Critical Dialogue

Imagined Sovereignties: The Power of the People and Other Myths of the Modern Age. By Kevin Olson. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016. 230p. $105.00 cloth, $28.99 paper.
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— Stephen K. White, *University of Virginia*

Popular sovereignty has been at the foundation of our idea of political legitimacy since the late seventeenth century. Kevin Olson offers us an admirable genealogy of this concept. His focus is on understanding how the West came to conceive of that collectivity called "the people"; how it acquired its particular normative significance; and how the resulting construction became "unproblematically foundational" (p. 9). Olson aims to "destabilize the natural rectitude of the people" by showing how this idea and its "normatization" were, and still are, far more problematic and contestable than we usually think (pp. 100–105, 169).

Like Benedict Anderson's analysis in *Imagined Communities* (1992) of how national communities are brought to life, Olson investigates how "the people" is constituted, but unlike Anderson, Olson wants to better expose how this shared feeling of commonality gains its sense of being normatively compelling through the social interplay of "word, image and practice" (p. 41). Much of *Imagined Sovereignties* is taken up with historical analysis of eighteenth-century France and Haiti. While the former focus is hardly surprising, the latter is somewhat unexpected, and that is part of Olson's purpose: to show how the relatively familiar, modern French revolutionary idea of the people functioned when it traveled to the relatively unfamiliar terrain of what was then the French colony of Saint-Domingue, where the inhabitants revolted "*against* the French on their own terms" (p. 109).

The chapter on France insightfully traces the slow and contentious emergence of popular sovereignty. Olson attends to the multiple and contested terrains of pamphlets, crowds, festivals, and debates in which claims about "the people" took on multiple shapes. Even more fascinating are the chapters on Haiti. There, in the context of colonialism and slavery, one sees vividly how difficult it was to imagine an unproblematic picture of revolutionary, popular politics. The difficulty confronting any simple conceptualization of a unified people can be seen in three competing ways in which that entity was imagined by different groups.

One faction saw the revolutionary people as the white planter class that wanted to separate from France, leaving slavery intact in a new, independent country. A second imagined a more egalitarian, property-owning, racism-free people, who nevertheless would perpetuate the institution of property in slaves and remain within the French empire. Finally, Olson sketches an "agrarian-anti-slavery imaginary" (p. 124). He admits that his portrait is somewhat speculative, given that this movement emerged mostly from decentralized practices about which there is little written record. This group did not have a formal plan to end slavery, but rather sought a renegotiation of the work lives of slaves, as a result of which the individuals who made up this "people" would have three days free per week for themselves to develop their own agricultural initiatives and create "counterplantations," allowing for "agrarian subsistence and market independence" (pp. 126–27).

Even after the Haitian revolution succeeded and a formal sense of the people had to be installed in official documents, additional unorthodox ideas emerged. In the American and French constitutions, the people was understood to include humans in an abstract sense, but with the tacit understanding that this really meant white males. In the language of Haiti's 1805 constitution, such standardized deception was implicitly highlighted and then symbolically reversed (at least in racial, if not gender, terms) with the claim that all distinctions of color would end and that all Haitians would "'henceforth be known under the generic denomination of black'" (p. 155). A further, remarkable construction of the people appeared in the 1843 constitution's idea of a postcolonial, transnational citizenry; in effect, "*all* Africans and Indians *are* Haitian" (p. 160).

In his analysis of France and Haiti, Olson marvelously elucidates how contested and unstable were the characterizations of this emerging eighteenth-century people. But his genealogy devotes comparatively little attention to how and why this idea later evolved into what he calls a "folk foundationalism" in the sense of acquiring an unquestioned, unitary status in modern political life (pp. 7–9). I found myself expecting a chapter showing in detail the character of this later process by which imaginaries congeal and become naturalized and seemingly inevitable,

their contestability forgotten. Clearly, such a process often involves collusion with structures of domination and the agendas of elites. Thus, Michel Foucault's genealogy in *Discipline and Punish* (1977) ties the modern compulsion toward "discipline" to the political and economic "take-off" of industrial capitalism. Accordingly, Foucault refers to the growing organization of the factory floor, as well as control, production, and greater management of workers who fit together "naturally" at this emerging site of discipline. Olson's potential story about the causes of the comparable naturalization of a field of social meaning around "the people" would likely be more difficult to tell primarily as a tale of growing power and domination. In raising this issue, my point is not to imply that I know how this story should be told, but simply to emphasize how challenging it would be to narrate a convincing one.

