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Review Essay: Populism - Ensuring that People have a voice that is heard and followed

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“.we have stumbled into a great experiment in building highly diverse democracies that manage to endure and, hopefully, treat their members fairly. …. This great experiment is the most important endeavor of our time” (Mounk, 2022, p.4).

This essay is part of that ongoing experiment. It is a stress test, so to speak, of the ideals, practices, and social views described in C. Van Woodward’s renowned biography of Thomas Watson, one of the most important leaders of the Populist movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (some certainly pass the test and should guide thinking about future policies, others fail and ought to be, and are, rejected).

In the end, this essay is primarily intended to challenge today’s negative characterization of the idea of “populism”, and to argue that rule by all the People (the core of the Populist agenda) is a necessary condition for a democracy (Woodward, 2014 p.146).

It is accepted today that a small homogeneous group can operate successfully as a democracy. But there has been from the beginning doubt that a large heterogeneous group could do so (Roberts, 1964). Thus, the challenge to the American experiment as a heterogeneous democracy (Wiebe, 1967).

Eighty plus years ago, Carl Sandburg had been early in his life both a fully engaged Socialist activist (Yannella, 1966), somewhat later a proponent of racial economic justice (Niven, 1991, pp. 336-344; Sandburg, 2020); and towards the end of his life a recipient of a life membership in the NAACP from Roy Wilkins (Niven, 1991, p.699). In the mid-1930s while working on his multi-volume biography of Lincoln he wrote his book length poem The People, Yes! published in 1936. As Frank wrote:

Aside from its iconic title, the work is almost completely forgotten today, a strange outlier amidst the last century’s highbrow taste in poetry. Sandburg’s verse is not abstract; it is not avant garde…As the title suggests, The People, Yes was a full-throated celebration of ordinariness: the manners of the people, their dreams, their folly, their aspirations, and above all their speech, the plain and irregular sounds and echos from the roar and whirl of street crowds, work gangs, sidewalk clamor…. Sandburg attacks the elite, mocking the pretenses of aristocracy and reminding his Depression-era audience of something they knew all too well - that justice treats rich and poor differently”. (Frank, 2020, p.113). Sandburg “believed in 1936 as fervently as in 1908 (Niven, 1991, p. 502).
I believe it has been written that poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world. Recently, it has been argued that Sandburg’s *The People, Yes!* illustrates the relationship between poetry and politics (Golden, 2014).

Jennifer Talbot Roberts (1994) and Josiah Ober (2017) challenged this long history of anti-democracy. More recently, Thomas Frank (2020) updated and more narrowly presented the history of anti-populism. “The first item in the bill of charges against Populism is that it is nostalgic or back-ward looking; that is both futile and unhealthy, similarly misleading on the crucial matter of international trade, (also) an instinctual antagonism to government agencies, particularly of the sort that are insulated from politics,… that it is authoritarian,… and (most damaging today, that it was and) is anti-pluralists, …racist or sexist or discriminatory in some other way” (Frank, 2020 p. 36).

A more narrowly focused essay, primarily a study of “right-wing” populism from a theoretical sociological perspective was published by Berman (2021).

Importantly, Danielle Allen, Director of an Ethics Center at Harvard, has written a powerful book that argues that justice is fought about by means of democracy, and also challenges the understanding of Democracy presented by John Rawls and other contemporary theorists (Allen, 2023).

Frank argues that the first four arguments “when applied to Gilded-age America...are almost entirely upside-down” (Frank, 2020 p. 37). Rather in brief summary, Watson’s journal in 1896 specified the core of the Party’s platform: “Government ownership of railroads and other public interests, control of trusts, an entirely new system of money and credit, a ballot free from corruption, political rights for Negroes.” It was never free silver, which was the essential goal of the Bryan Democrats (Woodward, 2014, p.312).

As regards the final and most disturbing charge against Populism then and today, that it was and is racist and supremicist, Frank acknowledges, and writes: “This is not to say that white southern Populists were racial liberals or that they practiced what they preached; they weren’t and they didn’t. What they did do, however, was defy the Bourbon Democrats of the South, for whom white solidarity and the suppression of African Americans were the monolithic, first principles of political consciousness. Populism’s very existence was an attack on these doctrines” (Frank, 2020, p. 43).

