

WE, THE PEOPLE, THE SILENT AND POWERLESS: A CRITIQUE OF RECENT PLURALIST CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF THE PEOPLE

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Recent pluralist accounts of the People and popular sovereignty, defining it as either a performance or a process, are divorced from the realities of mass disempowerment. By shifting emphasis from who to what, these notions of the People, though seemingly unconcerned with the problem of positing this entity as a collective agent, have actually posited the politically active as the concrete subject of the People. Consequently, I argue that these recent theories exclude the reality of mass disempowerment within contemporary democracies by marginalizing agency, presupposing empowerment, and assuming the resonance of the various representations of the People. Simply put, they suffer from an activist-centric bias that renders the politically alienated, disempowered, and inactive as irrelevant entities, a nameless shadow lurking behind analyses of popular power. Hence, my task is to clear the ground for a more comprehensive theory of the People and Popular Sovereignty by exposing the roots, limits, and costs of this activist-centric bias.

Keywords: democratic theory, Jacques Rancière, pluralism, political alienation, popular sovereignty, populism

INTRODUCTION

The People, as a concept, have reached a level of banality that its status as a *problématique* is buried beneath the rhetoric of demagogues and the scholarly analyses of such pronouncements. As of now, recent works on populism (e.g., Laclau 2005; Mudde 2004; Moffitt 2016; Pappas 2019) and popular sovereignty (e.g., Nootens 2013; Ochoa Espejo 2011; Olson 2016; Tuck 2016) generally agree that the People refers more to an artifact than a collective agent. They have taken, what can be deemed as a pluralist approach that tackles the multiplicity of claims and portrayals of the People by defining the latter as anything but a collective agent. This allowed recent analyses to flesh out and expose the various meanings of the People in political discourse and rhetoric.¹

Two examples of this approach that I will grapple with in this study are theories of the People as a process offered by Paulina Ochoa Espejo (2011) or as a performance

from the works of Judith Butler (2017) and Georges Didi-Huberman (2017). Their attempts to define the People beyond the search for a unified identity are based on presupposing that the People could not exist as a collective actor. It also seems that they have abandoned the issue of agency.

However, as I will illustrate later, by focusing on contentious politics, these theories of the People as either a process or a performance nests the questions of subjectivity and subjectivation inside political activism. This places the politically active at the center of their conceptualizations. Furthermore, this is tied to the absence of a clear account of the subjectivity of the politically silent, disempowered, and alienated. They have been assumed away by these theories since the questions of subjectivity and subjectivation have been placed exclusively within the realm of political activity. Overall, when viewed from a psycho-political perspective, a pluralist approach – exemplified by these two theories – facilitates an implicit equation of the People with the politically active.

However, why should we concern ourselves with the politically inactive, disempowered, and alienated? First, they constitute majorities of populations within contemporary democracies (cf. Gray 2015; Green 2016; Parvin 2018; Stoker and Evans 2014). To exclude these conditions from any analysis of the People is to surrender this concept to a politically active minority. Second, the politically active can be considered as disempowered and marginalized only in relation to more powerful sectors. In relation to those who are practically excluded from the public sphere, those lacking voice, and organization, and those who are in a vicious cycle of disempowerment and alienation, the politically active can be construed as disalienated and empowered (Borja 2015; 2017; Mills 1963). Third, insisting that political activism centers on the marginalized assumes an immediate resonance between the claims of the politically active as representatives, and the inactive, disempowered and alienated as represented. In addition, such an assumption short-circuits political representation, making it an unrealistic rendering of a more complex and dynamic process.

With these considerations in mind, my task is to confront this pluralist approach through a critique of its two resultant theories, namely, Paulina Ochoa Espejo's (2011) processual theory of the People and its supposed sovereignty and a portrayal of the People as a performance offered by Judith Butler (2017) and Georges Didi-Huberman (2017). I ask, what are the core assumptions that allow these theories to virtually ignore the politically silent, disempowered, and alienated?

Through counter-premises drawn from Jacques Rancière's (2015) conceptualization of the People and adapted for a psycho-political analysis, I argue that first, a pluralist approach can slip into an activist-centric bias. Second, this activist-centric bias is constituted by attempts to dismiss the question of collective agency (i.e., is the People a collective agent) while presupposing both political empowerment and resonant representation between the politically active as representatives, and those outside the public sphere as represented. Third, for the politically inactive, disempowered, and alienated, performances of "We the People," along with the other manifestations of the People as a series of events, are mere abstractions that may or may not resonate with individuals who identify themselves as part of the People. Overall, a pluralist approach, exemplified by these theories of the People as a process

or a performance, can ignore the possibility of dissonance between representations of the People – driven by already empowered actors – and those watching it.

In order to flesh these out, this paper is organized as follows. The first section is an exposition of the basic assumptions of the pluralist approach made manifest in conceptualizing the People as a performance or a process. The second section contains the premises of my critique, drawn from Rancière (2015). Through these, I illustrate that their emphasis on the politically active is also an implicit reduction of the People into specific sectors of the population. The third section lays down my assessment and critique of conceptualizing the People as a performance or a process. The final section raises the question, can the People be sovereign?

