

# Introduction: The Crowd in the History of Political Thought—A Conversation in a Socratic Spirit

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**Abstract:** The article introduces a symposium, “The Crowd in the History of Political Thought,” which is being published as a two-part special issue. The articles are by American and European scholars with disparate interests and approaches to the history of political thought. Some engage contemporary questions, while others offer interpretive analyses. Today, commentators, scholars, and pundits alike ignore the history of political thought to the detriment of their understanding of populism. Many thinkers have reflected on democratic health and sickness. The articles here furnish a partial catalog of the quarrels associated with this inherited vocabulary. The tradition itself is best conceived of as an unfinished Socratic conversation. In this issue, articles on Thucydides, Aristophanes, Plato, and Aristotle orbit the original democracy at Athens, the backdrop for reflections on popular rule of so many thinkers. The final article on Josephus moves away from the experience of the Greek polis toward the more contemporary preoccupations of the second issue.

## Introduction

In December 2021, we held a remote event, “The Crowd in the History of Political Thought: A Symposium on Populism,” cosponsored by the Universidad Francisco de Vitoria in Madrid and John Cabot University in Rome. Our ambition in convening this symposium was to create a forum to think and talk about populism, a subject of growing concern for Europeans

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As guest coeditors of this special issue, we warmly thank our fellow guest coeditor, Susan D. Collins. Her expertise and editorial assistance have significantly improved the articles of this first issue.

and Americans alike.<sup>1</sup> We invited emerging and senior scholars to give papers on the crowd in the history of political thought and to reflect on the ways older thinkers can shed light on today's politics.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, visions of the past are already intertwined with our present, while past thought can help us to broaden and deepen our understanding of the contemporary moment.

Our participants are American and European scholars with diverse interests and disparate approaches to the history of political thought. Some engage contemporary questions directly, while others largely offer interpretive analyses of past thinkers. Nonetheless, we encouraged everyone to reflect on what their respective subject might tell us about our theme. Consequently, the arguments of these articles are acutely alive to the concerns of the present. While constituting valuable individual studies, taken together, these articles enlarge our understanding of the tangle of issues at play in the catch-all term "populism," and we hope they contribute to untangling them.

### Populism and the History of Political Thought

Commentators, scholars, and pundits alike ignore the history of political thought to the detriment of their understanding of politics. On the scholarly side, some of this neglect is the result of the disciplinary divorce between political science and political theory, while some of it relates to the separation between much contemporary political theorizing and the history of political thought. Even if we accept, for example, the plausible view that the rising number of populist movements is bound up with the global socioeconomic environment, neither the dynamics of social antagonism nor the concepts mobilized by populists are new.

Populists, for their part, proclaim some authentic allegiance to democracy itself, which they argue has been perverted by corruption and unaccountable institutions, in essence by elite capture of the regime. Liberal democracy, they argue, has been perverted by insufficient democracy, which justifies a direct

<sup>1</sup>Key works that appeal to the history of political thought in their assessments of populism include Bernard Crick, "Populism, Politics, and Democracy," *Democratization* 12, no. 5 (2005); Nadia Urbinati, "The Populist Phenomenon," *Raisons Politiques* 51, no. 3 (2013); Margaret Canovan, *The People* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005); Chantal Delsol, *Populisme: Les demeurés de l'histoire* (Paris: Éditions du Rocher, 2015); and Céline Spector, *No Demos? Souveraineté et démocratie à l'épreuve de l'Europe* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2021).