It has to be acknowledged, at this beginning point, that the evils of white supremacy, anti-black discrimination, and violence continue to today; and that the great and important political-economic advances championed by the Populists of the People’s Party do not excuse in any way its or today’s racism, anti-semitism, or other egregious failings (Frank, 2020, pp.44-45). In fact, such views have, as they should, diminished the positive value of the political-economic and social gains that the Populists' work helped to inspire. These wrongs cannot be rationalized or justified by the argument that the gains in justice could not have been achieved without the unjust exclusions.
Frank continues “Understanding recent history as a showdown between peer-reviewed expertise and mass ignorance is at the core of the anti-populist tradition.” He mentions among others a 2018 David Brooks, *New York Times* piece where Brooks wrote “populism is the word we use to describe the hatred of ‘excellence’ by the mediocre” (p. 48). Goldwyn argues that this “new (anti-populist) ethos” incorporated the “certainty that … only certain kinds of people had a right to rule” (Goldwyn, 1978, p.286).

A recent book “advances a general theory why the silent (?) revolution in values triggered a backlash fueling support for Authoritarian-Populist forces in the U.S. and Europe. The conclusion highlights the dangers of this development…” that populism also has important implications for global politics, and that there are transnational connections between populist movements, parties and leaders (Norris & Inglehart, 2019).

In my opinion, if the People are not in ultimate charge of governance, at least indirectly, there is no democracy. In other words, there must be the sovereignty of the people for there to be true democracy (Ober (2017). 

It is recognized that there is a powerful human instinct for “tribalism,” a tendency to form groups identifying and excluding outsiders; for violent conflicts to arise from such exclusions based on “class, race, religion, and nation” (and gender); and importantly, that the weak if organized can threaten the strong. Hobbes presented this view of human nature and concluded that without strong, top-down government “life is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” (Mounk, 2022, p. 47).

Yet, as James Surowiecki (2004) has recently shown, there is a compelling case for the contrary understanding, for the wisdom of crowds He argues that if certain processes or institutional conditions are present, rule by the People can be wise and in the common interest of society. The necessary conditions are: cognitive diversity; autonomous voting as opposed to voting the interests of a group or party; decentralized decision-making (creates space for “local knowledge”); and a method for aggregating the above that allows for an open-ended discussion reducing, ideally eliminating, group-think or “follow-the-leader” voting. In other words, without structures and faith in the wisdom of the people democracy is neither desirable nor possible!

Recently, Mansbridge and Macedo (2019) wrote a helpful piece in which they argue along the lines like the above. Their “core” understanding of all populism is that the People stand in sharp opposition to the Elites. Perhaps the thought is more accurately stated as the elites stand in sharp opposition to the interests of the people.

Above I differentiate left/good populism from right/bad Populism in my discussion of Thomas Frank (2020) with continuing discussion in several subsequent paragraphs. I also capitalize the initial letter of the key concept under consideration here, to distinguish historical Populism, as too often in my opinion understood; and that recommended by Rev. Barber, “populism.”

In several places Mansbridge and Macedo (2019) also acknowledge the presence and dangers of homogeneity, nationalism, and vilification of vulnerable persons and groups, as do I.
The focus on the need for public consultation in the Report discussed below directly addresses a key point Mansbridge and Macedo (2019) make. In our opinions, Bad Populism denigrates deliberation. My discussion of the Report being reviewed here commends it, but also criticizes impediments to fuller discussion and real debate overlooked by the Report’s authors. My references to the need for recognition of rights and due processes in the conclusion of this piece reinforce the value of and need for deliberation.

An addition and key notion, often overlooked, is that the losers of the vote or an election are convinced they have an “equal’ and realistic chance to win a not-to-distant vote or election of a similar nature; that is, an assurance of rotation in office” (Mounk, 2004, chap. 6).

