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Popular Republicanism versus Populism: Articulating the People

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Abstract: In problematic ways, populism has become a catch-all formula used with discretion to capture all kinds of discontent with democratic politics today. Populism is not only an essentially contested, but also an unavoidably blurred concept. Its recurrent use as a weapon to discredit all kinds of projects that challenge contemporary liberal democracies has led to a situation in which protest movements that aim at democratic renewal end up being conflated with opposite tendencies whose objective is a reactionary scaling down of democracy. Against this background, this article argues that both for political and for analytical purposes, the key point for distinguishing between "progressive" and "regressive" projects that address the crisis of democracy is to determine how such projects conceive of the identity of the people. Invoking the people is not per se an attribute of populism, but ultimately a feature of all kinds of democratic politics. What does make for a critical difference, though, is how peoplehood is articulated in the process of collective mobilization. The distinction becomes particularly relevant with regard to current debates on how to tackle the issue of diversity and democratic integration in Europe and North America. To substantiate this relevance, the article introduces the concept of popular republicanism, which is fleshed out by discussing two recent examples: Catalan sovereignism and the Kurdish-Turkish HDP.

Keywords: people; populism; popular republicanism; sovereignty; independentism; Catalonia; Spain; HDP; Kurds; Turkey

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1. Introduction: Populism as a Conceptual Issue

Through the last three decades, Western-type democracies seem to have undergone deep political transformations, which, according to the bulk of scholarly literature, are intrinsically connected to the rise of populist politics. The apparent "explosion" (Judis 2016) of populism in the North Atlantic area has been accompanied by a steep increase of academic interest in the phenomenon, which has ultimately given rise to a genuine industry run by political scientists, sociologists, historians, and philosophers, who all write on populism.[1] The use of the term has become inflationary in public as in scholarly debates. Interestingly enough, this inflation has no correspondence in the self-categorization of the very actors who are classified as populists. This may be so because, at any rate in the Western context, populism has rather pejorative connotations. While Googling "populism" or "populist" produces millions of hits, these often describe populism as a threat, a danger, or a virus.

It seems difficult to make do without the concept, as it does capture a set of actors—parties, movements, leaders—that in a particular way give expression to the growing malaise of liberal democracy in Europe, North America, and many other parts of the world. As I will argue in this article, however, we should be more careful in our use of the term, as it is questionable to file all discontent with the current state of democracy under the category "populism". The importance of differentiating between populist and non-populist responses to the crisis of democratic politics becomes even more patent once we take into consideration that populism is an "essentially contested concept", as two

prominent scholars in the field succinctly put it (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, p. 2). In my view, this contestation takes place along two major lines, which intersect, but still point in clearly different analytic directions:

- The first line relates to the growing variety of approaches that political scientists adopt when it comes to classifying the phenomenon. This is a vast area. However, it can be argued that it is dominated by two strands. Whereas for one strand, populism is an ideology, the other strand sees populism primarily as a political style or strategy that may be used discretionally for attaining or maintaining power (De la Torre 2017, pp. 25–34; Puhle 2015).
- The second line is drawn by the different normative predispositions towards a phenomenon that has disrupted "normal" politics, sometimes pushing political stability in what used to be consolidated democracies to critical limits. According to the dominant liberal view, which also features prominently in scholarly discussions (Müller 2016; Urbinati 2019), there is not much to be rescued from populism if we want to find a way out of the current democratic malaise. Opposed to this approach, we find a smaller but still substantial portion of scholars who rather hold that populism is a corrective to democracy (von Beyme 2018). Some go even further and claim that a populist moment is at the very heart of modern mass politics; they thus regard a progressive populism as the cure that our sclerotic democracies badly need (Laclau 2005; Mouffe 2018).

The focus scholars adopt when they tackle populism tends to intermingle with their political preferences, even when these remain implicit. The overlap of analytic purposes and normative concerns renders the use of an already over-stretched category even more problematic. Populism has become a catch-all label for all types of dissatisfaction with contemporary democracies.

It seems impossible to present an analysis of the stress symptoms of these democracies without recurring to the concept. Nonetheless, I think that the very overlap of analytic interests and normative concerns has led to a more and more questionable use of it. Populism has become a formula used indiscriminately to describe whatever is considered to be a deviation from the standard of normal democratic politics. Populists thus ventilate a protest *against* the institutional frames of all types of democracy, a protest of the right, the left (and, sometimes, the center) in East and West, North and South, a protest *against* the political establishment, of course, which may also be a protest *against* globalization, *against* immigration, *against* the disempowerment of the citizenry, *against* parliamentary democracy, as well as *against* economic inequality. We are thereby facing a wide range of causes triggering protest, the common denominator of which seems to be their *negative* character. In contrast, there is only one *positive* reference point that regularly appears on the varying political agendas of allegedly populist actors. It is the invocation of the people with the purpose of rescuing a democracy hijacked by the political establishment. Significantly enough, to point at the invocation of the people as the hallmark of populism is an exercise bordering the tautological; at any rate, it does not help much when it comes to sharpening the concept's analytic edge. Even worse, it implies the risk of conflating protest movements that aim at democratic renewal with opposite tendencies whose objective is a reactionary scaling down of democracy.

Populism is not just a contested concept. It is recurrently used as a rhetorical weapon in day-to-day politics, as a *Kampfbegriff*, as it is put in German. Its ubiquity in the language employed to classify all kind of phenomena that challenge the "normal" course of politics makes it difficult to discriminate between "regressive" and "progressive" answers to the disfunctions of institutionalized normality. To put in other words: Populism should rather be seen as a symptom than as a cause of the crisis of Western-style democracy. However, the diagnosis of the symptoms observable in populist leaders such as Marine Le Pen, Viktor Orbán, and Donald Trump leads to results that cannot at all be extrapolated to representatives of left "populisms", or other movements that act in the name of "the

people", yet envisage a collective subject that radically differs from the exclusionary nationalism that has become notorious among the right in France, Hungary, or the US.