TWO PLURALIST THEORIES OF THE PEOPLE

The pluralist approach has two main components. First, they presuppose the non-existence of the People as a collective actor with concrete/determinate characteristics. This results from the bicameral orientation of pluralism that tolerates ambiguity while being receptive to others through constant engagement, negotiation, reciprocity, and civility (Connolly 2005, 3-5, 38-67). Furthermore, it allows a re-definition of the People away from agency. As Bruno Bosteels (2017, 20) puts it, the People "serves as a name...for the political process that produces its own subject, while reminding us that without an element of subjectivization, there can be no politics." In other words, they have abandoned the search for a stable identity in order to make sense of the multiple portrayals of the People.

Second, their focus is on the contentious politics (the re/formation and assertion) behind the People as a construct (Bosteels 2017). This is a manifestation of what William Connolly (2017) identifies as the principal aim of conventional pluralist theory, which is to examine the relationship between conflict resolution and stability. It also reflects what John Guidry and Mark Sawyer (2003) illustrate as a reclamation of space in the public sphere by marginalized groups through pluralist politics. Together, these pluralist conceptualizations deem the People as a non-existent collective actor, locating it instead in the struggle for its own political construction, representation, and assertion over a heterogeneous society.²

From these two components, the People can be defined as a constant process addressing the problem of indeterminacy in popular unification as a basis for democratic legitimation (Habermas 1997; Näsström 2007). In a recent elaboration of this thread entitled *The Time of Popular Sovereignty*, Paulina Ochoa Espejo (2011) defines the People as a constantly unfolding process directed at the constitution, governing, and changing the highest institutions of authority. This responds to the problem of indeterminacy or the difficulty of deriving legitimacy from the People whose unity cannot be proven on a spatio-temporal basis.

Ochoa Espejo (2011, 7) states that it is impossible to show such a unity because individuals "never come together at one moment; the people changes continuously...the problem of popular indeterminacy shows that the people will *never* unify [*italics in original*]." Moreover, even if legitimation is pinned on democratic processes and institutions themselves, the presence of a supposedly unifiable People

invokes a vicious cycle between the People and democratic institutions and processes. That is, if the latter is construed as the source of democratic legitimacy, then who or what legitimizes such institutions?

Hence, in tackling this problem of indeterminacy, Ochoa Espejo (2011) proposes an alternative ontological base. Instead of being construed as a collective entity with a unified/unifiable will, she (2011, 137) defines the People as a process or "an unfolding series of events coordinated by the practices of constituting, governing, and changing a set of institutions [*italics in original*]." Briefly, she defines an event as an occurrence constituted by activities and practices between different actors situated within blurry spatio-temporal boundaries. From this, she construes a "People event" as something coordinated towards the constituting, governing, and changing institutions of the highest form of authority; in other words, a "People event" does not refer to small-scale and/or local political activities. Hence, instead of being a collection of individuals, Ochoa Espejo (2011) construes the People as something constituted by such occurrences (i.e., public activities and practices).

However, what is the essence of such occurrences? To address this, we turn to the People defined as a performance. Between Georges Didi-Huberman (2017) and Judith Butler (2017), performing the People involves projecting shared demands, emotions, and socio-political conditions. To elaborate, I note that first, Didi-Huberman (2017) posits that since the People could not be represented as a united and determinate entity, what its performance does is interact with emotions in such a way that it makes tendencies, demands, and ideals that are otherwise veiled, hidden, or repressed more sensible to the public. Hence, when such a performance occurs, Didi-Huberman (2017, 80) posits that what happens is:

...citizens declare themselves oppressed by daring to declare their powerlessness, their pain, and their concomitant emotions. It is what happens when a sensible event touches the community in its history, that is to say, in the dialectic of its evolving. Thus the *affective* and the *effective* are deployed in it together.

Second, Judith Butler (2017) asserts that the People and its supposed sovereignty are embodied by assemblies outside the constituted power of parliaments and elections. The speech-act of "We the People" is a declaration of self-constitution and self-designation situated outside formal politics and made manifest by movements like Occupy Wall Street, the Arab Spring, etc. It is through such public acts – the gathering and convergence of individuals and their demands – that the People is performed.

Moreover, instead of being a determination of who the People actually is, Butler (2017) posits that such a performance begins debates on this issue instead. For her (2017, 53-54), "We, the people" is a provocation that does not

...presuppose or make a unity but founds or institutes a set of debates about who the people are and what they want... "we, the people" is a phrase that we take to be emblematic of a form of popular sovereignty

that assumes that the people can and do act together to name themselves and so to collect themselves in a plural political form. This does not mean that they agree with one another but only that they understand that the process of self-making is a collective or shared one. When someone tries to mobilize "we, the people," we look over to see who says it, whether they have a right to say it, but whether, in saying it, their speech act will be effective, gathering forth the people in the very saying. The phrase does not tell us who the people are, but it marks the form of self-constitution in which that debate over who they are and should be, begins to take place.

