democrats 14, while the moderate Left was reduced to 16 mandates and the Right was left with a mere eight, King Christian IX agreed to appoint a Left government formally lead by law professor Johan Henrik Deuntzer (1845–1918), but headed by Christensen in practice [Friisberg 2007: 734–735; Korsgaard 2004: 377; Petersen 1981: 233; Statens Statistiske Bureau 1898: 23; 1901: 52]. This was heralded as a fundamental "system change" [*Systemskifte*] at the time and is commonly identified in the historiography as the beginning of the current system of parliamentary democracy

(*qua* "the people's self-rule"), whereby the composition of the popularly elected *Folketing* determines the government [Friis 1970; Engelstoft 1951: 186–191; N.F. Christiansen 2004: 26ff;].[22] However, this practice remained constitutionally uncodified and the king continued to appoint the government and subsequent monarchs continued to consider it their prerogative to dismiss governments at will, as would become evident in the Easter Crisis of 1920 [Karpantschof 2018: 64; Møller 2014: 563–564]. The unnamed journalist at the conservative *National-tidende* who complained in a front-page article that "numerous left publications understand by this 'system change' a recognition of *Folk-etings*-parliamentarism and loudly declare 'the people's' victory, etc., but this is absolutely not the significance of this change of government" was not entirely mistaken [*Nationaltidende* July 24, 1901: 1].

Contestation and constitution of the people's rule

During the constitutional struggle, there had been calls to reconfigure the constituencies for elections to the lower chamber to reflect demographic growth and ensure more proportional representation in accordance with the constitution [Himmelstrup and Møller 1958: 118 (§32)]. The Social Democrats raised the issue again in 1905 and in 1909 the Radical Left Party [*Radikale Venstre*][23] government presented a solution, which turned out to require a constitutional amendment and led to negotiations involving all the political parties that went on for years. A new constitution was finally agreed on and, highly symbolically, signed into effect by the king on June 5, 1915 (the same date as the June Constitution). The 1915 Constitution allowed the reconfiguration of the electoral constituencies and, more centrally, abolished the privileged franchise for *Landstinget*. It also broke with the patriarchal model of household representation that had been the basis of all constitutions throughout Danish history, extending the franchise to both women and workers without their own household.[24] The 1915 Constitution represents not just a quantitative expansion of the

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[22] More precisely, the principle of "negative parliamentarism" whereby a government cannot be formed or remain in power if a majority of *Folketinget* is against it.
[23] The Radical Left Party emerged from the exclusion of the anti-militarist faction of the Left Party in 1905. It became a distinctly social liberal party and was often aligned with

the Social Democrats [*Det Radikale Venstre* 1905: 2–8].
[24] Women had previously been considered legally and politically subordinate members of their father's or husband's household. On the struggle for women's enfranchisement see ELLEN STRANGE PEDERSEN 1965 and PIA LANETH 2015.

electorate but a qualitative change in the conception of the people that was to be represented in and by parliament.[25] This was a major democratic advance. However, the constitution did not settle the central political question of the day, namely whether king or parliament should be empowered to appoint and dismiss the government [Himmelstrup and Møller 1958: 137–138 (§§32, 34, 30), 135 (§13); Engelstoft 1951: 260–280; Karpantschof 2018: 63–65].

While Denmark remained neutral and relatively politically stable throughout the First World War, it faced a deep economic crisis and widespread social and industrial unrest towards the end of the war as a revolutionary wave originating in Russia swept across Europe [Mikkelsen 2018b: 81–83]. Moreover, the Schleswig question resurfaced, as the allies decided to settle its status through two regional referenda, in line with prevalent international ideas of national self-determination. The population of the northern part of Schleswig (zone 1) voted to join Denmark on February 10, 1920, while the central part (zone 2) voted to remain part of Germany on March 14 (the southern part was almost exclusively German-speaking and did not hold a referendum). The government headed by Carl Theodor Zahle (1866–1946) of the Radical Left Party, which had been in power since 1913, accepted the result of the referenda. However, the Left Party and the Conservative People's Party [Det Konservative Folkeparti][26] did not want to concede central Schleswig and Flensburg. King Christian X concurred and dismissed Zahle's government on March 29, 1920 and appointed a new caretaker government headed by Otto Liebe (1860–1929) to pursue this objective [Kaarsted 1968: 327–328; Karpantschof 2018: 65; Mikkelsen 2018b: 83].

