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

Kevin Olson

Excerpt

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## I

## Imagining Politics

They turn the sovereign into a fantastic being made of interconnected pieces. It is as if they built a man out of several bodies, one of which had eyes, another had arms, another feet, and nothing more.... After having taken apart the social body by means of a sleight-of-hand worthy of a carnival, they put the pieces back together who knows how.

– Jean-Jacques Rousseau<sup>1</sup>

This has been an era of Velvet Revolutions, Tea Parties, and Arab Springs. Ever since the depolarization of the Cold War blocs in 1989, a series of widely celebrated political events has played out across the globe, expanding the scope of democracy, self-determination, and freedom. It has occurred most recently in North Africa and the Middle East, where popular insurgencies have won hard-fought victories against hard-line governments and entrenched dictators. Although quite different from one another in culture, tactics, aims, and circumstance, these upheavals share a family resemblance. They are all seen as democratic movements based in some kind of popular unity and collective action.

Meanwhile, restless energies have been at work in the United States as well. The Tea Party movement has cut a large swath through American politics in the early part of the century, seeking to liberate itself from the tyranny of a “socialist” presidential administration. The massive capital backing this libertarian insurgency is somewhat at odds with its claims to be a grassroots movement. Perhaps to relieve these tensions, the movement operates in the name of the patriotic values of the American founding. With similarly popular claims, the Occupy Wall Street movement has mobilized *against* neoliberal corporate finance and elite privilege. Framing itself as “the 99 percent,” this movement wears the mantle of popular universalism in opposition to the “1 percent” whose economic and political power require the power of the people as a countervailing opposition.

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Europe has its own concerns about the people and their powers. As the financial crisis of the early millennium spread across the Atlantic, European governments initiated unwise austerity programs that sparked widespread protest. This mobilization has occurred at times under the banner of “the people of Europe,” and at other times under the banners of component national peoples, particularly those of Greece and Spain. It provokes broader questions about the ambiguous sovereignty of the European Union: how can we conceive the fragmented and multilayered structure of European politics – as well as the protests against it – as manifestations of popular power? Can there be a “people of Europe” subtending the European Union, and if so, how does it relate to various European peoples and their distinctive cultures? If one mobilizes in the name of “the people” in Europe, which people is that, exactly?

While the power of the people often evokes images of mass marches, street protests, Molotov cocktails against Soviet tanks, or the Rebel Alliance against Imperial storm troopers, the idea has migrated into many other areas of contemporary society. In recent decades, it has become connected to ideas of consumer choice in the marketplace through green consumer and ethical consumer movements. This amounts to an extension of progressive politics into new domains: boycotts, a politicization of consumption, attempts to reinject values and politics into the economic sphere, and a denial of the boundary between politics and the economy, all oriented toward bringing the economic sphere under greater popular control.

At the same time, the increasing sophistication of the Internet has given the power of the people new life as a postindustrial epistemic project. The proliferation of wikis, blogs, and other forms of do-it-yourself new media amounts to a de-expertization of knowledge and commentary. In this new world, millions of ordinary voices replace the centralized authority of a few officially sanctioned ones. The novel practices that have sprung up around these new technologies promise a grassroots revolution in the production and distribution of knowledge.

In all of these upheavals, we see the central importance of popular politics in the contemporary political scene. The power of the people is one of the most cherished ideas of the modern political imagination. Over the course of several centuries, it has provided the basis for countless political movements and governmental formations: antimonarchical revolutions, anticolonial rebellions, anti-imperial separations, postnationalist movements for ethnic self-determination, and grassroots insurgencies and social movements of all kinds. It continues to provide one of our favored notions of democratic sovereignty and popular politics. It underpins the normative force of democracy and democratization, providing them with a kind of sanctity and taken-for-granted rectitude in our political imagination. In this sense, popular politics enjoys a presumption of goodness, and democratization is increasingly seen as a cure-all to thorny geopolitical, religious, and ethnic problems.