<sup>2</sup>Original symposium participants were Carlo Altini, Annelien de Dijn, Luc Foisneau, Guillermo Graño Ferrer, Montserrat Herrero, S. N. Jaffe, Tae-Youn Keum, John McCormick, Neville Morley, Clifford Orwin, Eva Piirimäe, Arlene Saxonhouse, Vasileios Syros, and Camila Vergara.

appeal to the people.<sup>3</sup> What we term populism, then, is linked to the health of liberal democracy and to the proper role of the people within it. If we attend to populist rhetoric, populism is either the cure to a sickness in liberal democracy—a correction or rebalancing of the regime—or an exhortation to fundamental change, where the change is usually framed as the proper elevation of the democratic at the expense of the liberal. None of this is to deny the messiness, hypocrisy, or self-dealing of populist politicians. We are talking about actual politics, of course, but there is value in exploring the rhetorical claims, especially since the appeal of populism is growing.<sup>4</sup>

Even if today's populism represents a distinctly liberal-democratic problem, many past thinkers have reflected on democratic health and sickness. And democracy, of course, is older than liberalism, and certainly far older than the twentieth century, the primary point of reference for commentators, where the triangle of fascism, communism, and liberal democracy dominates the popular imagination and even scholarly discussions, especially those of political scientists. There are, however, illuminating reflections about the people as a political actor throughout the history of political thought, from thinkers critical of it to those sympathetic. Moreover, our democratic vocabulary itself contains ambiguities and tensions. The articles assembled here furnish a partial catalog of the historical permutations and philosophical quarrels associated with this inherited vocabulary. Treatments of the relationships between masses and elites or leaders and followers, for example—to say nothing of the character of the true people, the proper role of democratic or liberal institutions, the perils of mass psychology, the meaning and implications of popular sovereignty, and the entanglement of democracy, demagoguery and tyranny—are all recurrent themes in the history of political thought.

The tradition itself is best conceived of as multiple traditions, woven out of quarrelling voices. These include theoretical reflections but also hard-won interpretations of political practice. Instead of “tradition,” we conceive of these debates as a running, unfinished Socratic conversation across time. And conversations, by definition, remain open to new voices or new encounters between older ones. We do not believe that the history of political thought

<sup>3</sup>In addition to the two-strand theory, which focuses on the relationship between liberalism and democracy, some have argued that contemporary populism is nourished by rival visions of democracy itself. Margaret Canovan, “Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy,” *Political Studies* 47, no. 1 (1999): 10.

<sup>4</sup>Among social scientists, the question of the character of the populist appeal is itself not free of controversy. In *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit and Authoritarian Populism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart attribute the rise of populism to older, authoritarian-inclined citizens, who seek to stop cultural change. Armin Schäfer, by contrast argues that the voting data suggests that younger citizens are actually more likely to support authoritarian populists. “Cultural Backlash? How (Not) to Explain the Rise of Authoritarian Populism,” *British Journal of Political Science* 52, no. 4 (2022): 1977–93.

furnishes canned solutions to contemporary problems. As citizens, we must wrestle with the theoretical, practical, and technological challenges of late modernity for ourselves. But earlier thinkers can help us to reflect incisively on politics, to examine our world from unexpected perspectives, to become aware of the implications of our theoretical as well as practical views, and, above all, to become more serious in our thinking. The messy conversation of our quarrelling political tradition can help us to help ourselves.

The articles of this first of a two-part special issue focus on premodern accounts of the people against the backdrop of the classical typology of regimes. They go behind liberal democracy to earlier regime forms, which allows us to isolate dynamics that may be at play in contemporary politics, if obscured by the greater complexity of the latter. Here, the non-liberal-democratic character of these treatments can help us to think outside or around our assumptions. The articles of the second issue focus more fully on the emergence and character of modernity as well as those newer conceptions of the people which are more familiar to us today. Modern regimes partly spring from the ways political philosophy itself nourished the establishment of novel political forms, but also from how early modern thinkers interpreted the deficiencies of ancient democracy. Consequently, these regimes have living histories more profoundly intertwined with the history of political philosophy than the ancient polis or the Roman Republic. A lively engagement with the history of political thought allows us to recreate philosophical conversations between premodern thinkers, the architects of political modernity and liberal democracy, and, lastly, their critics.