Protests began only a few hours later. Tens of thousands of people, primarily workers already mobilized by ongoing industrial disputes, assembled outside the Amalienborg palace and the town hall, denouncing what a special edition of the Social Democratic newspaper described as the king's "coup," and demanded the institution of a republic. The newspaper's dramatic prediction that "the reaction will bear witness to a popular [folkelig] uprising of hitherto unseen power" might have

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[25] The 1915 constitution made future changes to the constitution dependent on approval by a majority of at least 45% of the population in a referendum, commonly conceptualized as a "people's vote" [Folkeafstemning], although this was not in the text of the constitution itself [HIMMELSTRUP and MØLLER 1958: 145 (§ 93); see also NEVERS and SKOV 2019: 440; SVENSSON 2004: 63–65].

[26] The Conservative People's Party was the successor-party to the Right Party, founded after the adoption of the 1915 Constitution. The assumption of the title "people's party" [Folkeparti] by the old party of landowners, clearly illustrates the hegemony of the figure of "the people" in contemporary political discourse [see DET KONSERVATIVE FOLKEPARTI 1916: 5, 13, 18].

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seemed far-fetched when it was first formulated but seemed an increasingly realistic prospect as the situation developed [Social-Demokraten, March 29, 1920: 1–2]. That evening, a social democratic delegation headed by Thorvald Stauning (1873–1942) threatened the king with a general strike if he did not reinstate Zahle's government. The king refused and the Social Democrats and more radical left-wing groups began preparing for a general strike. The Social Democratic parliamentary group issued a joint statement the following day declaring that "the people and its elected representatives have no superior or equal," echoing and reformulating the leading Left politician Viggo Hørup's famous slogan. Mass meetings, demonstrations and strikes spread rapidly across the country. April 4 negotiations between the social democrats, the government and the employers' union succeeded, resulting in the appointment of a provisional government with two social democratic ministers, a plan to hold elections in 14 days and considerable concessions by the employers in the ongoing industrial disputes [Social-Demokraten March 30, 1920: 1; Karpantschof 2018: 64–65; Mikkelsen 2018b: 81–84; Kaarsted 1968].

The subsequent election was dominated by nationalist sentiments aroused by the Schleswig question and the Radical Left Party suffered a major defeat, while the Left Party and especially the Conservative People's Party advanced significantly (as did the Social Democrats, albeit for very different reasons) and went on to form a government [Det Statistiske Departement 1920: 18–19; 1918: 34]. However, the nationalist fervor did not last and the Social Democrats became the largest party in Folketinget in the 1924 election, forming the government for the first time [Det Statistiske Departement 1924: 18–20]. Their political discourse centered on their adaptation of the Left Party's prior politicization of the social conception of the people as the sole legitimate political authority, now identified primarily with the "working and exploited classes" in "industry and agriculture" as opposed to "the power of capital," as it was formulated in their 1934 populist program "Denmark for the People" [Danmark for Folket] that preceded their biggest electoral success in 1935 and shaped their future [Socialdemokratiets Hovedbestyrelse 1934: 4, 6, 22–23; Det Statistiske Departement 1935: 20; Hansen and Hovmøller 2021: 35–40; Hovmøller 2023: 148–205; see also Nevers and Skov 2019: 441–442; Hansen 2017; Bryld 1976].

The popular mobilizations during the Easter Crisis effectively marked the end of the king's power over Danish governments. No monarch would ever again attempt to intervene directly in the composition or policies of elected government. Henceforth governments would be

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appointed by the representatives of the people elected via equal and universal suffrage to *Folketinget*. The upper chamber was abolished in 1953 [Himmelstrup and Møller 1958: 179 (§15), 182 (§28)].[27] The principle of parliamentary democracy as "the people's (self-)rule" had prevailed in practice through popular mobilizations and sustained struggle, although struggles over who should form part of "the people" continue to this day.

Reflections on the populist foundations of Danish democracy

The successive and interlinked populist conceptions of the people that the National Liberals, the Left Party, and the Social Democrats adopted and advanced during the constitutional struggles between 1830 and 1920 shaped both the concept and the institutions of Danish democracy *qua* "the people's (self-)rule." The concept of democracy came to refer not only to the institution of parliamentary democracy and government, but to an authority and right inherent in the people. Democracy was achieved and defended in practice through popular mobilization and political struggle and to a large extent remains constitutionally uncodified. The current constitution from 1953 defines Denmark as a constitutional monarchy and the monarch formally continues to appoint the government [Himmelstrup and Møller 1958: 177 (§2), 179 (§14)]. Nonetheless Denmark continues to function as a remarkably stable parliamentary democracy with regular elections to *Folketinget*, which determines the composition of the government.

