answers that have been given to these questions by reproducing some lines from historians and others who have written on Disraeli. This book is, thus, more a work of synthesis than one of original research, and as such it is a valuable resource for students and other nonspecialists wishing to become acquainted with a historical figure as colorful as he was influential.

–David Clinton

GLORIOUS MYTH

Margaret Canovan: *The People* (Cambridge, UK; and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2005. Pp. viii, 261. $62.95.)

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The concept of "the people" originates with the Roman *populus* and rises to a climax in modern times in such events as the founding of the American constitution by "we the people." The concept has thus endured through over twenty centuries, assuming a remarkable variety of mythical and theoretical forms and exercising a variable, sometimes slight and sometimes dramatic, impact on events. Canovan's book is essentially a survey of this complex story, with discerning comments at each stage. The author is clearly attracted to a particular version of the concept of the people—to be discussed at the close of this review—and comes within a hair's breadth of affirming that version. But she draws back at the last moment, so that the book remains a survey, done with exceptional care and learning and illuminated throughout by highly sensible comments. It will be valuable to anyone who desires to reflect seriously on democracy, populism, and allied matters.

Several interesting issues are just beneath the surface whenever the people are being thought about or appealed to. For example, does the authority of the people imply democracy? It seems obvious to the modern mind that it does. But very often, of course, it has been merely an ostensible source of legitimacy for some ruling minority. Thus aristocracies, as well as emperors and kings, have governed for centuries with a legitimacy supposedly grounded finally in the people. Only in relatively recent times have the people come to be viewed as—and, in fact, to be—an active force in the political realm. When this happens, the consequences can be striking. Canovan remarks that one of the reasons the American Revolution signifies "a turning-point in the history of the people is that it launched the career of the people as a universalist and progressive cause, with a wide-ranging radical agenda capable of subverting established institutions in the USA itself and around the world" (p. 32).

The idea of universality arises inevitably from the idea of the people, for there is a sense in which the people means everyone. But can everyone be meaningful either as a source of legitimacy or as a political agent? In other

words, can the people be considered the same as humanity, or must it always be equated with a particular ethnic or national group? Can a people become a reality without excluding some, without distinguishing between insiders and outsiders? These questions have internal reverberations. Is the concept of the people necessarily egalitarian, inclusive of all within a society? An aspect of this issue that has great theoretical interest is whether the idea of universal rights must originate with a particular society and then be expanded or whether it works the other way around. Canovan points out that the principles of universal rights "arose in a few specific polities, and continue to need such a home base, even though they call its legitimacy into question" (p. 60). In that way, she seems to suggest that particularity precedes universality. She fails to note, however, that those principles could not have arisen in America, or anywhere else, had they not been inspired by the very idea of rights pertaining to human beings as such. In that sense, universality precedes particularity. At least it can be so argued.

Numerous other practical and theoretical issues, within their shifting historical settings, are discussed by Canovan. There is, for example, the question of whether a people is necessarily an organic growth, taking perhaps centuries to develop or whether it can be mobilized for a particular action like the uprising of the American colonists against England in the late eighteenth century. There is the issue of the relationship of the people to liberty, or, in theoretical terms, the relationship of democracy and liberalism. And there is the phenomenon of populism, always inflamed when it appears, and the question it puts before us: Is it a logical outcome of the idea of a people or an aberration in the development of that idea? Finally, there is the issue of what Canovan refers to as "the sovereign people." Does the idea of the people, fully worked out in theory and developed in historical practice, imply that "the people" is not just a concept or a myth but a reality which, at least from time to time, can come into existence and work its will into history? There is space here only to discuss this final issue, which particularly captures Canovan's attention.

Canovan contrasts "the people as ordinary members of the population," carrying on the often-shabby everyday politics of an average democracy, with such people, who, at some moment of crisis, may be "transfigured into a People that has power of political redemption" (p. 122). The Western political imagination is haunted, she writes, by the idea of "the population transformed into a mythic being that is not only the source of political legitimacy, but can sometimes appear to redeem politics from oppression, corruption, and banality" (p. 123). It is fair to say that Canovan's political imagination, too, is haunted by this vision. She returns to it repeatedly, never quite endorsing it but unable quite to put it out of her mind. She leaves the impression that the idea may, indeed, be valid. "The People," thus understood, is only an occasional and ephemeral reality, and it depends for its being on an act of political mobilization. But when it comes into existence and into action, it somehow has redemptive power. She mentions the Polish Solidarity Movement as an example of this phenomenon.

Canovan is always interesting and sensitive. But it seems to me she should have said either more or less about "the sovereign people." For it to be taken seriously would require a far more careful ontological analysis than any Canovan undertakes. One way such analysis could be embarked on—a way that fits well into the Western tradition of political thought—would be through careful theoretical examination of the idea of the general will, not only as it appears in Rousseau but also as it is set forth by Hegel and his followers, such as Bernard Bosanquet, in Great Britain. Canovan does give some attention to the idea of the general will but scarcely even begins to explore all aspects of the concept. For example, she evokes rather eloquently the vision of a redeeming People. But she never asks, "What about those who stand aside, not part of the throng?" Had she asked, and pursued, that question, she would have been led to consider the claim that the general will is always right, so that those who are alienated from it and compelled to obey it are, as Rousseau said, "forced to be free." Can we think that there ever is such a will or ever could be? Can we think that in every member of a population there is a real will that is, in substance, identical with the general will?

It is noteworthy in this connection that Canovan never alludes to, or seriously considers, the manifold ways in which the people in present-day industrial societies is corrupted—by advertising, by political manipulation, by consumerism. She pays no attention to the concept of the masses or to the kind of conformity of individuals that is manifest in the masses. She makes no reference to Ortega y Gasset and—most surprising of all—only a single, passing reference to Tocqueville, who had so much to say, particularly in the second volume of *Democracy in America*, about ways in which a democratic populace can be and can become corrupt. Consumers, conformists, masses—such are clearly not fit to be transformed into a redeeming People. Canovan should have said something about all of this.

The truth surely is that Canovan's redeeming people is a fiction and nothing more. It is a fiction which sometimes corresponds more closely with reality than at other times, but never in itself is it a reality. Democracy is never anything more than a procedure, which sometimes works tolerably well and sometimes very badly. Never does it express the will of the people, for there is no such will. Indeed, one might take a step further and suggest that the idea of the people as a force for redemption exemplifies a kind of political idolatry. It haunts the Western mind perhaps because the idea of God does not. I think Canovan suspects something of this sort. She is too perceptive not to. While she is drawn toward the idea of the sovereign people, she is held back by a skeptical and well-informed mind which knows that the idea is false, and often dangerously so. In the final analysis, then, she is right. And on this point, as on many other matters connected with the ancient idea of a mystical Everyone, at the source of all legitimate power and political action, she is well worth reading.

–Glenn Tinder