

TO WHAT EXTENT HAS THE VIEW OF “THE
PEOPLE” CHANGED THROUGH THE HISTORY OF
POLITICAL THOUGHT? YOUR ANSWER SHOULD
NOT INCLUDE MORE THAN FIVE THINKERS.

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Examiner: Joachim Lund
BSc International Business and Politics
Copenhagen Business School

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Through the history of political thought, the view of “the people” comes in various shapes and forms. There is no universal agreement on how political power is, or ought to be, embedded in people, and how this is to be manifested in society. Between the Antiquity to present day, several political thinkers have developed distinguished variations of “the people”, each expressing their views according to political frameworks of their period; some influenced by historical precedent, and others by events and occurrences of their time. This assignment will argue that through the history of political thought the view of "the people" has changed in a dynamic matter, as it is continuously in motion, being moulded by the different socio-political contexts of periods in time. Firstly, this assignment will discuss and analyze the views of “the people” held by Aristotle, Burke, and Tocqueville respectively. It will examine how the views of these thinkers reflect political culture of different periods; predominantly in the Antiquity, and in the context of the American and French Revolutions. Secondly, the assignment will offer a modern day perspective regarding the view of “the people” in contemporary politics, drawing on more recent views by political theorists. It will discuss the considerations and tendencies which influence and shape these views today. Lastly, the assignment will present the implications of the view of “the people” in today’s politics, and will conclude that diachronically this view changes dynamically, rather than in a linear fashion, as it continues to be subject to further interpretation.

A student of Plato, Aristotle draws from his teacher’s views on who should rule in an ideal society (Boucher & Kelly, 2003). Instead of arbitrarily placing political power in the hands of the people, who are not seen as as qualified to rule merely because they are citizens, Aristotle views it appropriate that moral goodness or virtue, which only a few people possess in adequate amounts, determine who is best opted to rule (Aristotle, 1981; Boucher & Kelly, 2003). The minority who knows about politics are those who should rule. These people are referred to as the ‘middle class’ of a *polis*. They are considered wealthy, educated, and virtuous. Thus, Aristotle is in favour of a form of aristocracy (Aristotle, 1981; Boucher & Kelly, 2003). He argues that in every *polis* people should be “*moulded to suit the form of government*” in which they live (Boucher & Kelly, 2003). To examine Aristotle’s view on “the people” and how political power is embedded in, and distributed between them, it is relevant to discuss his notion of the six pure types of possible constitutions. The first three pure types are kingship, aristocracy, and polity. In these constitutions the one, the few, or the many rule justly, in the common interest of all. The other three types he

labels tyranny, oligarchy, and democracy. In these constitutions the one, the few, or the many rule unjustly, and in their own private interests (Aristotle, 1981; Boucher & Kelly, 2003). Aristotle notes that *“In all six types of constitution some people have more political power and others less [...]”* (Boucher & Kelly, 2003). While his notion of democracy constitutes that political power be equally distributed between citizens, since all citizens enjoy the same degree of citizenship (Politics 1317; Boucher & Kelly, 2003), Aristotle views democracy as a faulty, corrupt and perverted constitution. He argues that distributing political power according to democracy (or oligarchy) is *“just as arbitrary as giving more power to some people on the grounds that they are taller than others”* (Aristotle, 1981; Boucher & Kelly, 2003). Therefore, he prefers aristocracy as a constitution, where there is a ruling ‘middle class’. The second most suitable alternative is polity, an ideal type of democracy where all citizens are viewed as virtuous and good. However, Aristotle argues that polity can also be seen as a ‘mixed’ constitution, thereby a realistic form of democracy. In this sense, rule by demos, “the people”, is balanced by the wealthy and educated minority. In this sense, Aristotle does not assume “the people” as a collective entity to be virtuous and good (Boucher & Kelly, 2003). He argues that it is contrary to nature *“that the unequal should be given to equals, and the unlike to those who are like”* (Aristotle, 1981; Boucher & Kelly, 2003). On the one hand, Aristotle sees the sovereign as subordinate to the state, and of the state as *“existing apart from any particular possessor of the chief governmental power”* (Dunning, 1900). On the other hand he does suggest that man is a political animal by nature (Aristotle, 1981), and that sovereign power should belong to the mass of the people (Dunning, 1900). But following Aristotle’s views, ‘the mass of the people’ is not to include every citizen. He divides “the people” into those who are fitted to administrate political power in society, and those who are not. The solution of the sovereignty of people presumes that everyone possesses a similar level of virtue. However, Aristotle argues that the logical sovereign shall be the ‘preeminently virtuous’, should there be a group or an individual exceeding all others in virtue. The primary notion of the state Aristotle describes is the distinction between the rulers and the ruled, meaning that *“political organization is inconceivably without the submission of one human will to another”* (Dunning, 1900). He argues that the people are not to do as they will, but shall subject themselves to the constitution in order to achieve the highest welfare in life. He thinks of the law as adequate and proper, and does not think the whole people as a sovereign is to participate in legislative activity, since it is not needed (Dunning, 1900). Aristotle argues that in all societies government is *“in the hands of one, or of a*