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The importance of popular politics has not been without ambivalence, however. The democratization of the Soviet Empire has gone hand in hand with the universalization of capitalism and the dismantling of the social service apparatus of the old socialist states. Although the value of political freedom seems unambiguous, citizens have borne substantial costs while the new states figure out how to regulate freshly unleashed capitalist energies. In several cases, the result has been a popular embrace of totalitarian and corrupt governments.

Similarly, the democratic revolutions of the Arab Spring have been received with some confusion in the developed West. Although popular politics has a privileged status, it quickly acquires a bad taste for many observers when flavored with religious fundamentalism. This harkens back to an earlier generation of popular revolutions – in Cuba, Chile, and Nicaragua, for example – that were greeted with enthusiasm until they took a turn toward socialism. In all of these cases, the power of the people has a strong sanctity, but at times it runs afoul of other commitments due to dissonance among deeply held beliefs.

The power of the people displays similar tensions in domestic politics. Because such ideas are built deeply into our common sense, they can also be employed for cynical and instrumental purposes. Thus we see them being used even where that use seems tortuous and strained. This happens, for example, when popular politics is instrumentally appropriated in forms of “populism.” As an electoral strategy, populism presumes or recognizes the power of the people. It works by identifying a candidate or regime with popular interests and tastes, borrowing the normativity of the people through association. This borrowing can be as rich as claiming that a candidate is “of the people,” or as thin as playing off the numerical superiority of the voting individuals who would so identify themselves. In either case, the deep cultural currency and indeterminate character of popular power allow it to be instrumentalized in this way. This phenomenon provides a vivid demonstration that it is much easier to work with the cultural grain than against it, employing taken-for-granted ideas to accomplish one’s ends. The power of the people can be pressed into service as a form of justification, even when this produces considerable distortion of the underlying ideas.

As different as these instances are, they share a common concern with the power of the people as a standard of legitimate politics. The power of the people tends to operate as a primary premise from which other conclusions are drawn. It anchors other values by providing an initial point from which to proceed. Yet, the events I have surveyed also give us some inkling of the ways in which this ideal is troubled by tensions and problematics. It is quite unclear why the power of the people deserves such unquestioning devotion and what we might say by way of criticizing it. As a result, it tends to be immune from scrutiny – or even worse, not seen as the kind of ideal one might think to question. This removes some of the most important issues from the table: a whole

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constellation of problems about what the power of the people is, how it can be collectively exercised, and why it should be considered such a compelling ideal.

These lacunae make it all the more pressing to take a close look at the power of the people. We need to achieve more clarity about its nuances, how it is invoked, and when it is being employed cynically to promote other ends. Popular politics is seen as simultaneously compelling and unproblematic, in spite of its considerable tensions and problems. It is uncritically assumed, indiscriminately used, diluted, and cynically twisted to a multitude of other purposes. Seemingly any aspect of democratic society can be alleged as a manifestation of popular power, even those that are least democratic. The very ubiquity of this idea drains it of meaning, dulls its critical edge, and diminishes its rhetorical and normative force. It is worth asking exactly why we see the people as having power, and whether it makes sense to export this ideal – by force or otherwise – to the rest of the “nondemocratic” world. As we have recently seen in Eastern Europe and the Middle East, one cannot simply adopt Western European models without careful thought. To the extent that European liberal democracy is a historically specific experiment, we need to ask probing questions about its conceptual heritage, its internal architecture, what is generalizable and what is specific and limited.

In this book I will interrogate “the power of the people” as a dominant concept for understanding popular politics. The critical challenge is to bring this idea back into vivid attention while stripping away the calcified clichés and associations that render it banal. We must recognize that such ideas structure the political, award agency and authorization, determine the boundaries of the possible, and valorize certain kinds of mobilizations. Thus it is important to examine their nuances and tease out their different forms and variations.