In the following pages, I want to substantiate my reservations against the overstretching of the concept of populism for basically two reasons. On the one hand, I want to contribute to disaggregating the manifold phenomena that are being subsumed under the term "populism" into more fine-grained categories, in order to better understand the dynamics at work in a political field where contesting the prevalent definition of concepts is a quintessential aspect of conflict itself. On the other hand, I aim to point at new forms of challenging the boundaries drawn around the field of what is traditionally considered to be legitimate politics, and to show how such challenging does not necessarily endanger the foundations of democracy, but may rather democratize these very foundations, thereby democratizing democracy itself. With these intentions in mind, I will proceed in three steps. First, I will show why and how the issue of diversity is the keystone for assessing approaches to sovereign peoplehood. Second, I will introduce the concept of *popular republicanism* to classify political actors who focus on the issue of democratic sovereignty—which may make for overlaps of their rhetoric with the rhetoric of populists, yet do so in a way that is pluralist and diversity-sensitive, and thereby clearly non-populist. Third, I will illustrate my argumentation by referring to two concrete cases: Catalan sovereignism and the HDP (Peoples' Democratic Party) in Turkey.

2. Contested Peoplehood

Pointing out that "the people" is the core category of populist politics is hardly more than a truism. At the same time, the very ubiquity of the people not only in populist, but in all kind of democratic discourses requires that we carefully scrutinize the attributes different political actors assign to the central collective subject of democracy. It is no coincidence that addressing the issue of peoplehood typically entails a complex blending of analytic purposes and normative assumptions. To a great extent, coming to grips with the identity of the people involves problems that are quite similar to assessing the role of populism in democratic politics.

A most pertinent point of departure for assessing these problems is the paradox of sovereignty, which has remained one of the most intractable problems of modern democratic thought since its very beginning (Dahl 1989, p. 116). The paradox reflects the logical and material impossibility of constituting the very subject of democratic sovereignty by democratic means. Democratic rule is based on the idea that sovereignty derives from the people, as Abraham Lincoln put it in 1863 in his Gettysburg Address, where he famously defined democracy as "government of the people, for the people, by the people". Yet, while telling us that the people are the key democratic agent, Lincoln's formula does not tell us how the people is to be identified. Even worse: wherever we look back into the formative history of "real" democracies and "real" peoples, we run into the problem that the roots of a democratic polity inevitably date back to a pre-democratic past. The polity's founding thereby lacks democratic legitimacy. This also applies to the US democracy summoned by Lincoln, whose people neither included first nations, nor Afro-Americans or women. In his *Du contrat social*, Rousseau ([1762] 1998, pp. 87–89) presents a first discussion of the paradox. Since then, the paradox has been haunting the work of democratic theorists, remaining a notorious blind spot of normative and empirical political science, as I have argued elsewhere (Kraus 2008, pp. 29–32; 2015a, pp. 38–42).

In the realm of *Realpolitik*, the paradox was less an issue of normative concern than a practical challenge. State- and nation-builders typically circumvented the challenge by amalgamating the identity of the people and the identity of the nation-state. The nation-state became the one and ultimate source of legitimate political authority: In a discrete domain of peoplehood defined by monist criteria, the notion of *national* sovereignty represented the bond between "one" people and "their" state. In this regard, it plays a secondary role whether the bond is constituted on the basis of political voluntarism—the "French" pattern of framing the nation—or, on the basis of cultural or ethnic affinity—the

"German" pattern.[2] In both versions of nationalism, peoplehood is understood in a monist way, by taking for granted the existence of a uniform collective identity sustaining the democratic exercise of sovereign power.

One cannot say that modern democratic theory has completely ignored the paradox of sovereignty. However, it has generally taken the identity of the people for granted in terms that are not that different from the matter-of-fact approach adopted by Lincoln. For those who endorse the minimalist or "realist" view of democracy advocated by Schumpeter ([1942] 2008) or Downs (1957), the identity of the people, or, to put it more technically, the issue of "input-oriented legitimization" (Scharpf 1999, pp. 7–10) is not a matter of much concern anyway. Minimalists tend to reduce democracy to the process of elite competition, elite alternation, and to the regular electoral evaluation of the output of top-down policy-making. The people thus only exists as an aggregate effect of myriads of individual choices, which end up constituting the "median voter". For this median voter, one may conclude, the issue of the collective links between her and her fellow-citizens is hardly more than a matter of providing equal access to the market of political goods.

Adopting such a strategy for getting rid of the people in the design of elegant and simple theoretical models has not helped to get rid of populism. Neither does it help to come to terms with what is at stake in populist politics. Fortunately, contemporary democratic theory has also produced attempts at tackling the consequences of the paradox of sovereign peoplehood that are sociologically and normatively more ambitious. As Paulina Ochoa Espejo (2017, pp. 612–16) persuasively argues, these attempts follow basically two major avenues when it comes to identifying the people.

In the first avenue, which Ochoa Espejo (2017, p. 612) calls the "hypothetical" account, the people is seen as an abstract ideal, as a guiding principle of democratic decision-making that can never be realized in material terms. In this account, the people is not a sociological entity, but "a counterfactual idealization that allows us to evaluate the legitimacy of norms" (Ochoa Espejo 2017, p. 614). This counterfactual is an indeterminate abstraction, universal and unbounded. The hypothetical view, with Jürgen Habermas as one of its main exponents,[3] has attained substantial support among liberal constitutionalists and deliberative democrats on both sides of the Atlantic. At first sight, pushing democracy in a deliberative direction may seem a good recipe against succumbing to populist temptations. However, the approach bears the risk of de-politicizing the key democratic task of constituting (in the proper sense of an activity) the people. It may thus involve a constitutional paternalism that ultimately triggers populist (as well as non-populist) mobilizations that demand the very empowerment of a deliberatively "pacified" people.

