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978-1-107-11323-7 - Imagined Sovereignities: The Power of the People and Other Myths of the Modern Age

Kevin Olson

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Imagined Sovereignities

Movements like the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, and the Tea Party embody some of our deepest intuitions about popular politics and “the power of the people.” They also expose tensions and shortcomings in our understanding of these ideals. We typically see “the people” as having a special, sovereign power. Despite the centrality of this idea in our thinking, we have little understanding of why it has such importance.

Imagined Sovereignities probes the considerable force that “the people” exercises on our thought and practice. Like the imagined communities described by Benedict Anderson, popular politics is formed around shared, imaginary constructs rooted in our collective imagination. This book investigates these “imagined sovereignties” in a genealogy traversing the French Enlightenment, the Haitian Revolution, and nineteenth-century Haitian constitutionalism. It problematizes taken-for-granted ideas about popular politics and provokes new ways of imagining the power of the people.

Kevin Olson is an associate professor of political science at the University of California, Irvine.

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Imagined Sovereignties

*The Power of the People and Other Myths
of the Modern Age*

KEVIN OLSON

University of California, Irvine



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32 Avenue of the Americas, New York NY 10013

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www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107113237

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First published 2016

A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Names: Olson, Kevin, author.

Title: Imagined sovereignties : the power of the people and other myths of the modern age / Kevin Olson, University of California, Irvine.

Description: New York, NY : Cambridge University Press, 2016. |

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2015051222 | ISBN 9781107113237 (hardback)

Subjects: LCSH: Political participation – Social aspects. | Identity politics. |

Group identity – Political aspects. | Sovereignty.

Classification: LCC JF799.O54 2016 | DDC 323/.042–dc23

LC record available at <http://lcn.loc.gov/2015051222>

ISBN 978-1-107-11323-7 Hardback

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*For Richard and Florence Olson, two of the great
parents of American nonfiction.*

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Acknowledgments

I'm fortunate to have many talented and wonderful colleagues. My daily conversations with Daniel Brunstetter, Kamal Sadiq, and Keith Topper have contributed a great deal to my thinking about the themes in this book. I greatly appreciate Jason Frank's insightful comments on the manuscript, as well as many other conversations along the way. I'd also like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their mix of encouragement, rigor, and constructive criticism. For valuable comments on various parts of the manuscript, conversation, and advice, I'm very grateful to Amy Allen, Étienne Balibar, James Bohman, Maeve Cooke, Joshua Dienstag, David Easton, Eva Erman, Sarah Farmer, Raúl Fernández, Catherine Fisk, Nancy Fraser, Alexander Gelley, David Theo Goldberg, Michael Hanchard, David Ingram, Arlene Keizer, Claire Kim, Nikolas Kompridis, Colin Koopman, Cristina Lafont, Horacio Legras, Julia Reinhard Lupton, James Martel, Lyle Massey, Bill Maurer, Kirstie McClure, Sofia Näsström, Andrew Norris, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, Carole Pateman, Mark Poster, William Scheuerman, Ralph Shain, Timothy Tackett, Antonio Vazquez-Arroyo, Brian Walker, and Christopher Zurn. Robert Dreesen at the Cambridge University Press has been a joy to work with, and I'm very grateful to him for sharing my enthusiasm for this work.

The Critical Theory Institute at the University of California, Irvine, is a wonderful intellectual home and source of inspiration to think otherwise. Special thanks to my colleagues in the Institute for their generous measures of stimulation and provocation.

A small friend once asked what I do for a living. Grasping for an explanation she might understand, I said "I write books." She thought about this for a second, then asked, "Picture books or chapter books?" This is a chapter book, but it does have a couple of pictures. For permission to reproduce them, I'm grateful to the Bibliothèque Nationale de France and Google Labs. Those institutions as well as the Archives Nationales de France and the Newberry Library

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Acknowledgments

have my gratitude for access to their collections. Ghislaine and Olivier Taxy deserve special thanks for their warm hospitality and friendship during my time in Paris. Funding to pursue this project was provided by a Faculty Career Development Award from the University of California, as well as grants from the Critical Theory Institute, the Center in Law, Society, and Culture, and the Council on Research, Computing, and Libraries at the University of California, Irvine.

Above all, my warmest thanks to my extended family and friends for their support and welcome distractions, especially my parents Richard and Florence and my sisters Shannon and Mikaela. And finally, Ulrike is always my first audience and most thoughtful interlocutor.