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## Review

# Imagined Sovereignties: The power of the people and other myths of the modern age

Kevin Olson

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The idea of popular sovereignty is the object of renewed scholarly attention, not the least by historically oriented writers such as Richard Tuck, Quentin Skinner, and Daniel Lee. Contributions to the understanding of the significance of this idea for legal and political institutions are also being made by a host of writers in constitutional law and political theory, such as Martin Loughlin and Denis Galligan. To this cascade of sudden interest in a long-forgotten idea, we should now add Kevin Olson's *Imagined Sovereignties* which seeks to offer a "critical history of popular sovereignty" by genealogical analysis.

In brief, there is a historical part of the book that includes four chapters dealing with aspects of popular mobilization in the French Revolution as well as in the rebellion against French rule in Haiti. The theoretical part includes two chapters and provides engagements with the writings of Ernesto Laclau, Benedict Anderson, Cornelius Castoriadis, Charles Taylor, and Michel Foucault. The ambitious aim that Olson defines for himself is to reveal tensions and problems in past thinking about the power of the people and thereby "open up a space for indetermination in our thinking about popular politics."

The initial chapter identifies the power of the people as a "folk paradigm of politics" in the sense that it represents a shared idea about how politics ought to be conducted. The point is that people tend to take for granted or "naturalize" various assumptions about the power of the people. The "elements" of this folk paradigm are four "dogmas": firstly, the people serves as the legitimizing force of politics; secondly, popular politics provides space of collective identities; thirdly, "revolutionism" is the tendency for the observers of politics to be captivated by violent upheavals; and fourthly, there is an inclination to "map popular power onto fixed territories, jurisdictions and populations."

In the two subsequent chapters, the author extensively paraphrases, compares, and discusses the work of Anderson, Laclau, Castoriadis, Taylor, and Foucault. The first



of the chapters examines how well some of our “best theories” can help us to interrogate the legitimizing power of the people. Laclau and Anderson are mobilized to this end because they see “peoples as the product of stories” and therefore offer “critical leverage against dogmatic thinking.” In the end, Olson concludes that Laclau “goes too far” in dissolving identity into mere free-floating linguistic demands. Anderson fares comparatively better and is praised for ingeniously demonstrating how collective identity is produced by diverse everyday practices, yet he ultimately fails to incorporate the normative dimensions of popular politics. The author continues in chapter three to look for “interpretative tools” in Castoriadis’ “systems of interpretations of the world,” Taylor’s “social imaginaries,” and Foucault’s focus on concrete practices and institutions. Foucault comes out as Olson’s favorite, and he mixes the discussion about the usefulness of Foucault’s approach with a critical discussion on Foucault’s dismissive attitude to sovereignty.

Chapter four marks the beginning of the analysis of popular politics and is devoted to the analysis of the nation, the public, and the people in the writings leading up to the French revolution. The best part of the chapter is the discussion of Chevalier Louis de Jaucourt’s article on the people in the *Encyclopédie* as well as Abbé Gabriel-François Coyer’s *Dissertation sur la nature du peuple* (1755). The discussion also involves Rousseau’s *Du Contrat social* and his well-known attempt to resolve the problem of the self-constituting people. Curiously, however, Olson does not engage with the previous treatments of the subject and relegates the entire literature on Rousseau’s “paradox of the people” to a single endnote. By the end of the chapter, the author presents several intriguing remarks on the uses of people and sovereignty in the declarations and constitutional drafts produced in 1789 and in the following years. This long and dense chapter – probably the centerpiece of the book – is followed by a brief fifth chapter that launches a conceptual framework for the analysis of how collective identity is invested with normativity. Introducing the concept of “sovereign imaginaries,” this chapter also summarizes the main theme of the book: explaining and detailing the ways in which our political imagination is invested with the normative idea of the people as the sovereign.

Chapters six and seven examine the popular and rebellious politics of the Caribbean in the late 18th century: how it was inspired by the ideas of the sovereignty of the people and of universal human rights that echoed from the French motherland, and how, at the same time, these ideas stumbled upon and collided with the racial prejudices and the complex social hierarchies of the colony. The seventh chapter contains a thought-provoking discussion of the anti-colonial legacy in the ideas propagated by the revolutionaries in France and Haiti. The author argues that the ideal of popular sovereignty simultaneously spelled inspirational force and tragic consequences for the peoples fighting against European power. This is a crucial argument, but its basis remains hidden in obscurity. Why was the anti-colonial project undermined by the idea of popular sovereignty? Olson alludes to the fact that the idea was a “European cultural construct,” but is not telling us whether this fact contributed



to the “tragedy.” The main thrust of the argument seems to be that the category of the people is locked into “conceptual instability” – the claim is made repeatedly. The reader is left in the dark, however, about the nature of these conceptual problems and to what extent they are to blame for the “tragic consequences” mentioned.

There are two aspects of the book that perplex this reviewer. First, there is the unwillingness of the author to engage directly any past or recent contributions to the topic of popular sovereignty. In fact, none of the writers mentioned in the first paragraph of this review appear in the bibliography. And though the notion of popular sovereignty is repeatedly portrayed as “conceptually unstable,” “semantically instable,” “paradoxical,” and “a thorough contradiction,” there is nowhere in the book a systematic and critical analysis to support these claims. It is as if the author feels entitled to take for granted that “the people” and “sovereignty” are inherently paradoxical, without saying why this is so and what it means, and that no argument for this claim is therefore required. The result is, however, an impression that the book is not making a serious attempt to speak to audiences that are interested in the topic and that might not share the view that paradox is ubiquitous and self-evident.

The second perplexing aspect of the book is the lack of conceptual precision regarding the topic addressed. Although the subject matter is often said to be “popular sovereignty,” Olson equally often speaks about “popular politics” and the “power of the people.” These terminological leaps would be fine if the expressions had the same meaning, but clearly they do not. Popular sovereignty is itself afforded different meanings in the literature. Some use it as synonymous with democracy, others as the idea that the people must be have the legal power to authorize amendments to the constitution, whereas others believe it is more akin to “constituent power”: the notion that the people retains the ultimate right to replace the constitutional order. But none of these distinctions are made in the book. Instead, the author talks about “popular politics,” which appears to be a vaguely defined label that covers any political activity that is related to the mobilization of collectives. Clearly, however, it is possible to investigate popular politics, its normative status and empirical consequences, without appeal to high-flying ideals of popular sovereignty, and vice versa. It is as if no distinction is made between the study of popular mobilization and participation, on the one hand, and the study of popular sovereignty, on the other. In the absence of a distinction between these terms, it is unclear how the usage of popular sovereignty in this book is related to the views entertained by others and the scholarly contribution is for that reason uncertain.

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