This will be a story of magic, enchantment, and transformation. It tells of the magic of having one’s beliefs become reality; the enchantment of conjuring fictitious beings into active life; and the transformation of individuals into collectivities and collectivities into sovereign entities. I bring this enchanted world to light not to make it melt away in the harsh glare of critical scrutiny, however, but to better understand the ways in which it enchants us. By rendering the familiar foreign, we gain critical perspective on something that surrounds us every day. Because of its stature as a cornerstone of the Western self-understanding, the power of the people has the potential to obscure as much as it reveals. Indeed, there is a stark contrast between the overwhelming prevalence of this image and the degree to which we understand what it actually means.

As a taken-for-granted account of the political, the power of the people significantly forecloses detailed understandings of what is being proposed. Its uncritical use can obscure other kinds of power and a variety of political ideals that may or may not fit under the heading of “democracy.” Indeed, one of “the people’s” primary “powers” is justification: it tends to end conversations

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rather than stimulate them. A properly critical view would disrupt such cynical and strategic justifications, revealing hidden strategies of power by reopening dialogue about what popular politics is and why. This line of criticism should start with our favored concepts and most obviously intuitive metaphors. Only by subjecting these received ideas to scrutiny, can we think in new and different ways about popular politics and the cluster of concepts connected to it.

This project requires a better critical understanding of a whole host of concepts in which normative force is attributed to collective identities. This includes peoples, nations, crowds, masses, mobs, social movements, publics, and dispersed networks of communication and opinion. It encompasses the various powers, sovereignty, rectitude, or sanctified agency they are perceived to have. It asks how we understand the normative force of social movements, how such collectivities acquire normative force, and what kind of normative force they acquire.

To some extent, this project requires a return to past languages and deployments. It is a recuperative enterprise, seeking to unearth ways of thinking that we have forgotten and clear away paths not taken. At the same time, it is a project of liberation. I will try to open up a space of indeterminacy in our thinking about popular politics. This will be by means of revealing tensions and problematics that have been there from the beginning. All of this has the virtue of taking something that seems simple and obvious and revealing it to be complex, unstable, and filled with tensions, problematics, and complications.

This effort of problematization will take the form of a simultaneously critical and historical investigation. It brings important contemporary work on collective identity and political imaginaries into dialogue with the archives of popular politics. My studies here will probe a span of eighteenth-century-French history, a period of Haitian history immediately before the Revolution, and Haitian constitutional history in the nineteenth century. They are aimed at our collective imagination: the way popular politics forms into political imaginaries that set the terms of our political relations and constitute institutions and practices. They reveal the processes through which political norms are created, highlighting the unique, incomplete, and in-process character of political normativity. All of this emphasizes the pliability and plasticity of our notions of popular power. By drawing out these details, I hope to disaggregate overly stylized ideas about popular politics. My goal is to focus attention where the real action is – our collective imaginaries and their sources – and to open up new possibilities for imagining popular politics.

## FOLK PARADIGMS OF POLITICS

Why do we believe in ideas like “the power of the people,” and what exactly is it that we believe in? These ideas have become such a commonplace that we forget they are creatures of our own invention. Even in an era when natural

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rights and self-evident truths (“We hold these truths to be self-evident ...”) have been thoroughly discredited, the image of popular sovereignty retains a tight hold on our collective imagination.

The power of the people functions as a *folk paradigm* of political belief. It is a set of shared ideas about how politics ought to be conducted and on what it ought to be based.<sup>2</sup> Like other forms of socially current, culturally embedded belief, it holds together in its own special way and circulates widely in a relatively unquestioned matter. At times, such folk beliefs may go entirely unrecognized because they are so thoroughly taken for granted. Yet they bind our conduct, precisely because we find them so natural and true. In this sense, such beliefs have an important function. They structure our relations with one another, organize cooperative endeavors, and provide us with a shared body of knowledge about the social world. These beliefs have both factual and normative content: they postulate a meaningful collectivity that we refer to as “the people,” endowing it with particular forms of power.