However, such a performance is not the same as political representation. Butler (2017, 51) insists that such assemblies "are not representing the people but providing the legitimating ground for those who do come to represent the people through elections." This distinction between activists and elected representatives is flimsy, as I will show later. For now, I note that this ignores that they can also be grouped together as representatives in relation to an inactive mass that sees itself represented.

In summary, conceptualizing the People as a process or a performance builds on the assumed indeterminacy of the People. By doing so, they shed light on the multiplicity of constructed "Peoples." To our benefit, a pluralist approach exposes the dynamics of political contention gravitating around the realization of popular sovereignty made manifest in duels between the government and political activists, and among activists from various ideological camps. Nevertheless, they have rendered the question of agency as secondary (if not irrelevant) or reducible to behavior.

Moreover, by focusing on contentious politics, performing the People becomes exclusive to the politically active and in the realm of competing representatives. Empowerment is presupposed, and they see powerlessness either as a mere theme of a performed People, or ignore it altogether, as was in the case of Ochoa Espejo's processual approach. Their focus on the supply side of the People – on images, events, and performances – is blind to the question of reception outside the realm of the politically active.

From these preliminary observations and without appealing to a united and determinate People – thus avoiding a slippery slope to a monolithic model that the pluralist approach rightfully does – I ask, *what is the People in relation to the politically silent, disempowered, and alienated?* I tackle this by extracting alternative premises from Jacques Rancière, whose treatment of the People along pluralist lines did not slip into an activist-centric bias.

THE PEOPLE FOR RANCIÈRE: PREMISES OF A CRITIQUE

My critique is based on the two intertwined premises that bring the issue closer to a psycho-political perspective. First, *the People is an irreducible and indeterminate supplement made manifest in identifying oneself as part of a broader People*. Second, *empowerment and resonant representation could not be presupposed, nor could contrary conditions be ignored in understanding the People as an irreducible and*

indeterminate supplement. I draw these from Jacques Rancière (2015) because he shares the pluralist assumption that the People is indeterminate without presupposing empowerment or placing the politically active at the center of his framework.

To elaborate, I respond to the following points from a psycho-political perspective. First, Rancière (*ibid.*, 37) posits that if we define politics along Aristotelian lines – that is, as the ruling of equals and citizens who are both rulers and ruled – then what makes it distinct is the "existence of a subject defined by its participation in contraries," making politics a "paradoxical form of power." This is based on Rancière's (2015, 35) analytical turn towards politics as something concerned with a "distinctive kind of subject...in the form of a mode of relation that is proper to it" instead of being a struggle for and exercise of power.

From a psycho-political perspective, we can consider this as a means of highlighting subjectivation as a core dimension of politics. However, what makes this subjectivation distinct? On the one hand, Rancière (2015, 36) insists that politics "cannot be defined on the basis of any pre-existing subject." Instead, politics is concerned with the generation and re-generation of the political subject. On the other hand, political subjectivation is driven by the sustained and contradictory relationship between ruling (as command, action, and creation) and being ruled (as being commanded, acted upon, and generated from); between the dual roles that Aristotle posits as essential to citizenship.

What allows a citizen to take on the dual role of ruling and being ruled? This question leads us to the second point. For Rancière (2015, 40), the liberty of the people

...which constitutes the axiom of democracy, has as its real content a break with the axiom of domination, that is, any sort of correlation between a capacity for ruling and a capacity for being ruled. The citizen who takes part 'in ruling and in being ruled' is only conceivable on the basis of the *demos* as figure that breaks with all forms of correspondence between a series of correlated capacities. So, democracy is not a political regime in the sense that it forms one of the possible constitutions defining the ways in which people assemble under a common authority. Democracy is the very institution of politics itself – of its subject and of the form of its relationship.

Consequently, a democracy negates the logic of *arkhê* – of domination and determined positions of power or powerlessness – in such a way that it is founded on, driven by, and directed at the subjectivation of the People constituted by those who are entitled to speak and participate because they are not supposed to and not because of some qualification. I add that other than wealth or birth, such qualifications also include education, activist record, indoctrination, partisan loyalty, etc. – anything that sets one apart from the whole before bringing one closer to a position of dominating the rest.

Third, a political subject is embedded in the aforementioned rupture of presupposed and specific qualifications to rule and be ruled. Adapting this along psycho-political lines, I posit that political subjectivation is based not on any pre-

existing distribution of power nor on any set of roles and qualifications. Instead, as Rancière (2015, 39) states, democracy, because of its equalizing force, can be construed as a "specific situation in which it is the absence of entitlement that entitles one to exercise the *arkhê*. It is the commencement without commencement, a form of rule... that does not command." In other words, political subjectivation involves the creation of actors with no pre-determined position in society. It entails a break from pre-existing logics of domination, thus opening the ground for assertions of rule that, in turn, is subject to a renewed cycle when the People, once again, is utilized to assert political equalization.

