

One of Lefort's other important insights was that the question of who the people are should always be up for debate; in fact, democracy ought not to be understood as a particular collective of particular individuals but as that never-ending debate. Näsström, following up on this thought, warns that today's problems will not be solved by trying to fall back on the sovereign people (in the way those calling for a Brexit referendum did, for instance). But she also thinks that her spirit-oriented approach can generate answers to questions that preoccupy contemporary theorists of "peoplehood." Citizenship politics, she claims, should also be animated by the spirit of emancipation; it should not focus on honor and distinction (as do policies aimed at recruiting the highly skilled for a global labor market) or become a matter of virtue (by having citizenship tests for civic knowledge and model behavior). Such approaches—here is another instance of productively redeploying an Arendtian insight—might have a boomerang effect by making existing citizens seem inadequate; for if they have no skills or have not been politically virtuous, should they be regarded as second-rate at best?

Still, what emancipation means for citizenship and how it could help draw the boundaries of the demos—questions that cannot be wished away by saying that we should no longer focus on sovereignty—remain elusive: Are citizens of a particular democratic state under a general obligation to enable others, such as refugees, to "begin anew"? Emancipation as an "immanent democratic yardstick" does not appear to tell us much about how, concretely, we ought to deal at the global level with uncertainty; nor is it clear how exactly we would judge political actors in terms of how well they make us share the burden of responsibility equally. Some of us simply have less time to think about the collective, and others are also less inclined to do so. Would emancipation become a de facto principle of justice here and require the redistribution of resources? Näsström herself concedes at the end of the book that her approach does not tell us what to consider right and wrong; it is more an invitation to think about well-worn questions differently. That goal is certainly met by this bold and—in the best, non-clichéd sense of the expression, thought-provoking—volume.

**Response to Jan-Werner Müller's Review of *The Spirit of Democracy: Corruption, Disintegration, Renewal***

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— Sofia Näsström 

Müller claims that my book is "a bit inconclusive," and what he has in mind are two questions: "the link between uncertainty and political equality" and "how to identify 'the people' in a democracy." Let me briefly recapitulate

the overall argument I make in the book and then address his critique in this light.

The conceptual shift from sovereignty to spirit is guided by two main ideas. First, with the removal of external guarantees in politics, there arises a fundamental uncertainty about the future, and in a democracy, we tame that uncertainty by sharing and dividing it equally: both the freedom opened up by this move and the responsibility it entails. Doing so emancipates us from a state of self-incurred tutelage. Second, the spirit of emancipation so understood opens up the purpose and direction of society to change. We assume the freedom to fail in our judgments and decisions, and we begin anew. A democratic interpretation of elections acknowledges both ideas, whereas autocratic and technocratic interpretations obstruct both—by "taking uncertainty out of elections" and by violating what I in the book define as a distinctively democratic conception of freedom: the capacity to begin anew.

To Müller, it is not evident "why uncertainty could not serve as a reason to hand decisions over to experts." Could not an expert do a better job in "disclosing" the future for us? Still, this scenario clearly counts as a corruption of the spirit of emancipation. It would not only mean that we relinquish our own freedom and responsibility for the future but that we also deny ourselves the freedom to fail and begin anew. When Müller argues that "the relationship between uncertainty and political equality" is a bit inconclusive, he overlooks the key claim I make in the book, which is that uncertainty is *integral* to political equality. It is what we share and divide equally in a democracy, politically through institutions as elections and socially through policies on citizenship, for example.

Can the spirit of emancipation be used as an immanent democratic yardstick to identify the people? I believe it can, but admit that more could be said on this point. The role of political theory is not to stipulate what we ought to do in a particular case but to offer democratic criteria to fall back on when asking such questions. The shift from sovereignty to spirit means that the democratic criteria we use when identifying the character and scope of the people change. As to its character, the shift from sovereignty to spirit means that the people as an entity is not *per se* democratic. It hinges entirely on the spirit that animates its actions and institutions. Is it fear, virtue, distinction, and/or emancipation? To put it bluntly: if the people in a democracy votes a dictator into power, it is not democratic. It is more likely to be animated by fear than emancipation.

Similarly, when there is a conflict on the proper scope of the people due to migration, secession, or climate change, the democratic criterion to use is not "Let the sovereign people decide!" Instead, we ought to ask in what spirit people engage in the conflict. If the spirit is one of emancipation—of creating new laws, institutions, and policies able to divide up the uncertainty the conflict

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## Critical Dialogue

creates about the future equally among the parties—it trumps other claims based on commitment to country and law or distinction between classes. This yardstick does not

tell us “how well” political actors fare in this regard. But it does challenge some entrenched ideas in democratic theory about who “we, the people” are.