I will come back to this issue. But first there is another critical matter to highlight. If we focus on the United States, a question arises regarding the author's starting point. Does he overemphasize the normative force of "the power of the people"? In the United States, there has been, from the start, a strong and resilient strain of skepticism about popular power and democracy. The ideas of limiting this power and affirming individual, God-given natural rights have arguably been as central to our political tradition as the idea of the power of the people. In this regard, I was struck by Olson's unqualified assertion that today, "natural rights and self-evident truths . . . have been thoroughly discredited" (pp. 5–6). While this might be correct for contemporary intellectuals, the claim seems questionable as a characterization of the general population, or popular political discourse and the public policy that emerges from it at both the local and national levels.

At the start of each semester, I conduct a survey of my undergraduates to get some sense of their political values and opinions. In 2018, 87% said that they affirm the idea of "God-given natural rights." Lest you think this simply reflects a highly conservative, southern student body, it is significant that 81% identified themselves as liberal or moderate, and only 16% as conservative. Now, like Olson, I do not find much intellectual cogency in the idea of natural rights, and I spend a good deal of class time trying to deflate it. But my point in the present context is that perhaps this idea retains as much force as a *folk* foundationalism in the American context as "the power of the people."

This needs to be acknowledged if one is going to make sense of important political phenomena today. In referring to contemporary popular politics, Olson speaks of various exemplary movements, including the Tea Party (pp. 1, 169, 178). I would argue that this group clearly manifests a good degree of skepticism about the power of the people as *the* core notion of American political culture. Of course, Tea Partyers do appeal to some sense of popular politics, but they tend to focus on what the majority of "*real* Americans" want. Olson's framework can encompass this phenomenon to a degree, with his claim that "the people" has always involved a plurality of imagined sovereignt*ies*. But he would nevertheless not be able to give a convincing account of the Tea Party and many other Trump supporters, after having so strongly dismissed ideas of natural, God-given rights to individual freedoms that such political actors feel are threatened by too much democracy.

One of the best aspects of *Imagined Sovereignties* is the deeply intelligent, concluding discussion of the role that genealogies of core concepts like *the people* should play in political theory. Genealogies are of course generally intended to slacken our drive to imagine our basic normative concepts as pure rational artifacts of enlightened modernity. But why do we continually manifest such a drive? In his concluding chapter, Olson argues that it is because such concepts are not just rationally normative, but also "existential," in that they help to constitute our identity, "spark our imagination, quicken the heart, and move people to act" (pp. 170–72). Stable, unproblematic ideas, like the people, help us feel secure and edified as we engage in political action. Earlier, I criticized him for not better tracking the history of how the people became naturalized. Although he could have done more here in terms of historical analysis, I nevertheless think that he locates, with his focus on the existential, what would have to be one of the central insights animating any convincing narrative.

When genealogical critique loosens the unreflective "existential force of deeply seated imaginaries," it potentially frees us "to think otherwise" by providing some distance from naturalized concepts of Western modernity (p. 173). But this shift, Olson thoughtfully reminds us, does not constitute an immaculate emancipation of our imagination. Rather, at best it means that we start a slow, piecemeal process, informed by careful historical investigation, through which we gain distance from the shibboleths of our political traditions, but also realize simultaneously that "Enlightenment concepts and practices" may themselves continue to "provide a basis for creative imagination" (p. 150).

Response to Stephen White's review of *Imagined Sovereignties: The Power of the People and Other Myths of the Modern Age*

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— Kevin Olson

I am very grateful for Stephen White's subtle and sympathetic comments. He asks for a more detailed account of how ideas of popular sovereignty lose their problematic character and become naturalized. This is an astute request that I very much embrace.