Lastly, Rancière (2015, 41-47) argues that in relation to the population as a whole and the numerous sectors constituting it, the People actually refers to a supplement that facilitates the identification of the whole community with the count of the uncounted members of the community – of those who do not matter, of those who are excluded from the halls of power. Furthermore, it is irreducible to any specific status or qualification. Neither is it the mere sum of the parts of a population. Instead, Rancière (*ibid.*, 41) states that it "disjoins the population from itself by suspending all logics of legitimate domination" while being added to any account of the various specific parts of the population. In other words, the People defies any attempt to utilize it as a means of legitimating any schema for distributing power in favor of specific sectors that are equated with it. It is also an artifice that breaks any presupposed entitlement to rule or be ruled.

Therefore, the People embodies both a void and a surplus. It is a void because it is irreducible to any specific part of the population while remaining as an exception to any logic of domination and presupposed distributions of power. It is a surplus because, alongside identifying specific social groups, the People is also a count of the uncounted. Overall, Rancière (2015, 41) states that the People

...is an abstract supplement in relation to any actual (ac)count of the parts of the population, of their qualifications for partaking in the community and of the common shares that they are due by virtue of these qualifications. The people is a supplementary existence that inscribes the count of the uncounted, or part of those who have no part – that is, in the last instance, the equality of speaking beings without which inequality itself is inconceivable... The 'all' of the community named by democracy is an empty, supplementary part that separates the community out from the sum of the parts of the social body. This initial separation founds politics as the action of supplementary subjects, inscribed as a surplus in relation to every count of the parts of society.

From the exposition above, I draw my first premise that the People is an irreducible supplement made manifest in identifying oneself as part of a broader People. I mentioned earlier that subjectivation lies at the core of politics when viewed from a psycho-political perspective. Moreover, this subjectivation must reflect the supplementary nature (the void and surplus) of the People. If we bring Rancière's arguments to the realm of political psychology – as his examination of political

subjectivity merits – then we must find a highly abstract part of the cognitive process that will not slip into a specific political identity while serving as a potential addition to the latter in order for a person to be attached to a larger community.

Hence, I turn to a basic and underspecified self-identification marking a person's willingness to be an addressee confronting a myriad of claims made on behalf of the People. What we have are individuals who are willing to be addressed as part of the People and to lend their ears to those claiming to speak for and/or to them. How they respond becomes an important issue since that would now be a matter of their other specific identities, lived experiences, and sense of dis/empowerment engaging with those of others.

In relation to the latter point, we turn to the second premise – empowerment and resonant representation could not be presupposed, nor could contrary conditions be ignored in understanding the People as an irreducible and indeterminate supplement. In other words, disempowerment and dissonance in representation matter as much as empowerment and resonance.

To elaborate, we could deduce from Rancière (2015, 43-51) that representing the People can be construed as the following. On the one hand, it could follow either the logic of the police (consensus) or of politics (dissensus). The former is directed at a partition of the sensible – of what informs our perception of the public sphere – in such a way that social groups have a specific role to play in an integral whole. This is also tied to a strict determination of what should be seen and counted, and what should remain hidden and uncounted – what we should notice and what we should ignore. The latter, or dissensus, is concerned with exposing gaps in the sensible. This involves exposing objects that have been deemed as something that should be hidden. It involves presenting the count of the uncounted. In relation to power, these two logics deal with the projection of a schema of power distribution – projecting who rules and who should be ruled. The logic of the police strives to keep such a schema stable (that those who are seen are kept within the roles they must play), while the contrary is true for the logic of politics (those are seen and the roles they must play need not be in harmony with the uncounted, making it more vulnerable to changes and re-structuring of established spaces).

For example, in a public protest, the logic of the police is not about repressing such acts, as Rancière (2015, 44) notes. Instead, it is in keeping perception focused on the encounter between protesters and the government. The logic of politics, however, allows us to see not only those who are supposed to be seen (e.g., protesters colliding with policemen) but those who are not (e.g., bystanders and spectators). Hence, an approach that fixates on the subjectivation of the politically active – of those who are already seen – is closer to the logic of the police that tries to eliminate gaps in whatever conflict they are projecting.

On the other hand, it is a matter of facing the challenge of the People's irreducibility. Every claim made on behalf of the People – every demonstration of its supposed presence – is an attempt to reduce and limit it. In relation to subjectivation, a person who identifies as part of the People will consider different performances and events of the People as mere abstractions that may or may not resonate with more specific identities, experiences, values, and attitudes that can substantiate his understanding of what and who the People is. Overall, my second premise emphasizes

that due to the indeterminacy and irreducibility of the People, there will always be something that will escape any of its representations. We can only gain insights on these if we do not presuppose resonance, analyzing it instead as a matter of degree with the lingering threat of failure and dissonance.

