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We, the People: Community, Populism and the Crisis of Political Representation

Abstract: The paper inquires whether the concept of the people can still be an important political tool for imagining communities and bringing into being historical agents for social and political change. With a long and convoluted history in which it has been claimed by leftist, liberal and rightwing ideologies, “the people” is currently the preserve of xenophobic and quasi-fascist mobilization in Europe and the US. By shifting the emphasis from a substantive definition of the people, and thus bypassing the dialectical problem of inclusion and exclusion that undergirded the concept from its inception, the text argues for a performative definition of the people by way of which the concept is no longer defined substantially but relationally. Against whom, or what, is “the people” mobilized in political discourse? becomes the relevant question for distinguishing between progressive and regressive uses of the concept.

Keywords: The People; Performativity; Trumpism; Populism; Refugees.

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It is clear now that the global economic crisis of 2008/2009 has led to a political crisis as well. More specifically, we are dealing with a collapse of the neoliberal political framework that has been dominant in the past 40 years. Post-war social democracy was already defeated by the global expansion of neoliberalism after 1968, but today we are witnessing the fall of its neoliberal variants as well: Blairism in the UK, Clintonism in the US and the German SPD have been defeated and are now irrelevant. Many European social democratic parties have ceased to exist altogether or are playing, at best, an irrelevant role.

But it is not just Social Democracy that is falling, traditional politics and parties are withering away as well after the economic crisis and under the pressures unleashed by its social outcomes. Austerity politics coupled with a massive bailout for the banks and a continuous growth for the richest and powerful few unleashed waves of populist mobilization that brought into power right-wing parties with an explicit anti-establishment rhetoric. Trump’s election as US president and Brexit are two of the most notable recent moments, but right wing populist politics have been sweeping across the European political stage for



some time now. From Spain to Poland and from France to Italy and Germany, Europe is haunted by the very concrete specter of right wing mobilization.

Indeed, populists thrive on instrumentalizing popular fears, but the fears are nonetheless real. In addition, much of the social base of the populist right is not formed by a bunch of crazy bigoted and racist lunatics as the mainstream liberal and even center-left media portray them, but largely of former working class constituencies, now depleted, angered, and downtrodden.¹ The neoliberal politics has hit them the hardest in the past 40 years and this is their way of saying “enough.” While there might not be anything progressive in their political expression, it is nonetheless a telling political gesture.

Part of this outcome is the much-lamented demise of leftist politics, especially after the fall of the former communist regimes and the unbridled triumph of capitalism worldwide. But there are wider concerns that compound an already intricate situation than this mere absence of the left. The crisis of the refugees, terrorism, immigration and war add different layers of complexity and complicate an already intricate relationship between labor and capital. Imperialism, the global division of labor and the contradictions that arise from various forms of capital accumulation at the global level intersect and shape in different forms the way in which political and social conflicts emerge and take shape. This intersection of vertical and horizontal forces is crucial for fragmenting the political field and also cautions against unwarranted generalizations.

Therefore, to complicate things once more, what appear to be similar

phenomena, united by a common popular drive, should in fact be properly disentangled. Their similarity might in fact be an illusion of perspective, influenced by the dominant intellectual framework of the dominant European classes. For example, Trump, Brexit and Marine Le Pen’s ascension to power in France have all been joined together as comparable phenomena and, as such, subsumable to a variant of contemporary fascism. But, of course, they are different social phenomena or, in any case, their local characteristics are more important for their understanding than a purported common feature.

What is undeniable though is that we are witnessing a major realignment of the political scene, one characterized by the fall of the (neo)liberal center and an increase of a politics based on identity in which the tightly knit community, the family, the group dominate and are, in any way, both the political subject on which political claims are made and the ideal of the political mobilization per se. Whatever label we might apply to the new politics after neoliberalism it is clear by now that this conservative feature cannot be denied and it is in fact germane for its articulation and public resonance. At the same time, it should come as no surprise that in times of trouble and turbulence people resort to the most familiar, take shelter at home and among family, friends and those that are alike and share common interests. Hence, the danger – so common for the liberal media and its echo chamber intellectuals – of framing the current global contradiction in the false opposition between the open-minded globalist and cosmopolite elite and the narrow-minded, localist and simple people. This opposition is in itself



part of the problem, an ideological reflex rather than a form of analysis.