### **The People vs. the Crowd**

With regard to “the people” as a political actor, we chose the expression “the crowd” instead, which requires explanation. Independent of the fraught rhetorical contestation of the category of the true people, there have been changes in the term’s substantive meaning across time, with several usages now existing contemporaneously. For example, “the people” can refer to the poor majority as distinct from the wealthy or well-born minority. It can point toward a cultural or linguistic or ethnic whole or mean every citizen, taken all together, as in the doctrine of popular sovereignty. Whatever its meaning, as befits a democratic age, the people are invariably viewed in a positive light. When populists are challenged, their opponents do not argue that the people are unimportant or bad. Instead, it is denied that this or that populist actually speaks for them. They are disingenuously conflating a part with the whole or cynically setting one group against another. Today, all politicians pay lip service to their devotion to the people. Whether their behavior confirms this devotion is a separate matter. In modern politics, then, the people are publicly presented as good or at worst benign. It is government which fails the people. The people do not fail their government.

The people, then, sit at the presumptive heart of liberal democracy, but the term itself proves protean and slippery, while it is abundantly clear that elites, another hazy category, have not disappeared. Indeed, elites are thriving, often at the expense of a great majority of people. There is some underlying confusion here.

By contrast, “the crowd” is not as capacious or confusing a term, which is one reason we chose it, another being that it is less politicized than that of “the people.” “The crowd” means merely a multitude of people assembled. In rare circumstances, a crowd could encompass the whole people, or a part that is representative of the whole, or a part pretending to be the whole, like at a populist rally. But more commonly a crowd is simply a gathering. And, unlike “the people,” which may be passive or active, isolated or taken together, a crowd involves an actual assemblage of people. Importantly, the word also carries the air of menace. Crowds can be dangerous but need not be. The term’s ambiguity is thus helpful in allowing our participants to discuss the underlying issues.

The reason for a crowd’s formation can be apolitical and passive, like audiences at sporting events or concerts, but it can also be active and political. The crowd at a rally, for instance, may be initially passive but can become quickly activated by a persuasive speaker. Here the crowd becomes a vehicle for collective action. A political crowd, then, is a gathering of politically activated people. There is a latent power of action becoming patent. And crowds can also transform into mobs, which everyone knows are problematic. Whatever populism entails, it involves restive gatherings of people who are set in motion by political speech. Our frame, then, “the crowd in the history of political thought,” allows us to construct a bridge across the ancient and modern divide, to open up conceptual space for positive and negative assessments of the people, and, importantly, to avoid the theoretical freighting now attending the term “the people.”

We solicited a range of contributions across what is often termed the ancient and modern divide. Many authors treated in these articles are widely studied, Plato and Aristotle for example, while other perhaps expected voices are absent—Rousseau or Tocqueville or Marx—and certain unexpected figures appear, like Josephus and Herder. By our lights, the richness of a dialogue is bound up with bringing disparate voices together into an overarching conversation, which allows for dynamic variations on an orienting theme. Many voices are missing, including medieval thinkers, to say nothing of the role of the people in national liberation struggles, protest movements, and non-Western thought. Our modest aim was to bring together diverse views from the history of political thought for an initial encounter.

Methodological disputes have often informed debates in the history of political thought. By our lights, the historicist/contextualist vs. antihistoricist/textualist dichotomy has become increasingly sclerotic. Consequently, we invited scholars sympathetic to these approaches, but also those who do not fall neatly within them—and there are growing numbers of the latter.

The deeper question in these debates revolves around whether difference or similarity predominates in human affairs, and, more deeply still, whether language and its games inescapably ring-fence our horizons, or whether thinking can be transhistorical in ways that matter. At the shallower level, however, most everyone agrees that one can go wrong by emphasizing similarity when difference predominates, or by stressing difference when similarities are more salient. There are many ways to err in interpreting past thought, let alone in trying to bring it to bear on modern preoccupations. Despite these difficulties, and whatever the interpretive disagreements among our participants, all believe that the history of political thought matters. Hermeneutical differences did not inhibit the conversation of our symposium, and we would be genuinely surprised if they interfered with the reader's engagement with these articles.