In Chapter 5 of *Imagined Sovereignties*, I sketch part of that story, claiming that it traces an arc through processes of problematization, habituation, and forgetting. There, I note that a more detailed genealogy would follow the transmutation of popular power through the waves of liberation that took place around the world during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (p. 106). These stories typically reflect a need to arrive at some workable notion of sovereignty that is not rooted in monarchy. Some are driven by elite interests, as White suggests, while others show a much broader array of agendas and conceptual sources. In all such cases, I would expect ideas of popular sovereignty to be naturalized through various forms of repetition, rearticulation, institutionalization, and association with the aura of other ideas and events. This history would never be a linear one, of course. As ideas of popular sovereignty are taken up in new contexts, they are inevitably reproblematized in novel ways. The great anticolonial revolutions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries undoubtedly have many interesting stories to tell in this regard.

White also notes the persistence of natural-rights thinking in contemporary cultures, presenting it as a phenomenon that might confound my genealogy of popular sovereignty. This actually illustrates a number of the points I am trying to make, however. Natural rights have been on the ropes as an intellectual agenda at least since Jeremy Bentham's *Anarchical Fallacies* in 1796. They remain an active belief among a significant portion of the population, however—a prime example of what I call folk foundationalism. It is interesting to ask why such thinking has flourished in some circles rather than disappearing.

Popular sovereignty has had a contingent and changing relationship with natural rights over the centuries. At times it has been based on them, at other times it has competed with them, and sometimes the two have subsisted in uneasy tension with each other. Further, the two themes have evolved differently within various communities of thought and practice, resulting in radically different political imaginaries that are often hostile to one another. In the Haitian and French materials that I examine, "the rights of man" are often invoked to support different and conflicting sovereign imaginaries, always in a vague, auratic sense. Today's evocations of natural rights seem similarly conflicted and penumbral.

Tracing these intertwined histories could reveal further dimensions of the phenomena I am interested in: the messiness of our beliefs; the odd processes that naturalize them; the existential force of such ideas; the differentiation of communities of thought and practice; our ability to embrace ideas that are in tension (or even contradiction) with one another; the unnoticed persistence of past imaginaries; and their permutation into new forms. These genealogies have many interesting stories left to tell.

A Democratic Bearing: Admirable Citizens, Uneven Justice, and Critical Theory. By Stephen K. White. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017. 238p. $99.99 cloth, $29.99 paper.
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— Kevin Olson, *University of California, Irvine*

In this lucid and timely book, Stephen White breaks important ground by giving us a new approach to the reactionary impulses of our time. He brings insights of democratic theory to bear on contemporary American right-wing movements like the Tea Party and the Minutemen. In White's analysis, those movements operate on a model of citizenship that he calls virtual patriotism. It is based on particular visions of liberty and strong claims to represent the core of American identity. The patriotism of Tea Partyers and Minutemen is virtual, according to White, because they see themselves as part of a long American democratic tradition, but their account of that cultural heritage is highly selective. It centers around an exclusionary notion of citizenship that draws sharp lines between members and nonmembers, polices borders, and infuses itself with religious and political fundamentalism.

White makes the provocative claim that the energy behind contemporary American right-wing movements is a visceral reaction to perceptions of what Jürgen Habermas has called lifeworld colonization. This occurs when the "lifeworld" of social interaction is eroded by economic and administrative institutions that replace it with markets and administrative imperatives. Virtual patriots' perception of colonization is much narrower than the framework that Habermas describes, however: They react to perceptions of state overreach and the administrative invasion of private life, but not to that of corporations and markets. Their response to these perceived incursions is what White calls a politics of republican self-protection. It is a republicanism oriented toward resisting domination by the state. By using the idea of colonization to unpack this phenomenon, he draws a compelling picture of its sources, as well as a potential basis for arguing that it is a misplaced reaction.