My goal in this paper is to address a very specific question: is there any progressive political role for the notion of “the people”, or is it already tainted by localism and conservatism, tinged with xenophobia and utopian dreams of homogenous communities? Is “the people” still appropriable for a universalist project or is it simply only a tool in the toolkit of the populists now? Once the locus of sovereignty, is “the people” still capable of rearticulating progressive politics or is it doomed to function only as an exclusionary mechanism?

From Class to “the People”

For Alain Badiou “the people” is a neutral term, a name like any other or, to put it in Laclau’s terms, an empty signifier.² It is neither progressive, nor fascist, nor liberal *a priori*. It is a matter of context. For Badiou, the context is a global one – the context of global capitalism. What makes the notion of a national people obsolescent (for example, the French people) is precisely the state of the internationalization of the proletariat. The proletarians have never had a country. They are forced by the very dynamic of global capitalism to become uprooted, to be on the move, international, despite the limitations they face for free travel. The nomadism of the proletarians, their uprooting makes any form of national identity for the people to appear regressive, because it is saddled with identity. Since internationalism is now (and has always been) the milieu of the proletarians and the locus of the subjectivized body of communism, national identity functions as a counter-revolutionary and anti-communist idea.

Badiou is of course right in theory, but his position is not dialectical enough in practice precisely because it is not properly anchored in historical materialism. His entire oeuvre is in fact premised upon the rejection of historicity. What Badiou tends to forget is the manner in which the tension between the national level and the international one (especially in the case of labor, but even in the case of capital) is not illusory, derived from an ideological position, but it is a very concrete one, stemming from contradictory and antagonistic relations vis-à-vis capital. Workers in general are indeed united by the fact that they are in the last instance subjugated to capital, but the way this subjugation works in practice is highly contextual and historic, articulated in various localities and, as such, it renders workers in very concrete antagonistic relations that can, and usually are, mobilized by political entrepreneurs for their own political gain. Sometimes what we call populism is in fact a much bigger phenomenon involving this type of antagonism. Trumpism, much more than Brexit, was its epitome.

Trump exploited to his own electoral benefit the objective antagonism between the destitute domestic industrial working class and the migrant labor force. In a typical populist maneuver he reduced this tension to a convenient and simplistic figure of the Mexican migrant and focused all energies on building the infamous wall. He distilled in this image a much more complex economic process that involved the outcome of neoliberal policies of job flight, free trade, delocalization, de-industrialization and impoverishment of the traditional blue-collar workers.

To put it differently, despite the ethnic and racial coloring of Trump’s discourse



(and, on top of that, his sexist and overtly fascist innuendos) this was not its main drive. His power came from a very pointed attack on the outcome of 40 years of neoliberal globalization for the domestic working class, the abandoned people of the Rust Belt, the main losers of these sweeping global transformations. They were neglected both by the Democrats who championed the case of the urban middle class of the big coastal cities and by the Republicans, traditionally the party of the uber-rich. Trump revolutionized US politics (and, even more so, the Republican Party) by mobilizing this disgruntled electorate that lost not only economically, but also, as a result of it, politically. They were dying silently, with no voice to air their grievances, frustration and anger. Trump plugged into this pre-political sentiment (anger) and turned it into a powerful fuel for his campaign and final presidential victory.

In Eastern Europe we had already seen this almost a decade before. Viktor Orban's Hungary is a case in point. His switch from the post-communist social-democracy of the 1990s to conservative and even extreme right politics in the 2000s occurred against the background of a wider switch. The former communist working class, abandoned by an increasingly neoliberalized Social Democracy (usually in the guise of an indigenized Blairism, which in fact meant crony capitalism and corruption), moved to the right and became increasingly conservative. Their legitimate social and economic demands, formerly articulated in a language of class, were now expressed in a language of fear, hatred and resentment, invoking feelings of national pride and liberation. The global conflict that was capitalistic in nature and involved

a secular realignment of the processes of capital accumulation (and production) was thus reduced to a national confrontation between the people and the foreigners.