It is these conditions that make a diverse democracy possible (Mounk, 2004, part three, p. 201 et seq.). One additional necessary condition, perhaps implicit, but separately very significant, is that people of dissimilar identities and views share common experiences and work together on common projects (New York Times, 2022).

These requirements point out a critical limitation of the otherwise very helpful, forward thinking Program for Public Consultation (PPC) report of July 2022. That Report addresses an essential need if the US is to have a viable, effective, diverse democracy. The need is that each and every person has an equal, effective way to have their voice heard. PPC proposes that each candidate and office holder make a pledge to consult with their constituents. It is important to remember that in a sense many supporters of both former President Donald Trump and Senator Bernie Sanders shared the feeling that their voices were either not being heard at all, or ignored by candidates and officials. The former President and the Senator favored fundamentally different procedural and policy responses to the valid complaints of their constituents.

As Edmund Burke famously wrote to his Bristol constituents in 1774: “Certainly, Gentlemen, it ought to be the happiness and glory of a representative to live in the strictest Union, the closest correspondence, and the most unreserved communication with his constituents…It is his duty…” (O’Brien, 1992, p.75) But, there was more, as we shall see shortly.

Late in 2021, the Program for Public Consultation conducted a detailed and in-depth opinion survey “seeking to discern the roots of dissatisfaction with government…and to explore approaches to mitigating such satisfaction…Most centrally, (PPC) sought to address the question of whether it would be politically feasible for a Congressional candidate to commit to using advanced forms of public consultation with representative samples of their constituents, to take those views into account and put a higher priority on them than those of their party’s leadership….A key question is how support for such a candidate would fare in the context of the kinds of attacks likely to arise in a campaign. Thus, respondents were asked to evaluate both strongly worded attacks and rebuttals, similar to a debate, and then to reevaluate the candidate.”

The people conducting the survey, The Program for Public Consultation, are a part of the School of Public Policy at the University of Maryland. The primary investigator was Steven Kull.

The major findings of the survey included:
widespread voter dissatisfaction with elected representatives’ responsiveness to the people. Large bipartisan majorities felt that officials were less responsive to the people than the founders intended; served special interests more than the common good; and, had little interest in or understanding of the public’s views. Thus they more often than not do not do what the public wants.

There is currently no adequate system by which the voice of the people can be heard. If there were such a system the common good could be found.

There was a readiness to vote for candidates who would use such a new tool for public consultation; willingness to do so increased such candidates' approval rating by several percentage points.

A majority of those surveyed said they would vote for such a candidate, if committed to seeking the best for the country, even if the candidate did not follow the constituent’s recommendations. (74% of Republicans, 79% of Democrats, and 64% of independents) (Kull, 2022, pp.3-4).

Prior history suggests that there are difficult questions to be asked. How would the PPC proposal work to insure that the people’s voice would be heard, and considered; and if not followed, such rejection would be explained and justified? PPC’s recommended method of public consultation is similar to a recommendation of Erich Fromm (1968) proposing the creation of a national council and a number of smaller face-to-face groups to formulate and send ideas to the national group. The purpose was to promote Fromm’s socialist-humanist goals (Friedman, 2014, p. 274). Similarly, but importantly also different, was the immediate post-first world war government in Germany. There the voices of the people that were heard were not randomly selected, but rather were in large part those of ideological factions, factions that threatened the streets (Nazis and Communists), and of disgruntled defeated soldiers and sailors (Weidemann 2018).

Both of these failed; one for an apparent apathy after the defeat of Eugene Mc Carthy’s presidential campaign in the US in 1968, the other from the obvious lack of randomness in the selection of participants.

The PPC process seems to overcome these defects. Its process involved a university that recruits “a large panel of several hundred citizens that is representative of the people in the district/state” (in terms of “gender, age, race, education, and political party affiliation”). The (citizen) panel will be consulted on key (pending) issues. On each issue the panel will be given a briefing, presented policy options Congress is considering, and asked to evaluate arguments for and against each option. Then they will be asked to make their recommendations.