### **Vol. 1: Classical Visions of the Crowd**

In this first issue, four articles orbit the original democracy at Athens, the backdrop for the reflections on politics of so many important Greek writers. Athens also offers a case study of a democracy free of liberalism and modern constitutionalism. The article on Josephus moves us away from the experience of the Greek polis while hewing closely to the horizon of political life. It thereby creates a bridge from the classical to more recognizably modern thinking about the people which is the concern of the articles of the second issue.

S. N. Jaffe's "Vast Personal Forces: Thucydides, Populism, and the Liberty of the Ancients" offers an interpretation of the Thucydidean account of how democratic citizens experience their regime, identifying a link between freedom and empire in the communitarian experience of power. He explores how the imperial Athenian democracy, where citizens were constituents of a vast personal force, magnified the citizen's feelings of power and freedom. Jaffe conjectures that while liberal democracy promises freedom, citizens often feel powerless and unfree, ensnared by impersonal forces, which explains in part their attraction to the mass politics of populism, for it furnishes a longed-for feeling of freedom, for a measure of control over one's life.

The ascendance of politicians today whose careers involved entertainment, that stepchild of comedy—from Donald Trump in the United States to Volodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine to Beppe Grillo of Italy—is suggestive of the political power of entertainment. Arlene Saxonhouse's "The Comedy of Crowds: Aristophanes and the Voice of the People—or the Poet" explores Aristophanes's attempt to educate the Athenian demos in the audience through his comic recreation of the demos on stage. The comic poet styles himself the wise educator of the people, a Comedian King, we might say, playing on Plato's famous Philosopher King. But is Aristophanes serious while Plato's Socrates is joking? While theorists have explored the



relationship between tragedy and democracy, Saxonhouse's Aristophanes raises questions about the pedagogical, even therapeutic role of comedy in democracy as an inoculation against unscrupulous orators.

"Crowds and Crowd Pleasing in Plato" by Tae-Yeoun Keum furnishes a theoretical account of the activity of Socratic philosophizing with reference to the role played by the audiences of the dialogues. Plato's Socrates characteristically engages in public examinations, often before gatherings or crowds. Despite the Socratic claims that present crowds in a pejorative light, Keum maintains that Socratic practice regarding his audiences problematizes these statements. Upon scrutiny, the undifferentiated audience can act as a corporate character within the dialogues, playing a ministerial role to Socrates. The audience, we might say, becomes an assistant midwife to Socratic dialectic. All this complicates the question of Plato and Socrates's assessment of democracy and the broader question of the relationship between Socratic philosophy and the demos.

Like Jaffe's article, David Polansky's "Populism and Democratic Conflict: An Aristotelian View" uses an ancient thinker to illuminate liberal democratic politics with an emphasis on populism. Polansky turns to Aristotle to explore the underlying class dynamics of populism which he believes have become obscured by the theoretical architecture of liberal democracy, but also by our moral attachment to the democratic regime. While tracing a genealogy of confusions surrounding the meaning of "the people," Polansky maintains that Aristotle's more capacious discussion of regimes, including nondemocratic ones, helps us to conceive of populism in ways that more cleanly identify the class dynamics beneath the angry charges and counter-charges of populists and their critics.

The Athenian experience as a touchstone for reflections on the people—here, the poor majority—establishes the orienting framework for later thinking about the role of the people in political life, but the Hellenistic world and the rise of Rome shift this conception in new directions. In "God's Brigands: People, Party and Sect in Flavius Josephus's *Bellum Judaicum*," Clifford Orwin scrutinizes Josephus's account of the Jewish people within the Hellenistic world and its many peoples, all in the shadow of Roman power. Orwin discovers antecedents to the modern understanding of the people as the decent political class and explores Josephus's indictment of sectarian politics, rooted in an assessment of the immoderate effects of allegedly antipolitical (i.e., religious) sects. Orwin maintains that Josephus not only anticipates Machiavelli's conception of the people as decent, but also his diagnoses of the problems Christianity poses for political life—or, more contentiously, the dangers monotheism poses to politics.

To end on a Socratic note, we invite readers to engage in their own conversations with these articles. We hope they enrich the debates surrounding populism, and that the reader finds them stimulating and rewarding, even or especially if they disagree with them.