Orban's politics, and later Trump's, alert us to the precise moment when "the people" came back to politics: at the exact moment when the corrosive effects of neoliberal globalization pushed the former industrial working class from the left to the right. Jonathan Freedman noted a long time ago that the salient feature of neoliberalism is not globalization, cosmopolitanism, uprooted global elites, free movement and all the other expectations of high bourgeois modernism, but precisely the opposite: the return of closed and tightly knit communities, the reemergence of the extended family as the locus of accumulation and politics, the fragmentation of the body politic along local networks of clan and region. Neoliberal globalization and, to be more precise, its corrosive effects that Marx attributed to capitalism per se by virtue of its ability to "melt into the air" everything that is solid, produces borders, fragmentation, localization and generally, despite its rhetoric, pushes the individual into the networks of the community. In effect, what neoliberalism did, despite, or perhaps, precisely because of its global outlook was to dissolve former international and universalistic constructions. The more capital went global, the more localism and particularism became entrenched and dominant.

It is within this broader horizon that we should situate what appears to be the rampant nationalism of such constructions as *Make America Great Again*. It is nationalism, indeed, but it is not the 19th-century type of nationalism, colored by ethnicity,



blood and language. It is nationalism without identity and the type of “people” such a construction conjures is not the “people” of 19th-century or 20th-century nationalisms. Liberals who condemn these political manifestations for their inherent racism and chauvinism, but also leftists like Badiou who despise them for not being international enough, miss the point. The success of populists and right wing political entrepreneurs around the world is in no small part an outcome of this double failure of the liberal center and the mainstream academic and political left (or whatever is left of it globally). As the US democrats demonstrated it clearly, first by marginalizing Bernie Sanders, then by antagonizing even further Trump supporters by calling them “the deplorables,” this is not a cultural war, just as it is not a case of misguided political allegiances. It is a very concrete form of political expression that rejects at once the effects of neoliberalism but also the liberal and leftist responses to it. As one commentator put it after Brexit, it is the politics of the “middle finger” shown to what is perceived to be, indiscriminately, the establishment, both that of the big business and finance, and that of the liberal and leftist urban middle classes.

Not only did the liberals and much of the leftists (especially during Brexit but also in the US with the support for Clinton) miss the point, but their knee-jerk reaction only confirmed where the problem was. Faced with the prospect of Brexit and with Trump’s victory, the instinctive reaction was to demonize the respective voters as fascist, backward, xenophobes and misogynistic white men. Surely, all those played their part, as did fear and anger, in the final eclectic cocktail that was thrown at the

establishment. But despite their rejection of ethnicity and nationalism, it was the liberal-leftist elites that were in fact mobilizing ethnic and nationalist explanations to understand the current situation, to make sense of Brexit and Trump. They mistook the re-emergence of “the people” as a genuine nationalist construction instead of seeing it as a clear symptom of neoliberalism and its final, terminal, crisis.

The Populist Frontier

Chantal Mouffe once wrote about the need of the left to create a populist frontier against the elites and the establishment. However, she noted that what is happening in practice, especially in contemporary Europe, is that there is a populist frontier against the migrants (and refugees, one might add). The spearhead of this populist frontier, for Mouffe, is Marine Le Pen and her proclivity to mobilize the working-class vote and that of the petite bourgeoisie by stirring the fears against the (Muslim) migrants and terrorism. She, of course, is not alone in Europe; a host of movements from Germany to the Nordic countries and the Baltics have gained political representation by eliciting this kind of fears. The 2015 summer of migration compounded the situation by bringing a wave of migrants from war-torn zones in the Middle East and North Africa to the heart of Europe.