Efforts will be made to “ensure that the briefing is accurate and balanced, and that the key arguments are fairly presented.” The official will be briefed on the recommendations of the panel, and may also talk to a few members to hear their thoughts in greater depth. The description of this process ends with a quoted response from a stereotypical elected official: “Naturally, in the end, I will need to make the final decision about how to vote. There are some issues I feel so strongly about and may go against the majority views in my district” (Kull, 2021, p. 10).

To return to Burke, he continued in his letter to his Bristol constituents: “…To represent Bristol, is a capital object of my pride…But his unbiased opinion, his mature judgment, his enlightened
conscience, he ought not sacrifice to you, to any man, or to any set of men living. These he does not derive from your pleasure, no, nor from the law and the Constitution. They are a trust from Providence... Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgement; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion” (O’Brien, 1992, p.75).

This process suggested in the Report would be a positive step towards giving people a voice in the policy process. However, it has both all the value and uncertainties of opinion surveys (Silver, 2015), and the weaknesses of experts’ silo-bound thinking. Further it is concerned only with formulating a single policy in the context of an identified problem, and an up or down vote on a limited number of specific, competing alternatives. Further, it would affect only the end of the policy adoption process, but none of the several earlier steps in the process identified below; or of the often critical implementation phase. Finally, it does not give enough weight to the dynamics between the community of people represented and the representative. Ideally, the representative should be more than a mere delegate from the district (the first part of the Burke quote) and less than the sovereign decision-maker (the second part of the Burke quote). Rather the representatives should think of themselves as holding their power in order to help constitute the communitarian dimensions of the lives of the people they represent (Schwartz, 1988).

Human self-interest is multi-dimensional. John Finnis has identified seven incommensurable, basic human goods (life, knowledge, play, aesthetics i.e., beauty, sociability i.e., friendship, practical reasoning, and religion) which each person processes in formulating their self-interest (Finnis, 2011, pp. 81-92). To further distinguish individual policy preferences from a binary policy choice, Finnis emphasizes the basic good of practical reasoning, which consists of nine requirements (choosing what to do; having an inherent plan of life, one’s “project”; no arbitrary preferences among values or persons; open-mindedness towards the relevant project; concern about consequences; respect for values implicated in every act; seek to advance the good of the community, i.e., for the common good; and to follow one’s conscience) (Finnis, 2011, pp. 100-133). However, they often appear to be, and probably are, incommensurable (Finnis, 2011, pp. 92-95).

William Domhoff has been studying and publishing on class and power at least since 1967. In Domhoff (1979) he identified four general processes through which economically and politically active members of society are able to influence the law and policy considered and adopted by the various governments in the United States. Despite his focus on the U.S. the process itself and the kinds of participants discussed should be suggestive of similar disparities of influence, power across governments.

The four inputs to policy formulation that Domhoff identified precede law making itself, and as said earlier, the only step in the process addressed by the PPC. The four inputs are 1) resources; 2) research; 3) decision making; and 4) opinion making. He also identified seven institutions exercising power within these dynamics a) persons of wealth; b) corporations; c) foundation; d) universities; e) policy planning groups; f) government commissions and g) the media (Domhoff, 1979, p.63).

President Eisenhower famously referred to the military-industrial complex in his 1991 Farewell Address (<archives.gov Presidential Address>). Domhoff identified four networks of similarly engaged and experienced people -- political, economic, religious and military. He points out that
in the political science literature, “movements” have been defined as “collective challenges to existing arrangements of power and distribution by people with common purposes and solidarity in sustained interaction with elites, opponents, and authorities.” He distinguishes “networks” as similar to, but both more passive and more permanent than, movements (Domhoff, 1979, pp. 169-200).

Along these same lines of thought, Linguistics, in the work of Roman Jakobson, identifies six perspectives to be considered in trying to understand communications: that of the addressee (intent); the addressed (the reader or listener, the interpreter); context; contact (the medium); the code (grammar, etc.); and the message itself (text) (Jakobson 2023). Similarly, in my experience, practicing lawyers and judges also deal with several perspectives (those of the plaintiff, defendant, judge/jury, appellate court(s), and conscience/God; if you prefer, Equity).