The second avenue is conceiving of the people as a process. Ochoa Espejo (2017, p. 613) calls this the "historical" account. Due to the populist turn of the last decades, this account is having a strong impact in the world of real politics. Its focus is on the people as the "real" collective subject of a particular historical trajectory, on which this subject is present both as a unified category and as an open project. This openness indicates that acknowledging historicity must not be confused with nationalist essentialism. If we apply a processual approach, we pay tribute to the notion of the people as a malleable and changing identity. In this respect, the historical account clearly departs from the homogenizing imageries of both Jacobinism and ethno-nationalism. Actually, the processual and dynamic view is well compatible with a self-limiting understanding of who we are as the people. While it is more open towards collective participation than the deliberative perspective, it is still aware of the illiberal dangers of reducing democracy to self-rule by a majority and operates with notions of peoplehood that, while being inclusive, are also respectful of minority concerns. From the angle of democratic praxis, the processual view is therefore preferable to the hypothetical account.

Once we are prepared to accept that offering a historical, process-based account of peoplehood may be an elementary aspect of democratic politics, it follows that the key criterion for assessing—both normatively *and* empirically—political projects using the rhetoric of the popular cannot be if "the people" is invoked or not. The key point is to

determine on which grounds and how it is invoked. Going one step further, we might even venture that the problem that for the before-mentioned political sociologists Germani and Di Tella, who also were highly prominent representatives of modernization theory in Latin America, lies at the origin of populist politics in the South—i.e., the lack of structuration of countries such as Argentina along clear-cut cleavages, the lack of "given", encompassing socio-economic and socio-cultural identities—is just a particular version of the paradox of constituting the democratic sovereign. At any rate, this would be the conclusion to be drawn according to the theoretical effort of the late Ernesto Laclau, who would become the most innovative exponent of the "Argentinian" approach to the study of populism. For Laclau (2005), constituting and re-constituting the people stands at the center of the process of articulating the political. This approach may ultimately imply an excessive ennobling of the populist cause. Nevertheless, it has served as a timely and sorely needed reminder to the adepts of the all-too-often self-indulging discourse of democratic "stability" that conflicts over the identity of the people should not be considered an anomaly, but rather occupy—be it in latent or in manifest ways—the front stage of democratic politics.

Why are the previous reflections on peoplehood and democracy relevant for the current debates on how to identify populism? To put it straightforwardly: From the processual perspective, the key point for assessing if a collective actor is populist or not is not *whether* it uses the category of the people (and related categories) to mobilize support, but *how* it constructs and uses this category. The bulk of the forces that are generally associated with the right-wing populist "mainstream" appeal to the people as a historically given, unalterable, homogeneous, and closed category. They do so in a way that places a putative "pure" majority of the people against ethnic and cultural outsiders, foremost immigrants and refugees, and against allegedly illegitimate external forces, be it the European Union or other international political regimes. Outspoken advocacy of ethnocentric closure appears to be the most characteristic common hallmark of right-wing populisms both in Europe and in North America. In Europe, populist parties of the right all share anti-immigration positions, which are frequently combined with a Euro-skepticism bordering Euro-hostility, as the examples of the *Alternative für Deutschland*, the French *Rassemblement National*, the Italian *Lega*, the *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs*, and Viktor Orbán's *Fidesz*, to name but a few, all show (Decker et al. 2015; Judis 2016; Kriesi 2014; Stanley 2017; Taggart 2017). In the case of Trumpism in the US, nativism features highly as well, while the blunt apology of great power unilateralism replaces the Euro-skeptic stance (Kaufmann 2019, pp. 115–36; Norris and Inglehart 2019). The rise of right-wing populism has entailed a forceful revitalization of notions of peoplehood intimately connected to majority nationalism on both sides of the Atlantic. These notions tend to be built on essentializing views of an "organically" given collective identity, on the longing for homogeneity, and on the assertion of a "heartland" (Taggart 2000, pp. 91–98) to be resurrected from the ashes of a fading modernity.

While such notions claim to be deeply anchored in a people's past, they must not be confused with processual historical accounts of peoplehood, but actually are the very opposite of these with regard to purpose and method. Process-based accounts offer an open reading of peoplehood, in which the concept of the people represents a conflictual and changeable reality. They thereby embrace diversity and hybridity as central elements of the process of constituting a people. Applying the same kind of logic, it is simply misleading to apply the populist label evenly to Donald Trump and to Bernie Sanders, to the *United Kingdom Independence Party* and to *Podemos* in Spain, to the *Sweden Democrats* and to *Syriza* in Greece. While it is true that all these actors enter the political stage in the name of the people, they do so by addressing radically different collective subjects. I will take up this point in the section of this article that tries to substantiate the usefulness of a conceptual alternative to populism, which I call popular republicanism, by looking at two concrete empirical cases, which frequently are (mis)labeled as "populist" as well, namely, sovereignism in Catalonia and the Kurdish-Turkish HDP.

Before discussing this conceptual alternative to populism, I want to point out one aspect of historical accounts that deserves further elaboration. As I have argued in the previous paragraphs, a critical parameter for contrasting different history-based accounts of peoplehood is their positioning vis-à-vis diversity and pluralism. Typically, the mistrust of diversity goes hand in hand with a static and essentializing view of the people's identity. However, even when a group adopts an open and processual understanding of who it is, this openness may have limits: While a people-as-a-nation may be prepared to discuss different approaches to its identity—which may be more "civic" or more "cultural", more "cosmopolitan" or more "communitarian", to mention the usual main suspects—and endorse the collective self-limitations stemming from human rights and minority protection principles, it may still reject the idea that the existence of one national identity common to all citizens becomes a matter subject to political contestation. This takes us back to the paradox of sovereignty: To put it in the terms introduced above, the people as a process offers a partial answer to the challenge of constructing the people through democratic means. However, where does the historical trajectory of construction start? Then what happens in cases where there is more than one possible trajectory (or narrative) at hand for deciding who the sovereign people shall be? These are not abstract academic questions, but questions that are intensely debated in a great number of democratic—or allegedly democratic—countries today, from Canada to Chile, from the UK to Spain, from Turkey to India.