Here, the populist logic works at a different level but it nonetheless resorts to a familiar construction: that of a (European) people being under siege by a radically different population. “Fortress Europe” is the name of this attempt to keep out the intruders, to protect the European legacy and



its people. This is not a metaphor, but the instantiation of very concrete defensive policies and institutions, such as Frontex. While within the EU member countries lock themselves up behind national prejudices (as was the case with the hatred against the “lazy Greeks” during the crisis of the Greek debt) and seek to maintain national sovereignty (as was the case with one of the arguments for Brexit), when faced with the migrant and refugee crisis they discover the similarity of belonging to the same geocultural construction – Europe – which entitles them to keep the borders shut and refuse the solidarity quotas for the migrants.

The manner in which Europe dealt with the refugee crisis reminds one of Michel Foucault’s poignant lecture *Society must be defended* in which he describes the mechanism by which the threat (real or imaginary) of an external enemy functions as a regulative force within the community. To put it in Agamben’s terms, the external enemy naturalizes the declaration of the state of exception, the suspension of law and the limitation of rights and liberties. The state of exception becomes the normal functioning of the politics in a circular and self-reinforcing manner.

Therefore, to go back to Mouffe’s point, it would be a mistake to attribute this construction only to right wing populists like Marine Le Pen. It is in fact a more general reaction and one that is constitutive to the European project itself. It is not some sort of aberration, a temporary fall-out of democracy, but the normal way in which the European project has functioned since its inception and, more generally, the way in which the hegemonic European identity has been imagined via colonialism and imperialism.

That this is a more general malaise is discernible in the contradictory and highly nauseating positions expressed on the topic by the global left thinker Slavoj Žižek.³ At times, his position was almost impossible to distinguish from that of a bigoted far-right supporter, entrenched in cultural wars and reciting the ideological drivel of a purported clash of civilization. However, what Žižek tries to avoid is the humanitarian liberal reaction of welcoming indiscriminately the migrants since this, on the one hand, infantilizes them (treating them like small kids in need of assistance), while on the other it fuels the rhetoric of the extreme right parties around Europe. There might be a point in both these arguments, but what Žižek ultimately forgets is that the twin crisis of migrants and refugees is an outcome of Europe’s very concrete politics and policies. He evacuates the need to properly investigate the root causes of the crisis by making a very general and abstract bow to the dynamics of global capital and its crisis-prone nature, a typical leftist gesture that seeks to avoid concrete analysis while pointing into the direction of material relations. Thus, freed from the burden of concrete historical materialist analysis, Žižek is all too keen to go back to the cultural realm in order to resume culturalist explanations about the irreducible differences between Europe and Muslim migrants.

The construction of a unified, culturalist, racially and ethnically coherent people of Europe is not only the purview of the nationalistic and xenophobic right, but a reflex of the Eurocentric left as well. It is, as already alluded to above, a deeply entrenched historical construction, linked with Europe’s hegemonic position during,



and as a result of, capitalist modernity. “The people” appears here not as a locus of sovereignty but as a form of racial and civilizational superiority. It is one of the forms in which the notion of “the people” is being mobilized today and it does not come as an attribute of the weak, but of the most powerful. Those who have the power to erect walls and build fortresses have the power to invoke the people in order to justify the walls that they build. The rest are just migrants, refugees, asylum-seekers and nomads and, most of the time, they are united only by the negative features attributed to them by the most powerful.

The way in which “the people” is brought about by this construction is only loosely or indirectly related to some global phenomena (though, in the last analysis everything, is). What is salient to note here is the way in which “the people” is being mobilized in order to preserve and justify systemic and systematic unbalances in the global hierarchies. “The people” is always the “chosen people,” meaning the subject whose life and death matter and are grievable. For Judith Butler this is the ultimate litmus test of belonging, of being part of the community: whose life matters, whose life is grievable? The construction of the European people together with that of Fortress Europe is a clear sign that some lives matter more than others, that the power of grief is not equally distributed. Belonging to the right people here is not a matter of economics or culture, but a matter of life and death, of being protected by the right or, on the contrary, of being “naked,” as Agamben puts it, devoid of any social and political protection. While the “people of Europe” is in itself a contradictory construction and has its own internal ruptures,

it nonetheless functions as an exclusionary mechanism that not only regulates who is in and who is out, but also, crucially, who is to be kept alive and who is to be left to die.