few, or of the many” (Aristotle, 1981; Boucher & Kelly, 2003). His view of “the people” in the Antiquity paints a picture of rule by the few for the good of all. Citizens have political power embedded in them, albeit to an extent of constitutional subjectification to a restricted denomination perceivably competent to function as political instruments representing “the people” in an aristocratic constitution.

An alternative view of “the people” can be encountered within Edmund Burke notion of ‘natural aristocracy’ (O’Gorman, 2004). Burke’s views hold certain similarities to those of Aristotle, notably with the doctrines of natural aristocracy and aristocracy respectively. Neither of them believes that power should be distributed arbitrarily between citizens. However, Burke holds a slightly more suspicious view on “the people”, arguably influenced by the political occurrences of his time. Burke is against the doctrine of the sovereignty of the people, and the opinion that people may chose their preferred form of government (Burke, 2007). According to Burke politicians must “*listen to the popular voice but must not be led by it*” (O’Gorman, 2004). He entertain the possibility of situations where the purely democratic form could be necessary, but nevertheless regards this as exceptional. He holds the view that the people “*must respect that property of which they cannot partake*” (O’Gorman, 2004). Hence, Burke argues that if people do not deserve to vote, their opinions ought to be neglected. He does not see the political system as dynamic (O’Gorman, 2004), as he sees the King, the Lords, and the Judges as the representatives of the people. On the one hand, Burke argues that the forms and the persons who administer the government originate from the people. On the other hand he argues that the creators of ‘the will’ are the Law and the Magistrate (Burke, 2007). In *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Burke argues against the equal share of power, authority and participation in management of the state. One of the fundamental features of civil society, he argues, is, “*that no man should be judge in his own cause*” (Burke, 1951). In order to better understand Burke’s view on “the people”, and what would have contributed in shaping them, it is relevant to take into account his own political experiences as well as the political events happening in in the late eighteenth century, such as the Gordon riots in London in 1780, which display the actions of an angry, discontent mob (Haywood & Seed, 2012). He also considers the French Revolution an attack on the foundations of civilization (O’Gorman, 2004). Burke has serious reservations about the revolution; the earliest being the fear that the National Assembly would be too weak to stand up against a mob rule. He believes that

democracy in France does not lead to stability (O’Gorman, 2004). According to Burke’s principles, the French people cease to exist after the revolution, and in order to be reconstituted as a people, they would need to re-establish a natural aristocracy. Moreover, he is deeply conservative, and views institutions, customs, and the spirit of a people as the products of the ages. Burke’s promotion of ‘natural aristocracy’ arguably holds resemblance to elitism, as he alludes to the notion that power should be exercised neither by the people nor under their surveillance (O’Gorman, 2004), but by a select group of qualified individuals; akin to an elite. He does not believe the people to have enough knowledge or experience to partake in policy decisions. Ultimately, he views people as ill-informed, easily seduced, and “*feeble in their circumstances*” (O’Gorman, 2004). In other words, he has a deep-rooted suspicion of the people (O’Gorman, 2004).