Against this background, I think that it makes sense to make a decisive additional step which pushes the historical account beyond the sheer admitting of its historicity. This requires that we distinguish between three different approaches to peoplehood in its relation with historicity. The first approach, *monist essentialism*, is to take the people as a given, to de-historicize and to naturalize its existence, as populists are inclined to do. The second approach highlights the importance of processuality and contestation in the field of constituting and reproducing peoplehood. In spite of including an element of contingency in the process of people-making, however, the approach remains committed to framing the people as one integrated ("national") whole. We could therefore speak of *monist pluralism*, a term that is less oxymoronic than it may seem at first sight. The third approach, which I will elaborate on in the following pages, implies a critical additional move by conceding that there may well be parallel alternative trajectories of becoming the people—trajectories not only in conflict with each other, but contested internally as well. The paradox of sovereignty would thereby not be resolved, but become embedded in a politics prepared to accept that democracy cannot be insulated from the dialectic of constructing and deconstructing peoplehood, but ultimately means a complex and sometimes conflictual interlocking of different historicities and geographies of people-making. This is the approach of *collective pluralism*.

3. Popular Republicanism: A Sketch

Let me briefly recapitulate the argument thus far: I am focusing on the role of the people in the articulation of political projects that challenge the democratic status quo. The approach actors adopt when they invoke the people varies critically according to the qualities attributed to the subject that is addressed as the people. The subject may be conceived of as a culturally or ethnically fixed and closed body, impermeable to its outside. Alternatively, it may be understood as a historically framed "project identity" (Castells 2010, pp. 10–11). Although the project may envisage the construction of a unified entity, the "formation of a national-popular collective will", to use the language of Gramsci (1973, p. 7), such will reflects an open political dynamic. It is an entity made of diversity. Typically, these substantial differences when it comes to constructing the people are used in the literature to draw the dividing line between populisms of the left and of the right (Judis 2016, pp. 123–24; Mouffe 2018, pp. 59–78; Ivaldi et al. 2017, pp. 361–62).

It is not my intention here to question the usefulness of the left populism category per se. My suggestion rather is to apply the category populism primarily to those movements—

be it on the left or on the right—that invoke the people and democracy for illiberal purposes, thereby undermining the basic principles of constitutionalism and the rule of law, and, in particular, the protection of the rights of minorities. These may include cases allegedly on the left, such as *Chavismo* in Venezuela, or Peru under the presidency of Ollanta Humala. However, I am skeptical with regard to the classification of groups such as *Podemos*, *Syriza*, or Sanders' supporters in the US Democratic Party as populist. That populists claim to act on behalf of the people must not prompt us to the conclusion that all parties recurring to this kind of rhetoric should be labeled as populists. For the reasons outlined in the previous section of this article, I have serious doubts that the term "populist" adequately captures those groups that subscribe to the "people as process" view. Accepting an open and inclusive historical account as a narrative frame for establishing bonds between diverse citizens is the very contrary of what the high priests of populist politics in government or in opposition—be it Trump, Orbán, or Le Pen—do.

My interest in proposing a new category for classifying a set of groups that are frequently characterized as populist is triggered by a combination of analytic and normative concerns. On the one hand, its "inflationary use" (Puhle 2020, p. 8) is turning populism into an all but void concept, which is used at discretion to denounce phenomena that challenge the taken-for-granted normality as defined by the liberal-democratic mainstream. Subsuming all kinds of groups under a primarily negative category, however, does not look like a fruitful strategy for offering practical orientation on a changing political map. On the other hand, the indiscriminate use of the term "populist" both for exclusionary and for open accounts of collective identity-building contributes to a normative relativism that I find highly problematic, unless one wants to make the point that everything that threatens the status quo is a danger for democracy. What sense would it otherwise make to classify regressive and progressive projects as members of the same political species? Under such circumstances, looking for fresh concepts is not a mere exercise in classifying for the sake of classification, but rather an attempt at finding tools that allow us a better interpretation of political reality. What could such a concept be in the field we are dealing with here?

A good starting point is a comparative study of the movement of the squares, in which Paolo Gerbaudo (2017, p. 10) introduces the concept of *citizenism*, which he defines as "a progressive version of the populist turn . . . in contemporary politics". According to his empirically grounded assessment, the main difference between citizenism and standard forms of populism is the former's strong libertarian or neo-anarchist thrust. In addition, as the very label suggests, its primary addressee is the citizenry, not the people. Gerbaudo (2017, pp. 17–18) assigns digital culture a pivotal role in the making of citizenist movements, as the generalized access to digital media promotes horizontal communication among activists and limits the role of leaders. In a nutshell, citizenism thereby connects the logic of participatory action to the logic of mass mobilization, blending a micro-democratic praxis with macro-democratic objectives (Gerbaudo 2017, p. 87).

The citizenism approach has the virtue of delineating a conceptual space that is not adequately captured by calling it populist. Nonetheless, its empirical focus may be somewhat narrow. The characterization of citizenism offered by Gerbaudo (2017, p. 103) has an anarcho-populist bias: "citizenism is a libertarian populism". Citizenism places great emphasis on horizontality, an emphasis that Gerbaudo regards as neo-anarchist; at the same time, citizenist mobilizations articulate demands for sovereignty, demands that for Gerbaudo have populist roots. The problem with this definition is that horizontality is not only an attribute of anarchists, but is present in grassroot movements of all kinds. Similarly, describing the quest for sovereignty as populist ignores the manifold faces of sovereignist claims in modern democratic politics. In the light of the processual approaches discussed above, the focus on sovereignty is *not* an exclusive feature of populist politics. Achieving sovereignty is an objective that also figures highly in genuinely democratic (i.e., non-populist) mobilizations. Without denying the usefulness of the concept of citizenism, I therefore propose an alternative concept. Its purpose is the characterization of those groups and parties that challenge the political establishment on democratic grounds by invoking

the figures of the sovereign people and of popular sovereignty, yet do so by recurring to dynamic, open, and inclusive notions of peoplehood. The category I put forward for describing these groups is *popular republicanism*. What is popular republicanism about?