In other words, the nature of neither the World nor the Word is binary. I recall reading somewhere that Joseph Conrad apparently frequently wrote “No English word had clean edges (they are merely) instruments for exciting blurred emotions.” Power and text both require close attention to all their manifestations.

Thus, the positive recommendations of the PPC are best thought of as a flow contributing information from only one of the many tributaries that enter into the stream of policy making and implementation. There is much more to be considered if one wants to improve the quantity and quality of the policy process, or to extend the metaphor, the river’s flow. As Bowles and Gintis put it “popular sovereignty cannot be unitary...We take sovereignty as ultimately and irreducibly heterogeneous. In effect, democracy requires that both individuals and groups have trumps to play” (Bowles & Gintis, 1987, p. 4).

A new 2023 fifty page booklet with almost 40 photographs from the Populist era and 156 endnotes quotes Dr. King from a 1965 speech honoring Populism.: “The leaders of this movement began awakening the poor white masses and the former Negro slaves to the fact that they were being fleeced by the emerging Bourbon interests.” The Populists “began uniting the Negro and the white masses into a voting block that threatened to drive the Bourbon interests from the command posts of political power power.” In response, the ruling elite “made it a crime for Negroes and whites to come together as equals at any level. That crippled and eventually destroyed the Populist movement” (Babson, 2023, p.47).

Also recently, and very importantly, Reverend William Barber and Liz Theoharis, in their revival and updating of Dr. King’s Poor People's Campaign, have argued for “an alternative populist vision.” They point out that poor and low-wage people, earning less than $50,000 a year, are ready for a grass-roots movement that is focused on achieving the common good. Their Poor People’s Campaign has been successful involving such people into “a local vision of radical democracy.” They explain that “we need a movement, big and broad enough to capture the imagination of every-day people, and deliver (upward) policies that make life sustainable for them and their communities” (Barber & Theoharis, 2022).

Yes, again, the PPC proposals would empower people and strengthen the link between the grassroots and public officials and candidates. Yet, the proposal does not address the complexities of policy formulation, adoption and implementation. Thus, the singular focus on a sample of citizens, even a well-informed sample, does not begin to get at the multiple interests concerned
about and affected by policy choices. The inputs into all phases of the policy process need to be broadened, and the likely consequences of the policy on the people affected need to be considered.

Further, as Domoff has argued, the policy formation process is elliptical, both within and across networks. Two books have been published recently that illustrate this and can be viewed as case studies of the role of venture capital in the policy formation process as well as in the legislation adoption and administrative implementation processes – Jane Mayer (2016) and Sally Denton (2016). These books illustrate the multiplicity of interests involved in policy processes, and the obstacles to full participation by most of the people affected by the policies. They illustrate some of the reasons people feel correctly that officials do not even hear their voices, no less that they might actually do what people are hoping for. The effect of money in politics clearly diminishes the one person, one vote mythology, and creates a very unequal sufferance system (Piketty, 2022, pp. 103-116).

The Bechtel book is about one family which started with one machine in 1898 and built and continues to lead a huge privately held conglomerate. Despite their anti-government libertarian philosophy almost all of their business has been and is pursuant to government contacts. Thus, in an ironic way, they are effectively an agent of the government. Bechtel has mastered the governmental contract processes. It is not uncommon for the company to write the specifications for the proposed project, and in a way that precludes some or all of its competitors, even to the point of conceptualizing a project to fit within the legal guidelines for a no bid contract. They also have been able to benefit from a low bid on a cost plus contract; from a turn-key contract (a fixed fee where all the cost savings go to the contractor; use of the GOPO model (government owned, privately operated laboratories within the Department of Energy); and loan guarantee provisions as an upfront financing aid, being given access to classified information (Denton, 2017, p. 157).

Bechtel officials have served on government boards and commissions; they have funded think tanks; they dominate trade associations; they helped write the 1980 Republican Party platform on nuclear power; and they served on the Reagan transition team for the Department of Energy. They have funded private research through the Hoover Institute and Heritage Foundation among others. An earlier study of nuclear weapons referred to the military-industrial complex as operating as a ‘threat inflator’ to increase demand for its services and products (Denton, 2017, pp. 5-6).