Although Danish democracy was shaped by this populist conception of the people and its (self-)rule rather than by liberal constitutionalism, it nonetheless proved highly resistant to both authoritarian and racist currents in the interwar years and during the German occupation of 1940–1945 [Korsgaard 2004: 471, 436–452; Nevers and Skov 2019: 440–441]. Moreover, Denmark was one of the few Western European countries to further democratize in the wake of the Second World War, abolishing the upper chamber of parliament with the Constitution of 1953, while most other western European democracies introduced constitutional restraints on the political influence of the people, as Jeppe Nevers and Jesper Lundsby Skov have highlighted. They attribute this

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[27] A prior attempt at constitutional reform in 1939 failed to reach the 45% threshold in the referendum (see footnote 25) by approximately 12,000 votes [DET STATISTISKE DEPARTEMENT 1939: 218ff; see also *Rigsdagstidende* 1939, 37–92].

to the predominant legacy of the distinctive populist conceptualization of the people and democracy as the people's rule, which, as I have shown, developed in the course of the constitutional struggles of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that transformed Denmark from an absolute monarchy into a parliamentary democracy [Nevers and Skov 2019: 442–443; Müller 2011].

However, Nevers and Skov also suggest that the heritage of the entwined concepts of the people and democracy have left Danish democracy particularly fragile and vulnerable to populist forces because it is rooted primarily in a populist conception of the people rather than in codified constitutional principles [Nevers and Skov 2019: 445–446].[28] They are correct to note that democracy is not explicitly guaranteed as such by the current Danish constitution (although some central democratic functions and institutions are), and that it is, in many ways, much more closely tied to the political culture and various uncodified political practices informed by the idea of the people's rule that emerged from the constitutional struggles. This idea relies on a concept of the people that does indeed conform to contemporary definitions of populism, emphasizing unitary conceptions of the people politically and morally counterposed to elites and other groups [Arato and Cohen 2017; Mudde 2004; Müller 2017; Mounk 2018; Rummens 2017; Urbinati 2019]. However, it is important to note that these populist conceptions of the people were formulated as part of the struggle *for* democracy *against* non-democratic elites and the constitutions that empowered them and that they have effectively supported and sustained democratic institutions and practices ever since. The populist conception of the people as the sole legitimate political authority that stands outside and above the state remains central and can still be mobilized by movements and parties to hold governments accountable to the electorate.

The problematization of the populist foundations of Danish democracy, and the democratic (de-)merits of populism more generally, miss

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[28] They refer specifically to the Danish People's Party [*Dansk Folkeparti*], which may, however, be more accurately described as a nationalist right-wing party today [see HOVMØLLER 2023: 206–237]. Nevers and Skov consider "it reasonable to assume" that the party's "populism" and "policies that exclude those who in their view do not belong to the people" has "some connection" to the distinct historical conceptualizations of the people previously outlined [NEVERS and SKOV 2019: 445–446]. However, this conceptualization of the people is deployed across the entire political spectrum to very different ends and is not necessarily tied to nationalistic or exclusionary politics. While it has almost always been counterposed to elites, it was historically deployed by the Friends of the Peasants Society, the Left Party, and the Social Democrats as part of their struggles for the inclusion and empowerment of the excluded and marginalized groups that they represented.

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the fundamental point that democracy by definition presupposes a conception of the people as a coherent political subject that can act as both constituent power and (direct or indirect) ruler [Espejo 2017; Frank 2017: 631–633; Kalyvas 2005; 2018; Loughlin and Walker 2007; Wolin 1990]. This people cannot be composed according to democratic or constitutional procedures insofar as it predates and constitutes them; rather, it emerges from the historical processes that found them [see Abizadeh 2012; Kalyvas 2005; 2018; Loughlin and Walker 2007; Whelan 1983]. Insofar as this is accomplished through sustained conflict with the elites of the *ancien regime*, the concept of the people will, in all likelihood, be formulated in opposition to them and thus assume a populist form without therefore undermining their democratic aims.[29] In the case of Denmark, this "people" was established practically and discursively through the successive political struggles and popular mobilizations of the National Liberals, the Left Party, and later the Social Democrats, who developed and deployed historically intertwined populist conceptualizations of the people headed variously by civil servants and burghers, peasants and workers in opposition to reigning political and economic elites in the struggle for democracy. To the extent that this conforms to contemporary definitions of populism, it may be relevant to revisit current definitions of populism and associated claims about its negative relationship to democracy.