The cornerstone of popular-republican mobilizations is the articulation of a counter-hegemonic identity which challenges the established frame of politics by appealing to the people. Such mobilizations adopt two main forms, which may interlock in practice, but nonetheless operate at two different levels of democratic politics. A *first* version of popular republicanism aims at the empowerment of the citizens-as-the-people in order to break up the oligarchic tendencies of present-day liberal democracies. Movements as the movement of the squares, Occupy, the Spanish *indignados*, but also the French *gilets jaunes* are all cases in point of such spontaneous, organizationally loose, horizontal protest.[4] It is true that they challenge the establishment in the name of the people and its sovereignty, as populists do. However, whereas populists see the people as a prefabricated and unalterable collectivity—the "heartland", the "true", "decent", or "normal" native majority, the ethnic nation—popular republicans envisage peoplehood as a horizontally open project that aims at rearticulating sovereignty from below. In this context, we may speak of *civic sovereignty*. This understanding of sovereignty overlaps with what I have characterized as the second approach to peoplehood, which focuses on rescuing the popular will from its monopolization by elite politics.

The second form of popular republicanism does not only reflect concern about the vanishing of the people's will in a context of technocratic decision making. It goes one step further and questions the foundations of sovereignty in a given polity as well. Typically, this involves claiming the right to transform the structures of an established state through the use of democratic mechanisms. What is at stake, therefore, is the very relationship of sovereignty, freedom, and democracy, which ultimately becomes an issue that has not been constitutionally settled at a particular historical point, but has to be reassessed and renegotiated in an open democratic process (Tully 1995). While populists essentialize the bases of sovereign peoplehood, popular republicans turn these very bases into a matter of contest. The sovereignty they claim is a *constituent sovereignty*. The quest for constituent sovereignty is closely connected with collective pluralism, the third approach to articulating the people, as it is directed against the freezing of a particular historical trajectory into the political master-narrative everybody has to accept to be entitled to act legitimately as a citizen.

The two sovereignties—civic and constituent—are not the sovereignties of populists; they rather link the people as a historical, "given" category to the people as an open project. This responds to a view of politics based on the "popular". What does the second, the republican, component of the concept "popular republicanism" point at? It indicates that a key motive in both civic and constituent views of sovereignty is non-domination. Non-domination—understood as the absence of an arbitrary use of power—also is the central concern in modern republican thought, from Machiavelli (2008) to Pettit (1997). This convergence justifies speaking of republicanism in the empirical context I am discussing. Let me stress, however, that my use of the term is utterly pragmatic. I definitely would not want to give rise to the suspicion that I derive real-world political phenomena from abstract theoretical concepts, thereby conflating normative ideas and empirical observations in an ad hoc political analysis driven by wishful thinking. For this very reason, I think it is crucial to qualify the republicanism I am referring to as popular. The concrete cases I have in mind did not enter the political stage as a result of debates among political theorists. Nonetheless, the prominence of non-domination in the respective political discourses is striking. In civic sovereignism, as represented by the Spanish *indignados* or the French *gilets jaunes*, domination is experienced as a result of the monopolization of public policy making by government technocrats and those who control the market. For constituent sovereignists, as Catalan republicans or the groups assembling in the Turkish-Kurdish HDP, domination is primarily a consequence of being a structural minority. Such status entails the lack of effective means for altering the rules of a game that institutionally privileges the identity of

the majority nation against rivaling historical identities. Structural minorities are therefore prone to regarding the notions of freedom and self-determination as a link between civic and constituent sovereignty. However, this rarely happens on the basis of a theoretically informed republican discourse. Popular republicans rather rely on the symbolic frame of the local political culture as their ideological template for challenging a relationship between different historical collectivities based on inequality of status.

4. Popular Republicanism and the People: Two Examples

To illustrate my critique of the overuse of populism in the literature dealing with the current challenges to which liberal-democratic mainstream politics is exposed, and to substantiate the usefulness of popular republicanism as a concept better apt to grasp an important segment of these challenges, I will focus on Catalan sovereignism and the Kurdish-Turkish HDP. Both cases show how not only political adversaries, but also media pundits and academic scholars have been eager to employ the p-word in ways that rather limit our understanding of the respective cases, instead of informing us about their causes and dynamic. There is no space here to offer an in-depth analysis of the complex conflicts between Catalans and Kurds, on the one side, and the Spanish and Turkish state, on the other.[5] Neither can I present a systematic comparison of the manifold ideological facets and organizational bases of Catalan sovereignist actors and the HDP. What the following pages offer, rather, is an interpretation of the two cases in a popular-republican key. This interpretation will therefore concentrate on the central aspects of popular republicanism as discussed above: the way the people is conceived of, and the meaning given to sovereignty.

In autumn 2017, Catalonia was at the forefront of international attention due to the crisis caused by the celebration of a unilateral referendum on independence on 1 October. The crisis culminated in the suspension of autonomy and the imprisonment of secessionist leaders. At present, regional autonomy has been reinstalled, but the conflict is far from being resolved. Holding a referendum on independence was the primary goal of Catalan sovereignists after the reform of the region's autonomy statute was aborted by a ruling of Spain's Constitutional Court in 2010. It is important to note that sovereignism in Catalonia means supporting such a referendum as an instrument of conflict management, thereby acknowledging that Catalonia has the right to become independent. On the one hand, this does not necessarily always involve support for independence, so that sovereignism has an ampler political basis than independentism *tout court*. Thus, the *Comuns*, who are the Catalan allies of *Podemos* in Spanish politics, and whose most prominent member probably is Barcelona's mayor Ada Colau, have an important sovereignist wing. On the other hand, independentism is clearly the dominant voice in sovereignism.

Catalan sovereignism has recurrently been interpreted as one of the manifestations of the populist syndrome haunting European politics. This has especially been the approach adopted by politicians and media representing the Spanish side in the conflict. Since 2017, however, there has also been an increasing number of academic publications in which the politics leading to the independence referendum in 2017 are analyzed as an example of populism or populist nationalism (Burgaya 2020; de las Heras-Pedrosa et al. 2020; Hedetoft 2020, pp. 99–112; Martínez González 2019; Ruiz Casado 2019; Zarzalejos 2018). Some of these contributions confirm the concerns raised at the beginning of this article. They basically use populism as a category for denouncing the independentist cause, thereby blurring the line between a *Kampfbegriff* and an analytic concept in a way that does not produce particularly enlightening insights. However, even those who employ the concept with more sober intentions do not put much effort into clarifying why they consider sovereignism the Catalan version of European populism.