Politics is thus reduced to the management of bare life and often takes the form of necropolitics (as the number of deaths in the Mediterranean makes clear). Judith Butler is right to ask “how to live one’s own life well, such that we might say that we are living a good life within a world in which the good life is structurally or systematically foreclosed for so many.”⁴ One needs to face the theoretical and moral task of asking what it means to live a good life for oneself immersed within broader structural conditions shaped by inequality, exploitation and effacement. The question about the good life, about the possibilities of living such a life and even the theoretical act of asking it, already pertain not to some idealistic spiritual quest for the purpose and meaning of life, but precisely to inquiring into the way the world is organized and structured, bringing to the fore the determinants shaping life (and death) and ultimately asking about the forms of politics that can enable a good life.

Butler is right to point out that in asking about living a good life one does not only ask about what “good” is (the sphere of morality and ethics) but also, and more importantly perhaps, what is living, what is life and what is a life worth living (that is, the sphere of politics and structural arrangements). The question about good life is then a question about biopolitics.⁵

In *Precarious Life* Butler introduced the category of the grievable in order to discern between the lives that are recognized as worthy of protection and endowed with rights and those that are denied such



protection and status: the ungrievable.⁶ This distinction recasts the question of the living of life as a question about whose lives matter, are worth living and protecting:

The biopolitical management of the ungrievable proves crucial to approaching the question, how do I lead this life? And how do I live this life within the life, the conditions of living, that structure us now? At stake is the following sort of inquiry: whose lives are already considered not lives, or only partially living, or already dead and gone, prior to any explicit destruction or abandonment?⁷

Butler distinguishes at this level between “social death” – a limit situation in which life is already considered a form of death, a situation best embodied by the figure of the “Muslim” in the extermination camps depicted by Agamben – and forms of economic disenfranchising, dispossession and exclusion specific to the neoliberal rationalities, or art of governing and administration that she calls “precarity.” Precarity helps to differentiate between different modes of unliveability and populations living an unliveable life.

Precarity, that is, life bordering on the unlivable and even the ungrievable, is thus the outcome of the very exercise of power, of the rules of administration and governing, specific to contemporary global processes of accumulation and production. The production of life and death, of differentially valued lives, is inextricably linked with material relations of production as such and their undergirding ideas of value, profit, loss and waste.

Can, therefore, the notion of the people still be redeemed? Is there any way out

of the deadlock proposed by the articulation of the people as a substitute for class and the invocation of the people as an argument for racial superiority? Is there a way of invoking the people while keeping in mind the necropolitics it effects on others by virtue of their precarity and ungrievable life?

The Constitution of the People

Alain Badiou noted that in parliamentary democracies “the people” is a category of the right of the state.⁸ He goes on to note what he calls a “sham”: the mechanism of voting by which a collection of human atoms – identified wrongly as the people – confer through their vote legitimacy to those elected. For Badiou this is the sovereignty of the people at its worse: that is, “the people” here is the subject of the parliamentary bourgeois democracy. In this process it is the state that confers to the people the legal right to vote – that is, it authorizes, under certain constraints, their inclusion into the category of those able to vote. As such, for Badiou here “the people” means a politics that leads to the persistence of the state in its being.

Moreover, Badiou goes even further to note that in today’s parliamentary democracies the notion of the people is even further restricted to a particular class: the middle class. As he puts it, the middle class is the people of the capitalist oligarchies – the only legitimate political subject.

Therefore, Badiou identifies two negative senses of the notion of the people and two positive ones. The first is the one already mentioned above, which attaches an identitarian hinge to it (the French people). The second negative connotation



is the one that Badiou identifies in the homology between the people and a particular segment of class. Both understandings of the notion of the people have as a direct outcome the persistence of the state. “The people” is indeed subordinated here to a preexisting state that either defines and protects the boundaries of national identification or grants the right of citizenship and of belonging to the people. For Badiou, in either case, the notion of the people cannot be emancipatory not only because of its narrowness (something is always excluded and so on) but by virtue of its subordination to the state. In neither of these conceptions does “the people” appear to be sovereign.