While my reconstruction and analysis of the conceptual history of the people and the people's (self-)rule in the constitutional struggles in Denmark provides sufficient grounds for me to challenge the predominant theoretical assumption that populism and democracy have a contradictory relationship, it is not enough to support an alternative theory, which therefore remains beyond the scope of the present investigation. I will nonetheless provide some critical reflections on the shortcomings of the dominant theorizations of the supposedly contradictory relationship between populism and democracy, the two most prominent versions of which suggest that populism is either inherently anti-pluralist or undermines constitutionalism and thereby poses a dire threat to democracy.

The most common critique of populism claims that populists' invocations of "the people" in the singular, and concomitant claims that they alone represent it against elites and other groups, threaten to undermine the latter's democratic legitimacy and thereby also the fundamental

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[29] This, of course, does not mean that the people remain fixed in this form indefinitely. This constitutive act itself transforms both the form and content of the people, as will multiple other social and political process in all likelihood.

pluralism of democracy [Arato and Cohen 2017; Müller 2017: 3–4, 20; Urbinati 2019: 45; Rummens 2017; see also Lefort 1988].[30] However, it is unclear how populism might be distinguished from democracy in this regard, insofar as the latter also derives its legitimacy from "the people" and claims to represent its will and interests exclusively (against populists, for instance). Moreover, historically democracies were often established by popular movements mobilizing populist concepts of the people against reigning elites, as I have shown in this article [see also Frank 2010; Olson 2016: 54–109; Rousselière 2021]. A number of critics of populism have attempted to evade the mutual historical implications of populism and democracy by insisting that populism emerges only after and as a reaction to democracy [for example, Müller 2017; Taggart 2002; Urbinati 2019; see also Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017]. However, this claim does not follow from their definitions of populism, nor does it correspond to the historical record, as I have shown.[31]

Another charge frequently raised against populism is that it undermines constitutionalism by putting the will of the people before the constitution and thereby threatens democracy [see Abts and Rummens 2007; Issacharoff 2018; Mounk 2018; Mudde 2013].[32] Here it is important to note first and foremost that constitutionalism is not identical to democracy nor is it necessarily democratic; modern constitutionalism is a method of constraining the power of the people and its representatives [see in particular Loughlin 2022]. But as I have already highlighted, constitutions nonetheless presuppose a constituent power, which, in modernity, can only be "the people" conceived as a coherent entity with a collective will—however represented—that constitutes and legitimizes the constitution as an act of self-legislation. The paradox of constitutionalism is that the constitution derives from and thus remains implicated in the very will of the people that it is meant to constrain. The

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[30] It is interesting to note that this critique of populism itself threatens to undermine the democratic legitimacy of populists in much the same manner that it accuses them of undermining the democratic legitimacy of its adversaries. This conforms closely to the elitist derision that many populists claim to confront.

[31] Müller has trouble maintaining this conceptual configuration. Thus in an attempt to exclude the Tahrir Square Movement of 2011 and its iconic chants of "the people demand the fall of the regime" and the East German 1989 protests against the regime under the famous slogan "we are the people" from his category of

populism, he argues that they were in fact *anti-populist* since they deployed these slogans against illegitimate populist regimes that claimed to represent the people exclusively – entirely neglecting his insistence that populism only exist in liberal democracies [MÜLLER 2017: 72].

[32] A closely related line of argumentation proposes that populists are only opposed to *liberal* constitutionalism and will gladly reform or make new constitutions that entrench their power and reflect their particular interests [URBINATI 2019; MÜLLER 2017: 62f; KALTWASSER 2015].

central point here is that constitutionalism, like democracy, is theoretically and historically entwined with populist conceptualizations of the people and it is therefore relevant to revisit and reconsider their relationship. Such an endeavor must start by abandoning the widespread assumption that populism is inherently opposed to democracy.

Conclusion

This article has reconstructed and analyzed the conceptual history of "the people" in modern Danish history. My analysis has shown the central role that the development and deployment of distinctly populist conceptualizations of the people played in the constitutional struggles from 1830 to 1920 that transformed Denmark from an absolute monarchy into a parliamentary democracy. Moreover, my analysis has shown that these populist conceptualizations of the people shaped and supported the emergence of the ideas and practices of parliamentary democracy *qua* "the people's (self-)rule." On this basis, I have sought to challenge contemporary assumptions about the adverse relationship between populism and democracy and have made a number of empirical and analytical contributions to the existing historiography, as well as the literature on the construction of the people, democracy, and populism.

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