To say that the power of the people is a shared and taken-for-granted idea is not the same as saying that it is universally accepted or universally agreed upon. Acceptance is a voluntaristic concept. It describes ideas that a given person is willing to embrace after coming to understand them in a careful way. My concern with ideas like the power of the people is rather the opposite: it is not given careful attention or thematized for judgment. Instead, it is part of the wallpaper of our shared world, something that we see without seeing. It is so deeply embedded in our cultural common sense that it escapes notice. Even when we do notice it, it is a commonplace that is immunized from careful scrutiny. It is not subject to acceptance or rational consideration because, for the most part, it bypasses the channels of such consideration.

Neither is the power of the people universally agreed upon. There are people who are aware of this idea and disagree with it. They fight an uphill battle, however, in making their agreement known and arguing for it. They face the challenge of bringing something to attention that, for most people, is invisible. In contemporary democratic cultures we see the people as having power, and that is the end of the story. Why would anyone need to discuss this further? Even if they can successfully thematize these issues, such critics face a second challenge: arguing against something that seems to be true. The naturalization of the power of the people runs so deep that the burden of proof is much higher to those who would oppose it, to the extent that their arguments even make sense. If Sir Robert Filmer tried to persuade a contemporary audience that kings have a natural sovereignty based on their shared descent from Adam, while the supposed liberty of the people is unnatural, he would face baffled incomprehension. There are people today, of course, who have ideas of natural hierarchy and deny that the people possess any special authority. Their arguments struggle for acceptance against the overwhelming, silent consensus of a more pervasive set of commitments, however, that privilege notions of egalitarianism and popular power.

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The power of the people is not alone in this character. It is one of a small group of concepts that are deeply submerged in our cultural common sense and have a foundational character in discourse and practice. Ideas like the freedom of the market, individual autonomy, equality, and liberty are high on the list. Like the power of the people, there is neither consensus about the particulars of these ideas nor universal acceptance of them. What sets them apart is their naturalization in our collective imaginaries. They circulate freely and often in conflict with one another. They can be invoked at will, twisted and turned in various ways, and put to many uses, often quite cynically. They are mobile cultural fragments that travel independently of one another and are assembled in a variety of ways. These elements form larger imaginary constellations, but in an unfixed and sometimes contradictory way. They can coincide, cohere, and/or clash with one another. One faces an uphill and counterintuitive battle to argue against them, however. They are culturally entrenched in a rather nonrational, unarticulated manner.

Because of their deeply situated, heavily naturalized character, such ideas have a disproportionate influence on our politics. As a result, they merit close attention. When certain items of belief become fixed points around which we arrange the rest of our world, they take on a dogmatic character and occlude critical insight. Our thinking about popular politics shows such tendencies in at least four ways. These are not universal or always-present characteristics. Rather, they are polymorphous and transposable elements, *Leitmotive* that form recognizable tendencies in our thinking. We can refer to them as *four dogmas of popular politics*.

1. **Folk foundationalism.** The idea of an independent, self-legitimizing people, nation, or community has an enormous hold on our thinking. Collectivities like the people are often perceived to act with natural rectitude. When the people take to the streets, when they declare their will in an election or voice a consensual opinion, we hold them to be inherently correct. We see politics as most rightfully conducted by groups like the people, and their actions in this domain carry a moral weight not borne by individuals or institutions.

There is a strong naturalism in this kind of thinking. The power of the people seems so natural that it often passes our attention unnoticed. It becomes part of the largely unthematized, unreflexive, habitual thought and action that routinize our everyday activities. The natural rectitude of the people is not an explicitly held view. Rather, it is a diffuse orientation that confers a presumption of correctness. This is largely an unreflective attitude, an unquestioned, basic assumption, a form of taken-for-granted legitimacy. It has a character of undeniability, so that one can go no deeper than this determination. It is a freestanding, unchallengeable idea.