This is where the two positive meanings of the people come to the fore. First, it takes the classical form of a national liberation movement against colonial and imperial domination. The 20th century saw a host of such movements that claimed liberation in the name of the people only to replace, in the end, an imperial form of domination with the domination of a nationalist bourgeoisie that turned nationalism from a potent weapon against the oppressors into a form of domestic domination. Again, at this point Badiou appears to be not dialectical enough and certainly not materialist in his historical analysis. Frantz Fanon already showed how the mobilization of the people against imperial subordination could coexist with preserving the hierarchies and exclusions within the people itself. In a more historical vein, but to the point, Benedict Anderson showed how national liberation movements in Latin America that mobilized a *sui generis* American “people” were the work of the Creole elites that, by doing

so, sought to gain power in relation to the metropolitan elites and thus conserve their privileged positions in relation to the indigenous population.

Secondly, the people appear as a form of self-declaration: “we, the people,” a constitutive act whose main feature, according to Badiou, is not simply the affirmation of a people as such, but the affirmation of the people against the state. This form of declaration of the people is salient for all the revolutionary moments in modernity, successful or not. The very act of coming against the state – which most often implies also the act of coming against the state’s regulation concerning who is legitimately part of the people – is the crucial aspect that defines the people, irrespective of the actual content of the people.

But in today’s crisis of both capitalism and its established political forms do we not encounter in fact the same phenomenon, but in a twisted form? When we hear the phrase “we, the people” today, is it not uttered by some right-wing group that rebels against the current state and its institutions, against its cosmopolitan elites and well-off middle classes? When Trump says “Make America great again!” is he not in fact saying that America should be a different state than what it is today? The shape of his post-election cabinet points indeed to this aspiration of mobilizing the people in order to shape a new state altogether. So, is the people now only the purview of the (counter)revolutionary right?

The way out of this conundrum is offered by Sadri Khiari. He notes that what we should pay attention to is not the substantive composition of the people (who is in and who is out) but to note against whom the people is constituted. Historically, the



people constitutes itself against some external element. It can be the feudal aristocracy, as it was the case in the “founding” articulation of the people during the French revolution, or it can be a neighboring people (as with most nationalist wars), it can be against an oppressing people (during anti-colonial uprisings), it can be against a class segment considered harmful (class war) or it simply can be against a perceived (real or imaginary) threat from the outside. Therefore, the people should not be considered based on its substantive and internal features, but on the manner in which its constitution takes place in relation to an external point against which its mobilization takes place.

Such a position takes a cue from Judith Butler’s performative theory according to which gender (but other forms of identity politics and forms of collective construction) comes into being not in the form of a substantive category but through iterable social practices (and discourse). The people is constituted by the same logic: the people exists only by virtue of its own mobilization, of its calling into being. As such, the emphasis ceases to be placed on the substantive notion of the people (on the notion as such and its perceived inner features and salient characteristics) but on the very act of its articulation, of its calling into being. What is at stake is not the validity or obsolescence of the notion of the people, but the manner in which its political invocation takes place. This political invocation can be progressive and emancipatory or just simply exclusionary, retrograde and fascist. Regarded in this vein, the notion of the people is defetishized and what comes into focus is the very process of the constitution of the body politics.

Giorgio Agamben noted that “democracy” means two things: the constitution of the body politics and a technique of governance.⁹ Democracy designates then both the form in which power is legitimated and the way in which it is exercised. On the one hand, the public domain of law (the politico-juridical order), on the other hand, the administrative practice (the economic sphere of the management of population, to put it in familiar Foucauldian terms).

The western concept of democracy weds together the constitution (the locus of sovereignty and the place of legitimacy) and the government (the sphere of practical government and administration). While interconnected, in the bourgeois definition of democracy, the two spheres are not equal, since the constitution is seen as that which structures the body politics as such, whereas the government is seen only as a subordinate technology of executive power. As it were, the management of population is subordinated to its constitution as body politics in the first place.