Jane Mayer (2016) is focused on a different powerful family, the Koch brothers, and how they have created and operate a similar libertarian, anti-government network, which includes Mellon, Scaife, Cooks, Bradley, Olin, Templeton, and other family foundations.

Lewis Powell, corporate lawyer and President of the American Bar Association, when he was about to be nominated to the U.S. Supreme Court, wrote a plan supported by money from the Chamber of Commerce urging “guerilla warfare” by corporate America against what he referred to as “enemies. These included the college campus, the pulpit, the media, the intellectual and literary journals, the arts and sciences (and) politicians.” Powell proposed efforts to rewrite student textbooks and to control faculty hiring at universities (Mayer, 2016, p. 75).

Heritage Foundation, Manhattan Institute, the American Enterprise Institute, Acton Institute, Cato Institute, American Legislative Exchange Council, National Right to Work Committee, and more were part of these efforts. Almost $600 million to launch and amplify the voice of the corporate
elite: Google any of these groups or the 100+ organizations and universities sponsoring a similar agenda on the inside and back cover of Mayer’s book.

Efforts to transform the culture and public opinion generally, the positions of electoral candidates and the law are ubiquitous. Interestingly these groups “discovered (they) needed grassroots activists to sell ideas, not candidates.” To do this effectively they adopted the tactics of “Saul Alinsky, Gandhi, Martin Luther King” (p.160). These efforts include a grass-roots like movement strategy. Using “a fake populist movement secretly manipulated (and run) by corporate sponsors” in an effort to “sell the yarn that . . . housewives, farmers, small businessmen, professionals, wage earners – not big business organizations” were behind whatever corporate/libertarian idea was being promoted. As regards the use of “front” organizations, one of their minions acknowledged that their tax-exempt giving was a “shell game;” that philanthropy was preferable to paying taxes . . . if they didn’t give it to their causes, they would have to give it to the government. At least this way they control how it’s spent . . . It’s really another form of lobbying” (Mayer, 2016, pp.159-161).

A personal experience: during my forty years of law teaching I taught a course called “Law & Economics” several times. It applied microeconomic market theory, and rational choice theory to legal doctrine. I thought of it as a very valuable part of a lawyer’s training, in that it would illustrate how the strengths and weaknesses of the market (economic efficiency as the highest value) are in tension with the Law’s quest for equal Justice (Riker, 1983).

Little did I know about the following use of “dark money”:

The Olin Foundation’s most significant inroads to the law were established in America’s law schools, when it bankrolled a then new approach to jurisprudence known as Law and Economics. Powell, in his memo, had argued that “the judiciary may be the most important instrument for social, economic and political change.” The Olin Foundation agreed. As the courts expanded consumer, labor, and environmental rights and demanded racial and sexual equality, conservatives in business were anxious to find more legal leverage. Law and Economics became their tool.

As a discipline, Law and Economics was seen at first as a fringe theory embraced largely by libertarian mavericks until the Olin Foundation spent $68 million underwriting its growth. According to Mayer, Olin Foundation became an academic Johnny Appleseed. It underwrote 83 percent of the costs for all Law and Economics programs in American law schools between the years 1985 and 1989. Overall, it scattered more than $10 million to Harvard, $7 million to Yale and Chicago, and over $2 million to Columbia, Cornell, Georgetown, and the University of Virginia. The Olin Foundation was apparently paying students thousands of dollars to take classes in Law and Economics at some elite law schools, and to attend workshops on the subject at others. Despite this ethically dubious situation, only one law school, at the University of California in Los Angeles, turned the Olin funds away, arguing that by plying students with grant money, the foundation was “taking advantage of students’ financial need to indoctrinate them with a particular ideology” (Mayer, 2016, pp.107-110).

The above well-regarded books point to obstacles, even blockages in the flow of the tributaries (Domhoff’s steps 1 thru 4 in the policy process, above) into the stream of policy.
and law making and implementation. The flow of thought, interests and desires from the constituent to the official is blocked or distorted by the power of money, and other unequal resources (Piketty, 2022, p.9-15). To mix my metaphor, our systems of policy formation and implementation are sclerotic. Such influence, actually power, continues today, perhaps enhanced (Enrich, 2022).