White emphasizes that virtual patriotism is only one, very selective strand of the American tradition. He hopes to displace it with an alternative vision that he calls a "democratic bearing," which is in many ways a direct negation of virtual patriotism's fortified borders, exclusion, and refusal to engage with facts. The democratic bearing is an inclusive conception of citizenship based on free and open communication. Unlike the citizenship of virtual patriotism, which reconstructs the imaginaries that animate existing right-wing nationalism, the democratic bearing is a normative ideal developed by considering

theoretical aspects of democratic life. White draws particularly on Habermas's work to formulate this ideal, both Habermas's diagnosis of pathologies of modern societies—which he calls lifeworld colonization—and the normative democratic theory designed to undo these problems by revitalizing communication within colonized domains of society. White's use of this material amounts to a wholesale rethinking of Habermas's ideas from very different bases, however. He is particularly concerned to avoid any of the foundationalism that he finds in Habermas; he thus retools Habermas's concepts as interpretive schemata and heuristic recommendations, rather than norms diagnosed as already implicit in our practices.

For connoisseurs of Habermas's work, it is tempting to zoom in on some of the fine details of White's refashioning project. Indeed, there are many interesting points to ponder about the way he extracts the animating kernel of various ideas from their technical integument in Habermasian philosophy of language, argumentation theory, systems theory, and so on. Perhaps the biggest departure that White makes from Habermas, though, is his decision to regenerate democracy by formulating a democratic ethos, rather than by rethinking democratic procedure. As a result, his view bears a strong family resemblance to Habermas's by virtue of its conceptual ancestry, but there are a number of important differences that bring many advantages while also raising new questions.

Democratic proceduralists like Habermas depend on actual political cultures to give their ideas substance and legitimacy. White describes one such culture, but goes further by kicking away the ladder of democratic procedure to focus on the ethos in which democratic practices are embedded. This gives us a vision of democracy that is situated in the lives, affects, and motivations of the people who practice it, avoiding the abstraction that procedural conceptions run into, particularly the necessity to explain why anyone should find them compelling.

At the same time, White's proposal does not entirely escape these problems. He envisions an ethos that one must deliberately cultivate. It is above all a communicative conception of democracy outwardly similar to Habermas's. This ideal has a normative clarity that organically developing political cultures lack; they tend to be a chaotic hodgepodge of conflicting elements. At the same time, such actually existing cultures seem natural and deeply compelling to us; they constitute our identity, shape our behavior, and structure our perception. However, a cultivated ethos like the democratic bearing is somewhat distant from this: It is an aspirational ideal, rather than a lived reality. In that sense, it comes into some tension with our actual, more or less democratic cultures.

I think that White intends this to be a critical tension, one that operates within the normative gap between our best ideas about democratic citizenship and less ideal ones like those of virtual patriots. If that is the case, however, it seems to me that such tensions need to be more explicitly identified and probed to have the needed critical force. This would require more detailed interpretive work, showing how normative ideals like White's are positioned in relation to the long histories of our actual democratic cultures. Only by making this juxtaposition explicit would we be able to understand the resources that our actual culture has for moving in his direction, while also seeing how some strands of that culture—right-wing nationalism, for instance—wear the robes of democracy while falling far short of his vision.

At the same time, I fear that this investigation might show White's normative vision to be already intertwined with existing conflicts and forms of exclusion in our own society. The democratic bearing attempts to regenerate democratic culture from within a certain segment of society: those who cultivate it as an ethos. In this sense, one cannot help noticing its affiliation with an already existing subculture. The democratic bearing celebrates forms of discourse and communication that are the expert domain of knowledge professions, information specialists, and academics, those who make their living by developing ideas and persuading others of their value. These are competitive professions that select strongly for people with verbal and conceptual skills. Such people are relatively shielded from precarity by their role in the information economy, and are frequently perceived as arrogant elites because of their privileged economic and cultural positions. Unfortunately, the communicative ethos of the democratic bearing tracks those ideals rather closely. It puts forward as a normative proposal what already has deep roots within structural and subcultural features of contemporary economies.

Here, the democratic bearing may well be caught up in the social fissures that stoke so much resentment among right-wing nationalists. On one side is the reactive exclusionism of virtual patriots; on the other is the discursive pluralism of knowledge professionals. White's proposal seems to intervene in favor of the latter against the former. If this is the case, though, how do we think about its normative force? Is the idea that the Tea Party, Minutemen, and other right-wing nationalists should adopt a different, more democratic ethos? That would certainly encounter difficult points of psychic resistance as an ethos of self-cultivation: Right-wing nationalists' anxiety surrounding racial identity and economic precarity would likely not be assuaged by cultivating a different, more democratic ethos. This is especially the case if the suggested ethos is one that is often demonized because it is possessed by those who are seen as culturally privileged antagonists.