Hence, before I present my objections against defining the People as either a process or a performance, I stress that while the uncounted can refer to those who are fighting for political recognition – the active marginalized – in relation to an incumbent government and the ruling elite, the uncounted can also refer to the politically silent, disempowered, and alienated in relation to those who are already active in politics. In order to rehabilitate these sectors in theorizing the People and its supposed sovereignty, I will consider them as the uncounted that Rancière analyzes in his work. The politically active, whatever their ideological color is, whomever they are fighting for, and whatever idea of the People they are propagating, are to be considered as an already accounted part of an incumbent system and a recognized whole.

OBJECTIONS AGAINST TWO PLURALIST THEORIES

To reiterate, an activist-centric bias is constituted by two dimensions. First is dismissing the question of collective agency (i.e., is the People a collective agent) while focusing on the politically active with little to no regard for the contrary. This sleight of hand with the issue of subjectivity (dismissing agency while focusing on the politically active) goes against the first premise by implicitly reducing the subjectivation underpinning the People as a matter of political activism, and by diverting analysis away from the issue of self-identification. This deprives inquiry of any nuanced understanding of the People's psycho-political dimension while reducing its socio-political dimension to the multiplicity of relationships among the politically active. Second is presupposing both empowerment by positing active citizens as the primary agents behind the People, and resonant representation between the politically active as representatives, and those outside the public sphere as represented. As a consequence, the silent, disempowered, and alienated are rendered inconsequential in identifying the People.

My critique is further driven by the following considerations. First, paradigmatic concepts like the People and popular sovereignty affect both political behavior and academic inquiry (Dufek 2019; Olson 2016). Consequently, the normative role and impact of these concepts lead to a discontinuation of inquiry into their ontology. In *Imagined Sovereignties*, Kevin Olson (2016) notes that popular sovereignty serves more as a premise for analysis than an object of interrogation. For him, criticism must problematize a previously uncontested concept in order to show how it gains its normative force. Thus, my goal is to restore the explanatory role of the People as a concept by re-problematizing its ontology.

Second, I note that there is a long road between popular sovereignty as a concept and its normative force. This link is constituted by political values (our ideals), attitudes (our judgments), and behavior (our actions) (Bozeman 2007; Rohan 2000). Ochoa Espejo (2011), Judith Butler (2017), and Georges Didi-Huberman (2017) did offer elaborations on the question of agency in their respective works. However, they

merely expose the behavior of the politically active and powerful. They have failed to give due weight to the psycho-political conditions of those who are outside performances and processes of the People.

Accordingly, by taking a psycho-political perspective, we can construe the behavior of empowered activists and incumbent powers into political objects informing the subjectivation of the politically inactive, disempowered, and alienated. In other words, I rehabilitate these sectors by laying the foundations for conceptualizing the People in such a way that includes those that have been excluded or marginalized by these pluralist theories – in a way that counts the uncounted.

However, who are they? Who are the politically silent, disempowered, and alienated? They are the uncounted – those who do not matter or are rendered into mere recipients of the beneficence of the politically active with neither entitlement nor qualifications to speak and participate. They are those who abstain from voting, those who return to silence after the elections (Gray 2015), those who refrain from participating in politics (Parvin 2018; Putnam 2000), and those who watch and evaluate political spectacles while remaining outside the public sphere where such performances take place (Borja 2015, 2017; See also Debord 1995; Rancière 2009). They behave like this, not because they are apathetic but because they see themselves as incapable of shaping political affairs even if they recognize that it affects their lives (Jaeggi 2014). They are neither unconcerned nor cognitively passive. On the contrary, they can and do evaluate what they are watching in a way that shapes their political behavior and habits (Borja 2015, 2017). For them, performances and events referring to the People are objects of observation and analysis. They can and have considered such objects as reified – beyond their control or influence – even if they can identify themselves as part of the People (i.e., as addresses to such claims like "We the People"). Simply put, they are alienated from abstractions of the People.

This section proceeds by showing that the activist-centric bias underpinning the theories of the People as a process or a performance involves: (1) reducing the issue of subjectivity to behavior, and (2) presupposing empowerment and resonant representation. Both dimensions are present in Ochoa Espejo's (2011) work, while the latter is more pronounced in Butler's (2017) and Didi-Huberman's (2017) treatment of the People as something performed.

Beneath the theory of the People as a process lies behaviorist reductionism and the presupposition of empowerment. Concerning the former, Ochoa Espejo (2011, 141) states that she "need not argue that processes are a product of cognition" and that she "need only claim that processes are fundamental entities of social life." Nonetheless, individual agency lingers in her framework even if she (2011, 147-160) tries to fill in the gap by appealing to the All-Affected Principle, positing the existence of the People as a collective of all those affected by public policies. Moreover, her work slips immediately into behaviorism when it tries to use identity as the agential component of her notion of event. Illustrative of this behaviorist analysis of identity, Ochoa Espejo (2011, 141) states that it is better to understand who a person is based on "*what she does, how she does it, where she does it, and whom she does it with.* On this conception, her identity is a set of characteristic activities and relations [*italics in original*]."