As mentioned above, William Barber and Liz Theoharis write of “an alternative populist vision.” (Notice the lack of a capital letter to begin the word “populist.”) Certainly their populism is different from, but akin to, the Populists of the People’s Party of the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Postel, 2007). I am suggesting their vision is like the political-economic vision of those original Populists, minus their early nineteenth century, too often asserted beliefs in white supremacy and less often, anti-semitism. Neither prejudice is justified, nor easily forgiven today. Thus, for all of the good the Populists and People’s Party visions and work wrought, they in a sense failed themselves and us.

Today’s politics should remind us that it is important to remember that going forward with selective historical memories is an American mistake, too often encouraged. Both remembering the good, and repressing the bad historical memories is to distort, worse, to deny the truth of one’s collective experience. Racism, genocide towards indigenous peoples, and Hiroshima ought never be forgotten. They are necessary, humbling memories of choices that must be avoided as we struggle forward guided by the better angels of our being (Grinspan, 2021). Similarly, one ought not forget that there have been positive “renewed variations of populist politics with a small p” (Postel, 2007, p. 22).

Conclusion

Thomas Piketty identified two “main lessons’’ learned from his study of the history of equality and reading and study of the “new economic and social history” (Piketty, 2022, p. 9). One is that “inequality is first of all a social, historical, and political construction.” The second “is that there has been a long-term movement toward equality.” He points out that the progress was and is a result of both crises and political and social conflict and the development of alternatives to the then existing “inegalitarian institutions and established powers.” He emphasizes that “the task is not at all impossible, but it requires us to accept deliberation, the confrontation of conflicting points of view, compromises, and experimentation… and accept the fact that…the exact content of just institutions is not known a priori” (Piketty, 2022, pp. 10-12). In other words, ideas and institutions that encourage, support, even require, what Piketty suggests in the previous sentence!

If all of that is acknowledged, I believe that the way forward to a revived and strengthened democracy, to a moderate populism of, by and for The People is discernible. One person, one vote, truly of equal impact, ought to be the norm. That as the measure suggests doing away with the State winner-take-all distribution of Electoral College votes, ending partisan political gerrymandering, and ending the unequal and disproportionate influence of money in elections and policy determination, among other elements of the current Constitutional understanding.

The inspiration for this “…is the radical democratic tradition - the Seventeenth century
levelers and the eighteenth century sans culottes, the nineteenth century chartists and agrarian populists, and the twentieth century feminists and advocates of workers councils” (Bowles and Gintis, 1987, p.8; Thomas, 1983, p. 365). That inspiration and belief is supported and reinforced by the scholarship of Surowiecki (2004) and Finnis (2011) that the People have many interests, but they can be wise in making decisions; of A.O. Hirschman (1970) on the need for all to have a Voice that is heard (Axel Honneth, 1996, conceptualizes this as a need for recognition); of the very recent work of Piketty (2022); of the insights of Domhoff (1979) on the complexities of the policy formulation and implementation processes; of Miller (1967) on the politics of the authors of the Port Huron Statement about the essentialness of equal and effective participation in the entire political process; and of the Martin Luther King, Jr., vision of a society where all People’s needs and dreams can be met and achieved (King, 2016). Finally, the fate of the planet and humanity turns on acceptance of “indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge, and the teachings of plants” (Kimmerer, 2012).

Gordon Woods has argued that government in America began as a colonial monarchy (order and hierarchy as primary values), evolved into a republic (virtue or public spiritedness and liberty as prime values), and then became a democracy (self-interest and equality as prime values). Importantly, today democracy includes dynamic forces reflecting all three (Woods, 1992). Just what it will evolve into cannot be known, but a populist-heterogeneous democracy depends in large part on the ability of people to understand first, and then effectively pursue, participatory opportunities in all decisions of governance: that is, to have their voices heard clearly, then weighed fairly, throughout a binding, but effective decision-making processes. In other words, a democracy with bannisters, i.e., norms, and rights (natural, political, economic and social).