Something like this attitude undergirds democracy as a particular manifestation of the power of the people. It shows up, for instance, in many of the areas I have just mentioned: revolutions against monarchies, rebellions against colonial regimes, struggles against empires, and all kinds of other social

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movements and political insurgencies. More prosaically, the judgment of a jury or the weight of public opinion, when they are viewed as expressions of “the will of the people” or “the voice of the people,” has a presumption of rectitude. The same holds for international adventures that seek to impose democracy or inculcate democratic values in a culture that does not possess them. The reasons for such a move are not carefully articulated, because their value is thought to be obvious and axiomatic.

Something similar holds in the academic domain. Democratic theory, for instance, assumes the rectitude of democracy as an operative premise. Since at least Robert Bellarmine and Francisco Suárez, various strands of Western political culture have held that something underlies and legitimates democratic politics. At different points in history this function was fulfilled by divine right, natural law, or a contract built on natural freedom and rationality. It was held to be independent of the state, in the sense that popular power institutes and legitimizes government and continues to exist after government has been dissolved. Ideas of divine right and natural law have passed out of our cultural frame of reference, yet residues of this way of thinking persist. We continue to hold democracy as a natural solution to political problems and a natural evolutionary trend in world politics. Even the more radical strands of democratic theory often assume the rectitude of popular mobilizations and insurgencies, focusing their attention on opening up new forms of the political and defending it against the ossifying tendencies of philosophical rationalism. This work, like its more mainstream counterpart, tends to draw unreflectively on the deep bases of popular politics in our culture. To the extent that this happens, it amounts to an uncritical romanticization of popular politics rather than a critical interrogation of its potential.

Not only is the power of the people seen as having a freestanding natural rectitude of its own, but that rectitude can also be used to justify other acts, schemes, procedures, institutions, and practices. In these cases, it serves as a normative foundation. This kind of foundationalism is often not explicit or carefully worked out. On the contrary, the power of the people is used without acknowledging that fact, calling it into question, or wondering whether such a form of informal, folk justification is warranted. Thus, in many ways the folk paradigm is *crypto*-foundational. It serves as an implicit, disguised, unrecognized foundation. This can occur in a quite informal manner: through linkages and associations that are implied, operate in symbolic ways, or form part of our common sense about politics. In this manner, the natural rectitude of the people is extended beyond the people itself. It is foundationalism of a sophisticated and subtle sort, in which normative contents are subtly extended and connected. Here the “foundation” does not function as a pediment that must be solid before construction can proceed. It is more a kind of anchor, umbrella, or post hoc rationalization for practices already under way. In this mode it justifies all manner of things: popular uprisings, democratic reforms, principles of openness and transparency in public policy, and so on.



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Academics have not been immune to this tendency. Even while foundational projects of all kinds have been discredited in recent decades, an undercurrent of folk foundationalism persists in our political thinking. There have been an increasing number of proposals to base human rights and social justice on democracy. Following this path, a politics of human rights or a politics of justice would draw on the natural rectitude of democracy, resolving normative problems that philosophers have not succeeded in resolving through other means.<sup>3</sup> That is not to say that such projects are misguided, only that they usually assume the normative rectitude of popular sovereignty as a starting point on which other arguments can be based.

Like any form of dogmatism, the damages of folk foundationalism can be reckoned in terms of its tendency to narrow and ossify our thinking. It occludes a differentiated understanding of the various forms of popular politics and their different concentrations and sources of normativity. When the power of the people is taken as unproblematically foundational, we ignore the rich cultural and ideational content of our ideas about popular politics, the way it has been figured in so many diverse and colorful ways in the storytelling, myth, legend, self-identity, memory, and imagination of Western societies. We blind ourselves to the complexities of epistemology, culture, problematic authorization, and self-constitution that are so characteristic of politics. To ignore these dimensions is to leave ideas of politics profoundly depoliticized and misunderstood.