In trying to bypass the rest of political psychology, Ochoa Espejo (2011) conflates essence with cognition and self-identification. She frames a psycho-political approach as essentialist before rejecting it in favor of an alternative and non-essentialist unit of analysis. The problem with her exclusion of other psycho-political factors (political values and attitudes) comes from her own lop-sided treatment of individual agency.

Cognition disappears from her framework, unnecessarily sacrificed upon the altar of behavior for the sake of her ontological shift. This will not be a problem if her framework disposes of individual agency altogether. However, it persists in her analysis without cognition. Consequently, what populates her framework are entities that act without a clear reason why since they are bereft of cognition or self-identification. Whether they are part of the People is not something that can be determined and analyzed internally. One needs someone from the outside to answer this question since subjectivation has little to no place in a framework bereft of cognition. Alternatively, we can say that her framework is inhabited by political activists with a clear goal of forwarding their own partial idea of what the People and its sovereignty should be.

Furthermore, between two disempowered and inactive entities, one chooses to be active while the other remains silent. Can her framework explain such differences? The answer is a resounding no since Ochoa Espejo ties her marginalization of psycho-political factors with a presupposition of empowerment. She does so by drawing a thin line between the People in general and its democratic form. For her (2011, 172), the People, in general, is coordinated by events on constituting and governing state institutions, while its democratic variant is a "people whose practices of constituting, governing, or changing a set of supremely authoritative institutions formalize the freedom and equality of all individuals who partake in it." This assumes that the People is already a sovereign, a process that can rule over government and direct it towards more specific ends (i.e., institutionalizing freedom and equality). In turn, this assumption begs the question of who or what determines whether an activity is an act constituting, governing, and changing state institutions. It would have been unproblematic if she had taken a magisterial position by enumerating which activities govern the highest institutions of the state. Instead, her framework ties the issue of coordination with intensely affected individuals despite explicitly rejecting the notion of the People as a collection of individuals and reducing agency to behavior.

Ochoa Espejo (2011, 159) tries to resolve this contradiction by positing the coercive power of the state (through the all-subjected principle) – that a person "is intensely affected by those institutions when they can coerce her and there are no alternative institutions that would allow her to continue her normal life" though this does not imply "that those individuals intensely affected by the institutions in question constitute the people." However, this raises the additional problem of locating constituting power in either state institutions or the People.

In response to this, she appeals to the interaction between individuals and institutions. Specifically, for Ochoa Espejo (2011, 172), the People as a process can "create itself and rule itself in this second sense when those individuals who partake in the people have the opportunity to influence actively and consciously the construction of institutional practices of rule." The interaction between institutions and individuals'

behavior, in turn, generates people events constituting and driving the People itself. This may look sound, but by giving primacy to the overlapping of events instead of identification with a collective, this understanding raises the question about the nature of such overlaps. What makes an overlap a People event? Ochoa Espejo posits that an individual must recognize such an overlap and have a desire to control state institutions, two psycho-political factors that are measurable via attitudes and values, respectively.

Therefore, despite such an ontological innovation, Ochoa Espejo's analysis goes no further. Its behaviorism prevents it from analyzing the very psycho-political factors (i.e., values, attitudes, self-identification) shaping how a person responds to a People event. It is probable that the weight of this analytical chasm prompted her (2011, 162) concession that the theory of the People as a process is eventually "compatible with more traditional conceptions of the people, such as those of a historical, social contract, of a hypothetical account of those individuals who would agree to constitute the state."

Alongside this behaviorist reduction, Ochoa Espejo also presupposes empowerment as a means of supplementing her deficient treatment of political identity. Specifically, in order to further support her argument that a People event must be concerned with controlling and shaping state institutions, she conflates popular identity with sovereignty. Ochoa Espejo is compelled to do this because subjectivity and subjectivation are not central factors in her understanding of popular sovereignty. Instead of asking, what makes someone deem a political act, an act of sovereignty, she simply assumes that it is already an act of sovereignty. In doing so, she draws the line between the People in general and a democratic People, imbuing the latter with the capacity to practice something that requires a clear account of political agency.

We must recognize that to speak of sovereignty is to speak of power, and to speak of power is to refer to an action. An action cannot be without an actor, even if the latter is temporary. This, if we ask who has power and who has none, then the answer that her theory implies appears to be the politically active outside and inside the government. They are the ones populating such events, and as a consequence, they determine what should be included and excluded in the agenda for the People while partaking in decision-making at the level of state institutions. The politically active rules through such events. Everyone else outside such activities is, in essence, inconsequential for Ochoa Espejo's framework.

The problem is that the politically active is but a part of trying to represent the whole – they are, in Rancière's terms, already counted.³ Consequently, "People events" are but representations of the People, and it begs the question of whether such representations actually resonated with those who identify as part of the People. If it did, then to what extent? In relation to the latter point, by dismissing the other dimensions of a person's political psyche, she leaves no room for self-identification. As a consequence, she ignores the possibility that there could be a gap between the politically active and their People events, and the self-understanding of those who are outside such events, even if they identify as part of the People.