To avoid such problems, we could envision an alternative way to proceed with White's fertile project.

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Suppose that instead of working primarily from philosophical conceptions of communication and citizenship, we were to operate within the cultural horizon of our own political cultures in a more immanent and interpretive manner. We might try to catalog the implicit norms and ideals of our existing culture and identify resources within that horizon that could be bent toward some kind of democratic ethos. (In Habermas's language, this would not be a "rational" reconstruction, but one with a much more sensitive, contextually interpretive orientation.) Here, I am proposing an interpretive processing of specific details and events: the deep archives of our own political history. It would critically work up actual norms and practices, building theoretical generalizations out of concrete histories. Indeed, White operates in such a mode in his account of right-wing nationalism. Extending that more broadly to the democratic bearing would result in a somewhat different vision of democratic engagement, openness, and pluralism, but one more directly rooted in existing normative contexts. Similarly, we might criticize right-wing nationalism from such a perspective by asking what positive commitments are lodged in its current cultural ideals, then probing the tensions between those ideals and the ways they are realized.

Such a critical modality could have a great deal of force because it would be rooted in commitments that people actually hold. Here, White's astute theoretical insights might produce new thinking about democratic politics by engaging directly with the stew of tensions, problems, and fertile ideas that already exist in our own political imaginaries.

Response to Kevin Olson's review of *A Democratic Bearing: Admirable Citizens, Uneven Justice, and Critical Theory*

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— Stephen K. White

Thanks to Kevin Olson for a thoughtful exchange. One issue that interests us both is the relationship between what might be called "idealizing" and more "realistic" political theory. Often discussions of this revolve around straw men. But there is a significant concern here worth teasing out. I think Olson and I agree somewhat on this topic but also are at least partially at odds. In my book, I contrast the ethos of the "virtual patriot" of the contemporary American right with a more "democratic ethos," which I associate with a heavily revised Habermasian framework. Olson sees my elucidation of the latter position as reflective of idealizing political theory, contending that my orientation departs too strongly from a realistic, "immanent and interpretive" approach.

As Olson notes, I reject Habermas's foundationalist claims about necessary moral presuppositions embedded in language. But after such a renunciation, how does one derive those core norms associated with a discourse-ethical orientation to political life? Olson sees me committed primarily to "free and open communication," a "normative ideal" derived from "theoretical aspects of democratic life." I am not sure exactly what that means, but it does not adequately characterize my position. After a rejection of foundationalism, all that is left for anyone is to proceed in an "immanent and interpretive" fashion. The real issue involves where exactly one begins that interpretive process. He wants attention tightly focused on the "lived reality" of specific cases.

I do not contest the value of Olson's "realistic" perspective. But his way of framing things at times seems to imply that my "idealizing" counterperspective leads to analysis divorced from lived reality. He argues that attention to "free communication" is something really important only for "knowledge professionals." This charge harkens back to the unconvincing claim that a deliberative approach locks itself into seeing the political world as a college seminar. But this ignores the way in which the Frankfurt School always pursued a hermeneutic of suspicion of power, and the way in which the Habermasian frame has always focused on demands for justification on the part of those in power. Now, critics have often correctly highlighted certain modes of power that have been undertheorized by Frankfurters, but such interventions are generally embraced by critical theorists, not rejected.

If an idealizing approach is not totally lost in the clouds, how might we imagine its relation to a realistic one? Each should draw sustenance and possible correction from the other. Interpretation that proceeds immanently from specific, localized cases may be usefully leavened by interpretations drawn from analyses of broader historical vistas, like "Western modernity," through which we tease out more explicitly universalizing themes. Of course, as we know all too well today, these vistas have often been interpreted in one-sided, whitewashed ways. And proceeding in Olson's more "realistic" fashion is just what helps expose such vices. My concern is simply to emphasize that political theory is healthiest when we continually tack back and forth in relation to both perspectives. I would like to think that Olson ultimately agrees with me on this.