Moving in a different direction than the notion of rule by the few is Alexis de Tocqueville’s view of democracy in America in the nineteenth-century. Tocqueville believed that both Plato and Burke had been “*worsted by history*” with their arguably exclusionist views on the participation of the people in politics (Ryan, 2014). Following Tocqueville’s notion of the sovereignty of the people, it is this political principle that appears to define American democracy, rather than the social state or the governing political authority. According to this notion the only power is that which comes from within; as society “*acts by itself on itself*” (Manent et al., 1996). Tocqueville argues that the doctrine of the sovereignty of the people is what makes a democracy in the United States. Consequently “man” and “citizen” become interchangeable terms (Manent et al., 1996). Tocqueville here portrays a view of “the people” within a democratic state, where any person in public office is the “*instrument of the majority*” (Manent et al., 1996). In contrast to Aristotle’s and Burke’s favourable views on variations of aristocracy, Tocqueville speaks of a democracy in which private conditions, such as wealth, do not constitute political power over other citizens. Tocqueville’s democratic society does not tolerate an aristocratic body which is independent of the will of the people within which political power is embedded (Manent et al., 1996). In other words, the will of all shall be formed by all.

“The people reign in the American political world as the Deity does in the universe. They are the cause and the aim of all things; everything comes from them, and everything is absorbed in them.” (Tocqueville, 1998).

Although advocating for democracy, Tocqueville acknowledges that aristocratic liberty can have good consequences. However, it is arguably founded on a false idea. He argues that the democratic idea of liberty is the correct one, since liberty here means equal rights for citizens to have absolute right over themselves. This way the sovereign can “*emanate only from the union of the wills of everyone*” (Manent et al., 1996). According to Tocqueville, the ideal that liberty is equal for all is essentially equivalent to the sovereignty of the people, which is in turn equivalent to the democratic idea of liberty (Manent et al., 1996). Moving away from aristocratic and elitist thought, Tocqueville paints a picture of a democratic society where the people are the sovereign. He displays a view of “the people” which is increasingly recognizable in contemporary political thought. Influenced by the contrasts between America and France (Ryan, 2014), Tocqueville offers a relatively more expansive view of “the people” than those of the previously discussed thinkers of this paper.

Through political history we can observe the view of “the people” to have been in motion since the Antiquity. It has been moulded, expanded and retracted through time, and notably influenced by American and French societies in the context of revolutions. In contemporary political discussions, some scholars argue that the presence of populism in politics has come to dominate how political power is embedded in “the people”, and how it is manifested in modern society. Some scholars may argue that democratic politics and populist politics have fluid boundaries. Arguably, there is a wide “field of populism” emerging today in Western societies once liberal-democratic (Fitzi et al., 2019). According to Jürgen Mackert, we cannot separate populism from ideologies such as liberalism, and the idea of the sovereignty of the people, that are “*at the core of the legitimation of modern democracy*” (Fitzi et al., 2019). According to Michael Mann, there has always been present some form of populism, since “the people” have long served as a united target in politics. Pitting people, statuses or classes against one another was arguably also present during the French and American Revolutions. Mann argues that populism precedes modern democracy and is a critical part of its foundation (Fitzi et al., 2019). He draws on the example that it was not “the people” who established the American Constitution, but rather it was 55 middle-aged white men of high rank, claiming to represent the people of the 13 colonies. He describes a society in which ‘the populace’ of the lower orders of society are not a part of the people (Mann, 2005). In this society the people are entitled to “active” citizenship, while the populace have only