Through her dismissal of psycho-political factors and her presupposition of empowerment, the problems of dis/alienation and dis/empowerment vanishes. She assumes that the People as a process can constitute, govern, and change the "highest" institutions of authority. However, even as a process, is the People even capable of

doing such things? Moreover, what if the People – an event or otherwise – cannot constitute, govern, or change political institutions? Does it cease to be the People? These questions of political capacity and control – of alienation and disempowerment – are forced into irrelevance. For Ochoa Espejo's processual approach, a politically alienated and disempowered People is an impossibility.

Defining the People as a performance is also guilty of this exclusionary presupposition. This is because it assumes empowerment by implicitly positing the politically active as the primary agent constituting the People. This, in turn, obstructs analysis from seeing those who are inactive, disempowered, and alienated. It also divorces theorizing on the People from both the literatures on political participation and social movements and the real difficulties in mobilizing citizens.

To be fair, Judith Butler (2017) and Georges Didi-Huberman (2017) see the People as a performance of powerlessness; that is, making sensible what is underneath the domination of parliament, government, and elections. Despite this, they fail to note the fact that such performances are conducted by the empowered in front of the disempowered, alienated, and inactive. Butler even recognizes their presence before summarily dismissing them as a given. She (2017, 51) recognizes that there are those who remain outside the performance of the People, stating that:

...it is never really the case that all of the possible people who are represented by "the people" show up to claim that they are the people! So "we, the people" always has its constitutive outside, as we know. It is thus surely not the fact that the "we" fairly and fully represents all the people; it cannot, even though it can strive for more inclusive aims.

This implicit bias against the inactive and disempowered rears its head before disappearing behind her argument for political inclusion. Butler (2017) also uses political inclusion as a means of glossing over the real possibility that those who remain outside do not necessarily agree with nor sympathize with self-proclaimed or elected representatives of the People.

In the case of Didi-Huberman (2017), his treatment of representation focuses on the aesthetic dimension of representation. For this reason, the powerless and their powerlessness is no more than a core theme of an imagery of the People. Moreover, in examining the reception of such projections, he descends into a rhetoric of "we" and humanity instead of seeing the disempowered as a distinct entity that perceives the political world differently from those who are already active and more empowered.

The alienated, disempowered, and inactive, see performances of the People and its supposed sovereignty as reified abstractions that are rarely within their control. Though the People can be a performance of powerlessness and suffering, such activities are still abstractions whose agents have been plucked out or emerged from an inactive, disempowered, and alienated mass. For this reason, the performers (the politically active) are different from those outside a performance (the politically inactive). Butler (2017) ignores this so she can highlight the distinction between activists and elected representatives, dubbing the performances of the former as that of the People.

However, if we recognize those who remain psychologically attached to the public sphere (by watching and evaluating public affairs) despite being outside it, then the distinction she posits becomes a mere act of splitting hairs to hide an activist-centric bias. This is because activists and elected officials are both representatives performing in front of an inactive and spectating (alienated and disempowered) mass. An activist-centric bias renders the latter group into a nameless shadow – they keep the uncoun-tered in their place. A cruel irony for such normative theories calling for civic empowerment.

In summary, the theories above pursue a pluralist approach in a reductionist manner that favors the politically active. On the one hand, Ochoa Espejo (2011) takes a behaviorist approach while presupposing empowerment. On the other hand, Butler (2017) and Didi-Huberman (2017) presuppose empowerment and the resonance of the various representations of the People. Their analytical sleights of hand have swept the silent, disempowered, and alienated under the rug. They obstruct further conceptualizations of the People beyond the realm of the politically active – hindrances to actually facilitating the count of the uncoun-tered.

However, who is watching such activities other than those in it and their intended targets (e.g., an incumbent government)? What happens to those outside? How will they respond to such activities? Put more bluntly, are they the People, or are they not? If they are not, then how can the People be democratic? If they are not, then what makes them distinct from the active and empowered? Their analyses go no further. Instead, they focus on the activists performing this "we the people," while ignoring the fact that an entity other than the incumbent powers is watching over such performances. Bluntly, this allows both activists and elites alike to sleep soundly, knowing that the People exists only in their activities and nowhere else.

Furthermore, who has the power to define and invoke the People in justifying political ends? Who considers themselves as empowered and capable of shaping politics? Who considers themselves as part of a powerful People? The theories discussed above try to force these questions into irrelevance. However, an understanding of the People that is grounded upon the complex realities of political representation, social movements, and power asymmetries (De Fronzo 2015; Green 2016; Opp 2009; Saward 2010) must take these into account.