And yet, folk foundationalism has also become the basis for our most closely held political beliefs. An operational assumption of this book, which I hope to redeem as the discussion proceeds, is that folk foundationalism is both a critical lacuna *and* the functioning normative basis of popular sovereignty. I will argue that our most fundamental political ideals are built on this kind of thinking. Therefore, constitutive tensions are structured into the very bases of democracy: blindnesses about the political origins of these ideals, misunderstandings about the assumptions made in granting normative status to popular politics, and romanticization of popular politics that discourages close scrutiny.

2. Collective political identity. Popular politics is a politics of groups. These are conceptualized in a variety of ways. They typically have a broad and nebulous form, sometimes conceived universally (all of the people) and sometimes more narrowly (the people of a particular domain, the common people, the suffering people).

Against this background, it is clear that my focus on the power of the people is shorthand for a whole family of related ideas. Other large, (quasi-) universal collectivities are also a vital part of this discussion. The nation is the most celebrated of them. More specific movements and manifestations are also important: crowds, mobs, protests, mobilizations. These smaller, localized groups have a more ambiguous normative status. Crowds, masses, and mobs tend to be viewed with suspicion if not alarm. However, they can be thought correct if they represent a more oceanic collectivity. A crowd in itself has no particular normative sanctity in our imagination. When it represents “the people,”

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however, it exemplifies something bigger and more important. Similarly, protests, marches, and sit-ins are often seen as manifestations of the people, and in those circumstances they bear a presumption of natural rectitude.

This raises important questions of identifying which collectivities matter for politics. The size, composition, and other characteristics of a collectivity are important determinants of whether it is recognized as rightfully exercising some kind of popular power. The most universal and diffusely bounded collectivities (peoples, nations) tend to be the ones whose rectitude is most easily taken for granted. When the power of the people is manifested in the actions of a smaller, more localized group, its significance becomes more problematic. Scale clearly matters when it comes to the association between rectitude and collective identity.

In this sense, universalism is an important trait of some collectivities and a crucial part of their normative logic. It is, most generally, an ascription of diffuse boundlessness to which we attribute a special status. Yet this is by no means a simple matter. As Étienne Balibar has argued, political universalism is complex and problematic.<sup>4</sup> The very idea is subject to many different formulations and connotations. As a result, the relation between universalism and natural rectitude is by no means fixed or stable.

Political collectivities can be diffuse and imprecisely bounded in other ways as well. Collectivities like publics are despatialized and do not have easily established membership or location. Yet we attribute normative force to them as well, in the form of “public opinion” or “the voice of the people.”

3. Revolutionism. Consider the following series of numbers: 1649, 1688, 1776, 1789, 1848, 1871, 1917, 1956, 1968, 1989. We are predisposed to look for a mathematical relationship, yet something else stands out. We parse these numbers as a set of dates representing iconic punctuations in the fabric of “normal” politics. The Eurocentrism of this list is problematic. Yet it also illustrates my broader point, that we select particular, often iconic moments of political exceptionality to represent the political in its purest form. These images of revolution associate very specific forms of collective identity with ideas of natural rectitude. They are the unstable, ineffable ones found in revolutionary mobilizations and insurgencies, typically crowds and mobs mobilized in protest. Here we have an image of the people in the streets, demanding justice or opposing authority. They act through a series of disruptions and forceful reorderings. In this vision, the people come together to oppose institutionalized powers and constitute new ones. Such images of dramatic conflict and outdoor assembly are our most vivid representations of the power of the people. They are often accorded special sanctity as “foundings” or “new beginnings.”

This aspect of the folk paradigm shows our collective attention to be particularly captivated by certain kinds of political phenomena, events, values, and collectivities. It raises the question whether this is a result of the inherent importance of those phenomena, or their vivid character. If the answer is the latter, it signals a distortion in our thinking about politics. Political insurgency