“passive” citizenship. The people are stratified rather than a collective entity with shared political sovereignty (Mann, 2005). According to the notion of populism, it always in some form appeals to “the people” and denounces “the elite”. Although seen as a thin-centered ideology, it has two core ideas. The first being that society is divided into two groups; the “pure people” and the “corrupt elite” (Fitzi et al., 2019). The second idea is that of the *volonté générale*, the general will, commonly linked to Jean-Jacques Rousseau. It holds that “*politics should be an expression of the general will of the people*” (Kalwasser & Mudde, 2017). Within populism we find both the vertical opposition between “the people” and “the elite” as well as the horizontal opposition between the “inside” and the “outside”. Therefore the core element of populism can also be understood as defined by the intersection of the vertical and horizontal oppositions. Vertically, “the people” and “the elite” are contrastingly defined. “The people” are on the inferior end of the economic, political, and cultural spectrum; “the elite” are powerful, rich, educated, and nevertheless considered out of touch with the hardships of regular people (Fitzi et al., 2019). Horizontally, the contrast is between “inside” and “outside”. The “inside” identifies “the people” as a bounded collectivity standing against outside groups or forces. In both left-wing and right-wing populism, elites pertain to the “outside” and are “on top”. Elites are considered distrustful of “the people” and disapproving of the “*putative irrationality of democratic politics*” (Fitzi et al., 2019). So what affects the view of “the people” in modern day contemporary politics?

One major component of our time, which arguably plays a major role in today’s politics, is the media as a phenomenon, and the conception of “*mediatization of politics*” (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999; Fitzi et al. 2019). This arguably encourages politicians to communicate in a populist style, and to appeal to “the people” as a whole (Fitzi et al., 2019). Furthermore, in the context of the diffused prosperity of post-war decades, the subsequent economic transformations have invited the opportunity to speak on the behalf of the ‘little people’ or ‘ordinary people’ against outside groups and forces; against “those on top”. However, seeing as populism is not ubiquitous, one can raise the question of whether we speak of a populist moment, or rather a populist era (Fitzi et al., 2019). Some recent scholars may argue that it is the curious political, economic, and cultural contexts of recent years that have created a “perfect storm”, which birthed today’s widespread populist views. Particularly, recent crises. Present is the media, which “*enhances the performative power of populist discourse [...]*” (Fitzi et al., 2019). Arguably, the media is modern day’s

equivalent to political occurrences in Aristotle's Antiquity, or Burke's French Revolution, or Tocqueville's America, which influence the contemporary view of "the people". Redefining the concept of the sovereignty are populist political entrepreneurs, stigmatising the legitimately elected political representatives as an "illegitimate power elite". They seek to redefine the founding idea of modern democracy, and to redefine the concept of "the people". They pin the 'decent people' against the 'corrupt elite'. However, this can lead to exclusion of those groups who do not fit into "the people" as defined by the populist notion (Fitzi et al., 2019).

In comparing the views of these thinkers, and of those present in contemporary politics; the view of "the people" can be observed as of a dynamical nature. What we can deduct from examining the view of "the people" through political history is that it is steadily in motion as thinkers seek to manifest how political power is, or ought to be, embedded in members of society. This leads to the implication that the view of "the people" may continue to be subject to differing interpretations as we move along. Through time this view has changed as thinkers through political history have molded the notion, each employing a distinctive perspective influenced by different sociopolitical environments. Some thinkers' views are shaped by history and precedent; others' by political occurrences of their time. Which view current political thought subscribes to is arguably dominated by populist notions, but is not set in stone, as there is no singular view that can be universally applied in practice. By observing the changes of thought diachronically, we see the view of "the people" continuously expanding and contracting. In conclusion, this change can be observed as dynamic rather than strictly linear, as it continues to be shaped by history, and by the societal frameworks within which each political thinker operates.

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