This precedence accorded to the constitution is inherently central to the bourgeois liberal political thought, which made it possible, in the last three centuries of its dominance, to think of democracy as pertaining only to the level of formal arrangements, primarily in terms of constitution. This leads to a focus on particular set of institutions and practices, such as the disjunction between the legislative body and the executive body, the mechanism of free elections and free ensemble and the disjunction between the public sphere of the state and the private sphere of the family.

But what is left out of this focus on the constitution and formal rights is, of course, the level of economic-governmental



rationality. This level is never properly scrutinized in relation to democracy since its function is seen only to implement, administer, and govern based on the constitutional order. Karl Marx was one of the first to challenge these assumptions and turned his critical eye towards the sphere of economic production in order to point out its thoroughly undemocratic character. For Marx, freedom became then not the abstract, formal bourgeois set of relations, but freedom in the precise sense of being divorced from one's means of securing livelihood.

Lately, in a different vein, thinkers in the tradition inaugurated by Michael Foucault have paid increasing attention to the art of governance and the management of population and linked it back to the sovereign level. The very mechanisms of administration and management – considered secondary – are in fact recognized as highly productive now. For these thinkers, the constitution does not bring into being the body politics magically (and democratically). What the constitution does is to offer legitimacy to processes of power that control the assemblage and dispositions of populations. The art of government is itself constitutive.

This shift of perspective places in a different light the concept of authoritarianism. Instead of simply designating as authoritarian the formal level of the politico-judicial sphere (as in liberal bourgeois thinking), a more fruitful way to go about it is to understand it at the level of governing and management – that is, in the sphere pertaining to economic administration and the making of livelihood. In so doing, authoritarianism becomes the imposition of a normative matrix that regulates the

making of living, a structural arrangement not of one's choosing. This is precisely the level one cannot vote for, cannot have a say in. At the same time, it is quintessential in shaping life and death.

Authoritarianism is then the core of democracy, its indelible structuring principle. The management of life and the administration of people and the economy are not open to debate and voting, but are simply exercised based on unequally distributed access to power and resources. What the politico-legislative sphere does in democracy is simply legalize and legitimize, formalize as sovereign, this structuring inequality, this power differential.

Not only does this level of structural authoritarianism cast a different light on the meaning of the concept of democracy, but it also points out the external element, the “against whom” the people is constituted: not only against the state as Badiou has it, or simply against bourgeois democracy as such, but against this invisible matrix that keeps economic authoritarianism out of sight and out of democratic control. The act of constituting the people against this invisible but performative matrix is the only way in which the people and, to be more precise, its actualization, can still have political relevance today, one that is capable of going beyond the traditional conundrums of the concept. It is also the only way to take the steam out of the populist mobilization of the term itself. The articulation of the people is too potent a tool to be left in the hands of the enemies.



NOTES

1. See Don Kalb and Gabor Halmai (eds), *Headlines of Nation, Subtext of Class*, Berghahn, 2011.
2. Alain Badiou, "Twenty-Four Notes on the Uses of the People," in *What is a People?*, Columbia University Press, 2016.
3. Slavoj Žižek, *Against the Double Blackmail. Refugees, Terror and Other Trouble with Neighbors*, Penguin, 2016.
4. See her lecture upon receiving The Adorno Prize: "Can One Lead a Good Life in a Bad Life," available here – <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/can-one-lead-a-good-life-in-a-bad-life>. Accessed December 19, 2016.
5. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège De France, 1978-79*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.
6. Judith Butler, *Precarious Lives. The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, Verso, 2004.
7. Butler, "Can One Lead a Good Life in a Bad Life."
8. Badiou, *op. cit.*
9. Giorgio Agamben, "Introductory Note on the Concept of Democracy," in Giorgio Agamben and William McCuaig, *Democracy in What State?*, New Directions in Critical Theory, New York, Columbia University Press, 2011. Note by contrast how for Rancière democracy is irreducible to either a form of government or a mode of social life, in *ibid*, p. 76. See also Jacques Rancière and Steve Corcoran, *Hatred of Democracy*, London, Verso, 2009.