If we admit that the People refers to a collection of active citizens, as the theories above imply, then we must pay the following costs. First, the inactive, along with their sustained political alienation and disempowerment, disappears from the purview of such theories. The problem with this is that even if a concept is imbued with normative power, if it cannot be utilized to explain the challenges facing its translation into practice (i.e., persistent political inaction among majorities), then such a concept is dubious. It is either too divorced from reality – a mere component of a systematic flight of fancy – or a conveyor of an implicit bias. The People is one such concept imbued with normative power, as Kevin Olson (2016, 2017) argues, but weakened as an explanatory mechanism within the theories tackled above.

Second, by ignoring both the question of disempowerment and the possibility of a gap between the represented and their representatives, they fail to see that representations of the People are mere abstractions in relation to those who are outside public activities; those who can deem themselves as part of the People without partaking in performances, events, and processes claiming to represent them.

Lastly, if the criticism is meant to break something previously thought of as unquestionable and unproblematic, then this activist-centric bias must be shelved in order to expose the conditions of the politically inactive, disempowered, and alienated. This follows Olson's (2016, 108) contention that in criticism, "we must attempt to capture something ineffable about our own thoughts and practices, something that is both persistent and fleeting." The discussion above suggests that what is actually ineffable is not imbuing the notion of People with power through performances or chains of events; scholars and activists can speak of such things with ease. Instead, what remains ineffable for them are the lingering problems of political alienation, disempowerment, and inaction.

CAN THE PEOPLE BE SOVEREIGN?

What is the People without power in the context of contemporary democracies? Can the People be alienated from itself? Is the People a pre-political entity that co-exists with its political representations? These are questions that remain unutterable – an outright taboo to scholarship on contemporary popular sovereignty. This is exemplified by the debate between the all-subjected and all-affected principles that have focused on who has the right to participate in politics without asking if they are even willing to or capable of participating (Andrić 2021; Lagerspetz 2015; Näsström 2011).

In order to flesh these out, future inquiries can elaborate on the problem of political representation. I propose that these involve Michael Saward's (2010) holistic framework on political representation as a matter of constant claim-making between representatives, their constituents, and other audiences. The latter is an important category that recognizes the presence of those who are not immediately aligned with a representative and could choose to approve of or reject the latter's claims.

Other crucial works that must be engaged with are those by Hans Kelsen ([1920] 2013) and Margaret Canovan (2005). Their works elaborate on the duality of the People and could serve as less abstract perspectives that complement Rancière's framework. On the one hand, Kelsen ([1920] 2013, 35-46) observes the reductionist and asymmetrical creation of an abstract "People" as a subject that rules while a concrete and inevitably indeterminate People remains juxtaposed to it. On the other, Canovan (2005, 91-2) argues that the People is both a set of concrete individuals situated in a particular space and time, and an abstraction that can outlive individuals. As a concrete collective actor, the People refers to a set of individuals sharing a common characteristic within a specific time and space. It is concrete in the sense that such commonalities are directly measurable and could serve as a baseline for variations. When taken together, future analyses can map out the process of political representation between the dualities of the People. When pursued, this line of inquiry could render presuppositions of empowerment and resonant representation impossible – the politically active, whatever ideological banner they are fighting under, could no longer easily claim that they represent the People.

NOTES

1. The question of who the People is, lingers on. For one, it remains at the center of concurrent debates on democratic legitimation and the issue of boundaries. Sofia Näsström (2007, 2011) sums up the aforementioned difficulty by identifying the core problems of boundary (i.e., who are entitled to participate in democratic decision-making), and self-constitution (i.e., the People must constitute itself in order to serve as the basis of political legitimacy). There are two approaches to these intertwined problems. One is the debate between the all-subjected and all-affected principles. This focuses on who should have the right to participate in decision-making, thus, presupposing the existence of the People as a concrete and collective actor (Andrić 2021; Lagerspetz 2015; Näsström 2011). I will not focus on the aforementioned issue of legitimacy and boundaries. Nonetheless, I stress that by asking who should participate, this debate entertains the possibility that the People can exist as a collective agent.

2. This analytical shift from a question of "who" to "what" is not without foundation in history. Specifically, it is a recognition of two historical realities: (1) the People have proven irreducible to any essential and objective characteristic; (2) history is filled by attempts to politicize the People (Lee 2016; Tuck 2016) – to establish it as an entity with political authority – through both exclusionary claims to essentiality, and inclusionary means placing individuals within a collective political entity like the nation-state (Nootens 2013). Multiple conflicting claims have been made and fought over what the People is, as a specific group. Borders are set by identifying a non-People and/or target elites. Such attempts then turn into struggles between competing claims about the nature and political role of the People (Laclau 2005; Morgan 1988; Smith 2001, 2003).

3. Taken more generously, Ochoa Espejo's (2011) framework contributes nothing to the dissensual nature of politics. However, in less generous terms, her framework, founded in part on a behaviorist approach to subjectivity that leans in favor of the politically active, actually contributes to a police logic that reduces the People to the realm of the already sensible – that is, the struggle between the politically active and the institutions of the state.

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