Although not referring explicitly to Catalonia, Paul Taggart (2017, p. 253), in an overview of populism in Western Europe, points out that actors who "use sub-regional identities as a way of framing a wider rejection of politics" have to be sharply distinguished from those who "reject political structures because of their assertion of alternative identities". Catalan independentism is an example of such an assertion and therefore has to be

clearly distinguished from parties such as the *Vlaams Belang* or the former *Lega Nord* (nowadays transformed into the all-Italian *Lega*). The dominant tendency among its variegated branches is an approach to self-categorization that is deliberately civic, non-essentialist, and diversity-embracing. This has largely been so since the recovery of autonomy after the end of the Franco dictatorship (McRoberts 2001). Moreover, the rise of sovereignism has been paralleled by a significant discursive shift within Catalanism, which has involved a successive replacement of nationalist by republican vocabulary, especially on the side of the center-left *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya* (ERC), at present one of the two major pro-independence parties.[6] This is not to say that Catalanism has become immune to all nationalist temptations. In the ideologically more ambiguous *Junts per Catalunya* (JxCat), there is a greater commitment to more traditional nationalist positions.[7] Sovereignism must not be understood as a homogeneous block. It is a multidimensional movement, differentiated into several currents and organizations stretching from the center-right to the radical left represented by the CUP (*Candidatura d'Unitat Popular*, Popular Unity Candidacy). It would be fallacious to hold that all these currents are equally neat exponents of popular republicanism. This does not refute the argument, however, that popular republicanism, in contrast to populism, is an appropriate concept when it comes to characterizing the bulk of the forces that subscribe to the sovereignist cause in Catalonia.

The framing of peoplehood by Catalan sovereignism has resolutely been not a primordialist, but an open and voluntarist undertaking. While it is true that there was a Herderian undercurrent in the early period of Catalan nationalism in the late 19th century (Llobera 1983), this undercurrent never attained a dominant role in Catalanism under democratic conditions, neither in the Second Republic (1931–1939), nor in the post-Franco period after 1975. In the process leading to the present crisis between Catalonia and Spain, independentism may have made many mistakes,[8] but it can hardly be accused of ethnocentrism. Rather the opposite is true: In the laws elaborated to regulate the access to Catalan nationality after independence, one will in vain look for any identitarian element. Actually, the intention was to offer immigrants an easier path to becoming full citizens than Spanish legislation at present does (Vergés-Gifra and Serra 2020, pp. 5–6). Contemporary Catalan society has been shaped by successive waves of immigration, first from the Spanish South, and since 1990 from all parts of the world, in particular Latin America, Eastern Europe, and North Africa. It is not exaggerated to consider Catalonia one of the areas of Europe where complex diversity is most salient (Kraus 2015b, pp. 137–38). Immigration and multilingualism are not only immediately palpable in the metropolitan area of Barcelona, but also in many of Catalonia's rural districts. It is significant that sovereignism has never been a response *against* this complex diversity, but has been very keen to take it on board. This does not only become patent in party discourse, but is also evidenced by opinion polls, in which the voters of independentist/sovereignist options (CUP, ERC, JxCat, Comuns) show remarkably more open attitudes towards immigration than those of unionist "Spanish" parties, including the Socialists (Vergés-Gifra and Serra 2020, pp. 7–9). The sovereignist block has succeeded in getting the support of large sectors of Catalan society precisely because it has prioritized an inclusive and democratic orientation, instead of appealing to any alleged ethno-national core. Independence was not supposed to fix the patterns of collective identity in a way nostalgic of foregone nationalist models. It was rather a means to enable practices of self-categorization beyond the frame of the one and only Spanish nation, an attempt at interpreting republicanism in the key of collective pluralism. This approach is especially prominent among the parties that represent the left wing of sovereignism. It has gone hand in hand with the adoption of a progressive interculturalist agenda vis-à-vis immigration, as well as with an open-doors policy towards asylum seekers. Both have thus far received a remarkably high support—by all comparative European standards—from the broader public.

The civic approach to peoplehood is also discernable when it comes to language. Since Catalonia's national "awakening" in the 19th century, the protection and promotion of Catalan has been standing at the forefront of the struggles with the Spanish state. This has

not changed with the shift from autonomism to independentism. However, while language was initially taken to be the most characteristic manifestation of the national spirit, the connection established between linguistic and national identity has actually become looser with the rise of sovereignism, which stresses the weight of political grievances vis-à-vis Madrid, while it avoids problematizing the diverse linguistic affiliations within Catalonia's citizenry. An indicator of this loosening is the emergence of independentist sectors that operate mainly in Castilian, thereby searching the support of Catalans who do not have Catalan as their first language (Kraus 2015b, pp. 138–39). Independentist leaders have repeatedly emphasized that Catalan and Castilian-Spanish would both continue enjoying a co-official status in the new Catalan state. The shift towards republicanism in the field of language is perhaps best captured in a telling discursive move: While, after the re-establishment of autonomy in 1980, Catalanist forces defined Catalan as Catalonia's "own" language, they nowadays tend to speak of the "common" language of the region, thereby stressing the non-ethnic role assigned to the linguistic element in their symbolic imagery (Branchadell and Kraus 2019, pp. 437–39).