However it evolves, Sandburg is correct in his bold assertion “The People, Yes.” It is the soundest foundation for our diverse democracy.

This essay should and will end as Sandburg’s poem ends; from section 107, the final section of the poem framing this essay (Sandburg (1936):

**Where to? what next?**

Nevins quotes Sandburg acknowledging that his prose poem is an ”affirmation of swarming and brawling Democracy” (Nevins, 1991 p.504).

CODA - Four thoughts. One, this argument for a new populism is not as extreme as it might at first seem to some. It has long been recognized that all government rests on the opinion of the people being governed (Madison, Federalist No. 49). But also, importantly, populism is not inconsistent with constitutionalism; at least the “living” kind, supported by Madison (Lacroix, 2022). It is important to remember that “equal protection of the laws” is a fundamental “right.” However, rights unavailable to all people within the society are not properly understood as “rights.” Rather they are mere “privileges” of some limited number of people (Moyn, 2018).

Two, a popular history, with references, contextualizes populism in the history of the U.S.
from before the Revolution until the 90s (Stock, (1996). And a recent issue of the Boston Review newsletter of October 12, 2022 has a comprehensive review by Alberto Polimeni (2022) of the theoretical arguments of Jan-Werner Muller (2017) expressing a deep skepticism about populism, with contemporary references.

Three, Highly regarded scholar William A. Galston argues in a recent book that Populism is a ”threat to liberal democracy” essentially for two reasons: It is “anti-pluralism” and also “anti-elitist.” My conclusion and Coda recognizes and addresses these important concerns. His very brief discussions of the republican principle, democracy, constitutionalism, and liberalism (liberal vs. illiberal) are helpful in keeping the debate focused and joined. Most significantly, populism is neither anti - elitist, nor anti - pluralistic. People are properly concerned that the experience of “elites” distances them from the lived experience of the “hoi polloi.” In the business world the boss can fire people. In politics there is no boss of other elected officials (there is a boss in each bureaucracy, but with very limited powers to fire).

And too many candidates step up, without any real experience in a democratic environment. In other words there is too often no training program in democratic decision-making and governance.

As regards pluralism, it seems clear that even, maybe especially, Thomas Watson recognized that there was a multiplicity of valid interests in the society. That is why elections, a free press, and autonomous organizations are all essential for democracy (Woodward, 1938, chap. xiii).

There is also a reference to the important critique of Populism by Christopher Lasch; the book also includes a valuable Bibliographical Essay.

Lasch criticizes the views of both Hofstadter, that Populism was a nostalgia wish about the good old days, and Goodwyn, who saw it as a genuine reform movement, based on a ”clear understanding” of the actual political and economic situation they were experiencing; as well as Right-wing Populism and the Revolt against Liberalism (Lasch part II).

Four, Efforts to strengthen the democracies of individual nation-states tend to exclude from “the People” people from the larger world beyond that nation’s borders. The unequal distribution of resources and opportunities requires an awareness of the “justice gap” this reflects (Moyn, 2018, e.g., p.45). The climate crisis has forced the entire planet to recognize our mutual dependence and that national policies affect people beyond its borders. How can we give voice to those people affected? That is a challenge that must be met. Because a truly ethnically diverse democracy like that this essay addresses has within it voices that have a real awareness of and connection to other countries, we have the beginnings of how to answer that question.

Five, A final thought for contextualizing this essay. Jacques Maritain, a leading Catholic philosopher of the last century, known as “gentle Jacques” and as “the soul of discretion, politeness and deference (who) disliked noisy crowds, argumentative confrontations and
violent disruption” considered Saul Alinsky (see Horwitt, 1989) “as one of two authentic revolutionaries of modern times (the other was Eduardo Frei, a former President of Chile) and one of his closest friends.” In his last known letter to Alinsky, Maritain wrote:

Dear Saul…You know I am with you with all my heart and soul. Pray for me, Saul. And God bless you! To you the fervent admiration and the abiding love… Old Jacques (Doering, 1994, p.112).
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