Last but not least, the republican turn is graspable in the key ideological component of sovereignism, i.e., the very notion of sovereignty underlying the political discourse of Catalanist actors. In these discourses, sovereignty and peoplehood are understood in a "thin" sense, as categories that interlock with other peoples' institutional realms and are embedded in the political architecture of the European Union. Sovereignty is thereby linked to the notion of a collective pluralism: it is a concept that has to be conceived of in plural, as a piece in a multi-layered system of overlapping and complementary sovereignties. In this system, sovereignty is not an absolute value. On the contrary, political competences are split across different institutional levels, executive functions are shared, and cultural diversity is recognized on the basis of equal status (Kraus 2017, p. 117). Such an understanding of sovereignty has little in common with the approach to independence that was prevalent among the forces supporting Brexit in the UK, to mention but one contrasting example. Brexit was clearly linked to a vision of sovereignty based on traditional nationalism, which implied a rejection of any kind of federal power-sharing between peoples, saw the diversity associated with immigration as a threat to British-English identity, and celebrated the project of an independence *without* Europe, a project through which Britain would regain former imperial glory (Evans et al. 2018). It was a deliberate attempt at returning to a pronouncedly monist interpretation of sovereignty and peoplehood, an interpretation that is largely absent in the Catalan context, where sovereignty is linked to the language of collective pluralism.

Let us now turn to our second case, the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), an actor that carries the commitment to collective pluralism in its very name, as it aims to represent diverse peoples—in plural—rather than *the* people. Constituted in 2012, the HDP is a fairly new player in a political system in which populism, according to area experts, has been playing a prominent role for a long period of time. It has been an element not only attributed to Kemalism, modern Turkey's foundational ideology, and to the political forces subscribing to it, but is also frequently used to classify Erdogan's AKP, the Islamist party dominating Turkish politics in the last two decades.[9] In a contribution focusing on all major parties represented in parliament in Ankara, Elçi (2019) claims that populism is the cornerstone of overall political communication in contemporary Turkey, a strategy to which all political forces recur to varying degrees. In view of the apparent ubiquity of populism, it is no surprise that the HDP is described as one more exponent of populist politics. However, in the literature the HDP is usually classified as a *left* populist party (Elçi 2019, p. 392; Kaya 2019; Tekdemir 2016, 2019).[10]

In general terms, the left populist label suggests that the HDP shares with other populist forces an anti-establishment approach, as well as a political discourse eager to reinforce the sovereignty of the people vis-à-vis political elites. At the same time, its "populism" is considered left-wing or progressive, because it invokes an inclusive and non-ethnocentric peoplehood, a peoplehood constituted by those who are ignored by top-

down politics, with the purpose to reframe democratic institutions in a way that empowers the weak. One of the foremost advocates of such a left-leaning, "agonistic" populism is Chantal Mouffe (2018). Her positions reverberate strongly in the characterization of the HDP offered by Tekdemir (2019). His is definitely a rich and instructive article; still, at occasions, it almost gives the impression that the HDP was created as a prototype designed in order to put Mouffe's ideas into political practice in Thrace and Anatolia (Tekdemir 2019, pp. 337, 342). Yet, the originality of HDP politics escapes simplifying categories. Curiously enough, Tekdemir (2019, pp. 335, 338, 339, 340, 346) writes repeatedly on how the HDP constructs "the People" in *singular*, thereby sticking to the monist notion of peoplehood and the nation that permeates Turkish politics, but also the Jacobin approach to collective agency inherent to Mouffe's conceptualization of collective agency. Ultimately, this misses the critical point evidenced by the very self-denomination of the party as Democratic Party of the *Peoples*, in *plural*. One of the pivotal elements in the party's formation was precisely to respond to ethnic Turkish chauvinism by conceiving of collective identity in a way that indicates the will to leave behind the homogenizing bias of the republic built by Atatürk and his successors.[11]

Against this background, my claim is that the emergence of the HDP is better described by the popular-republican than by the (left) populist formula. The party's popular republicanism is particularly salient in its framing of peoplehood through democratic means. Its commitment to a collective (i.e., non-monist) pluralism is even more explicit than in the Catalan case. While one of the main objectives on the HDP's agenda is to build bridges between Kurdish and Turkish groups, the party rejects defining an encompassing consensus on the basis of homogeneous and essentialized identities (Tekdemir 2016, p. 657). The party's roots cannot be understood without referring to the militant struggle for Kurdish self-determination in Turkey initiated in the 1970s. It has therefore not always been easy for the HDP to deal with the problematic legacy of PKK violence.[12] In contrast with confrontational Kurdish nationalism, however, it aims to transcend the rigid contraposition of two monolithically opposed identities, represented by Turkishness, on the one hand, and Kurdishness, on the other. While the party's electoral strongholds are clearly in Turkey's eastern provinces, it has succeeded in attracting segments of the urban vote in Istanbul and Izmir too. Among its supporters are not only Kurdish sectors, but also Turkish students and intellectuals, Alevites, feminists, LGBT activists, and grassroot associations involved in the 2013 Gezi Park protests. In view of its political transversality and pronounced secularism, conservative Kurds have actually criticized the party for acting as a Kurdish exponent of Kemalism (Gunes 2017, p. 19). They may have a point to the extent that both Kemalism and the HDP can be related to different strands of republican thought. The HDP's republicanism, however, is clearly of a non-Kemalist brand, as it detaches the focus on equal citizenship from the objective of institutionalizing a uniform body politic. A one-dimensional insistence on the indivisible unity or unconditional sovereignty of *one* nation is a feature the Spanish and Turkish constitution have notoriously in common. Challenging a constitutional arrangement that conflates civic equality with the negation of diversity is, in turn, a characteristic the HDP shares with Catalan sovereignism, in line with a republicanism that radically distinguishes between people-building and majority domination.

The focus on non-domination and horizontality is also palpable in the approach the HDP adopts in its tackling issues of national identity and sovereignty. In ways that to some extent parallel the new Catalanism, where "Catalan" and "Spanish" are conceived of as political categories, rather than as ethno-national attributes, the HDP frames "Kurdish" and "Turkish" as collective markers that are porous and not mutually exclusive. The notion of constituent sovereignty that transpires through the HDP's declarations and activities discourse is very much indebted to grassroot politics. It combines elements of a Kurdish-Turkish confederalism with a resolute municipalism. Thus, the party does quite the opposite to envisaging sovereignty in terms of a sublime concentration of political power. Its objective instead is the thorough remodeling of the Turkish state on a radically

decentralized, multicultural, and egalitarian basis (Gunes 2017, pp. 18–19, 30). Constituent sovereignty thereby becomes an exercise in constructing a common polity on the basis of complex diversity and collective pluralism. This approach differentiates the HDP from the secessionist goals previously prevalent in Kurdish nationalism. It also reveals an approach that, in contrast with Catalonia, clearly disaggregates sovereignty and territoriality. The non-territorial turn may to some extent reflect the fact that substantial portions of Turkey's Kurds have migrated from the eastern provinces, the historical homeland of the Kurdish population, to the metropolitan areas in the West of the country. Istanbul nowadays is the world's largest Kurdish city (Wind 2014). Nonetheless, it is questionable that the Kurds' search for support from the Turkish left merely reflects party tactics. It rather seems to reflect the genuine insight that the reconciliation of democracy and diversity in the area requires a reinvention of citizens' bonds beyond the reproduction of essentializing patterns of being Turkish and being Kurdish. In view of the imperatives underlying *Realpolitik* in the region, this may be considered utopian, or even naïve.[13] An expression of populist politics it is certainly not.

5. Conclusions

The rise of populism is a reality that has substantially altered politics in a large number of Western-type democracies. Whether this alteration has to be seen as a threat to democratic stability, or whether it may rather work as a corrective of a status quo defined through technocratic imperatives remains the subject of debate. Addressing this dilemma in an adequate way requires an assessment of populism that is more nuanced than the frequent black-or-white stereotypes. The dilemma can only be tackled by looking at concrete empirical cases. While this may seem obvious, the main purpose of this article was to point out something that is less obvious: namely, that an important part of the issues with populism is not whether it is "good" or "bad", but rather stems from the precipitate labeling of all kind of political phenomena that depart from the mainstream liberal consensus as populist. This precipitation may, on the one hand, be linked to the fuzziness of the concept, which makes it prone to abuse for partisan purposes. While conservatives rarely object to being called conservatives, socialists do not dislike the term socialism, and liberals may feel honored by being addressed as liberals, populism is a different kind of attribute. In Europe, in particular, being considered a populist has pejorative connotations.[14] On the other hand, the precipitation may be an effect of what has become the populism industry in political science. Populism has become a hot topic, triggering hundreds of research programs, publication opportunities, and professional networks, which has led to a virtually self-sustaining trend towards detecting ever more populist varieties and undercurrents.

This trend, in some cases, has consequences that are rather obfuscating than illuminating. While populism is real, there are new phenomena that are real as well, yet not really properly understood by classifying them as populist. It is against this background that I propose popular republicanism as a category that may have some overlaps with populism, but points at a different type of politics. My interest in this category is not driven by political conceptualism. My claim rather is that the term contributes to a better understanding of collective actors that tackle the all but intractable issue of who the people is in innovative ways. Let me add that by regarding Catalan sovereignism and the Kurdish-Turkish HDP as popular republican, I do not follow a normativizing agenda, according to which the two cases would show us the path to end the persisting malaise of liberal-democratic politics. Neither Catalan sovereignism nor the HDP are ready-made products exportable to other contexts of democratic pain and struggle. On the contrary, their innovative potential resides in their specific way of responding to a highly specific context, in the "popular" grounding of their republicanism. I am well aware of the shortcomings my analysis may have due to the impulse of fleshing out this specificity with the purpose of showing the crucial differences between popular republicanism and populism. Popular republicanism is not the panacea that will redeem democracy from all evils of democratic politics. It is

meant to be an empirical rather than a normative concept. So far, its political record, in Turkey as in Spain, can hardly be considered a story of glorious success. Still, this record shows that if the goal is to get over populism, a promising first step may be to look beyond populism in order to appreciate what is new.[15]

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Notes

1 In the social sciences, the previous study of populism had a much more limited scope, focusing mainly on the populist experiences in Latin America; see the seminal contributions by the Argentinian political sociologists Gino Germani (1962) and Torcuato S. Di Tella (1965).

2 I am hinting at the classical dichotomy that has been informing the bulk of the study of nationalism for decades; see Kohn (1944) for a key reference.

3 As his take on "popular sovereignty as procedure" (Habermas 1996) shows.

4 See Gerbaudo (2017) for Occupy and the *indignados*, Collettivo EuroNomade (2019) for the *gilets jaunes*.

5 For overviews, see Gunes (2012); Kraus and Vergés Gifra (2017); Nagel and Rixen (2015); Romano and Gurses (2014).

6 The most systematic reflection on this move thus far is the book *Obertura republicana*, by Marín and Tresserras (2019), two intellectuals in the ERC orbit. Significantly, the book's sub-title reads *Catalunya, després del nacionalisme* ("Catalonia, after nationalism").

7 *Junts per Catalunya* (Together for Catalonia) emerged as a platform in support of Carles Puigdemont, who was the president of the Catalan government responsible of the independence bid. After being removed from office by Madrid, he escaped to Brussels to avoid imprisonment.

8 See (Muñoz 2020) for a compelling critique from within the movement.

9 See Kili (1980) for Kemalism; Aytaç and Öniş (2014); Dorlach (2016) for the AKP.

10 This makes for a difference with much of the literature on Catalonia, in which independentism is in most cases equaled to populism without further qualification. An exception is Thybo (2019), for whom the CUP is an example of left populism in Western Europe.

11 See the sharp analysis of the HDP's political origins in Gunes (2017).

12 The PKK is the militant Kurdistan Workers' Party, formerly led by Abdullah Öcalan, who has been in jail since his capture in 1999.

13 While I am writing this (July 2021), HDP politicians all over the country are exposed to increasing repression by Turkish authorities. The Prosecutor General has filed an application with the Constitutional Court with the purpose of having the party banned, alleging that it has been colluding with the PKK. Selahattin Demirtaş, the party's leader, is kept in detention in Edirne since November 2016.

14 The negative bias of the term may be less pronounced in the case of the USA, due to the role of the People's Party and progressive populism in the late 19th and early 18th centuries (Frank 2020, pp. 19–53). Nevertheless, the irruption of Trumpism seems to have left a strongly negative impact on how populism is generally perceived in North America.

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