to think through the "surprisingly persistent power of the politics of popular assembly" (xiii). Our contemporary moment – from the memories of the Arab Spring and Occupy movements over a decade ago to the Black Lives Matter uprisings of 2020 – speaks to this enduring power of popular manifestation. How do we think about the mediatization of these assemblies? The circulation, reproduction, and interchangeability of images of popular manifestation have become a recurring feature of our contemporary politics. To be sure, this landscape might be less of a qualitative transformation than an escalation of tendencies already present in the Age of Revolution. As Tocqueville already noted, 1789 was "a spectacle of incomparable beauty [in part because] all foreign nations saw it, all applaud it, all were moved by it" (quoted on page 171). How are external audiences implicated and enlisted in the power of popular assembly? Frank's important intervention, as I noted above, is to alert us to the strategies of producing identification with a collective and empowered agent and engendering a reverential self-regard. The relationship between the regard of others and the production of self-regard might be one of the shifting features of popular assembly, which we take up as we consider its different modalities.

The Democratic Sublime makes it possible to pose these questions because, as with *Constituent Moments,* it begins with a commitment to the enduring energy of democratic politics that looks beyond its constitutional and institutional configurations. In a contemporary moment of democratic crisis, breakdown, and backsliding, a turn to the potentialities and conundrums of popular manifestation revivify the study of democracy.

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Popular Sovereignty, Aesthetics, and Emancipation

Sofia Näsström

What is radical about popular sovereignty? This question sets the scene for Jason Frank's new and stimulating book *The Democratic Sublime.* Marx's early celebration of democracy as a radical "instrument of lower-class revolutionary agency" (x) and subsequent disappointment in 1848 with "the cult of the people" (xi) as an abstraction from the material conditions of the lower classes capture a typically modern dilemma – namely, how to understand the emancipatory role of popular sovereignty.

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Unlike ancient thinkers who equated democracy with a particular social class ("the rule of the poor"), the modern effort of making the people sovereign – at once authors and addressees of law – requires some form of mediation (Kalyvas 2019). The people who authorizes law has to be represented, imagined, or claimed into being, and this is where the dilemma begins. For while this instance of mediation opens the door for marginalized social groups to emancipate themselves from exploitation and domination in the name of the people as a whole, this act of mediation is simultaneously premised "on the imaginary abolition of class relations", which is a lie (x). Moreover, rather than fostering collective acts of self-emancipation, appeal to a unitary and sovereign people can easily degenerate into a toxic form of nationalism, or be exploited "as a tool for reactionary dictatorship" (xi). Popular sovereignty, it seems, is a conservative minefield. So why hold on to it as a distinctively radical theory of democracy?

One answer to this question is beautifully laid out in this book: popular sovereignty is not merely "a theory of democracy," but a way for ordinary people – "the people out of doors" (2) – to envision themselves as a collective actor capable of political empowerment. As Frank points out, popular sovereignty has always been dangerous to those who hold power, and this is precisely due to its capacity to generate new political imaginations and, not least, to make people *act* on them: This world is not the only one possible – let's change it!

Like many radical democratic theorists, Frank rejects Marx's "sociological essentialism of class" (xii). He holds on to the sovereign people as the preeminent source of democracy. Still, he is skeptical of the linguistic turn in contemporary radical democratic theory. It eclipses "the resistant kernel of concrete materialism in the aesthetics of peoplehood" (xii). If Luis McNay has argued that radical democratic theory suffers from "social weightlessness" – abstraction from people's lived social realities – Frank calls our attention to its aesthetic weightlessness: its failure to see how the people mediates its own political empowerment aesthetically (McNay 2014). The aim of the book is therefore to "excavate the lost radicalism of democracy" in the half century before Marx rejected the cult of the people as a chimera (xii). The lost radicalism of democracy lies in the aesthetic representation of popular assemblies and their sublime but persistent power over time (xiii). Or, as Frank puts it in a key sentence in the book, the people "must see themselves assembled in order to feel their power" (10; 72).

The result of this aesthetic motto is a rich analysis of how the people materialize as a collective actor, and become tangible to our senses, both in the work of such particular thinkers as Rousseau, Burke, and

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Tocqueville, and in particular historical insurgencies, riots, crowds, demonstrations, and barricading. What is sublime about popular assemblies, Frank argues, is their capacity to move rather than persuade people. Unlike reason, aesthetics can "transport the reader or listener to another more elevated state" (12), a place beyond its own "personal, individual, self-interested ego" (13). According to Frank, it is symptomatic of our loss that the thinkers who best understood this power of the sublime were critics rather than defenders of popular sovereignty. This is why *The Democratic Sublime* draws on insights made by some of its most "trenchant critics" (xiii), like Burke, who scorns the revolution and points to the sublime "delight" that human beings take in their own subordination. Instead of turning to the streets, Burke wants to show, there is pleasure in "proud submission" and "dignified obedience" (98).

The Democratic Sublime is an immensely learned, timely, and engaging book. Frank carefully uncovers elements of aesthetic peoplehood in the work of classical thinkers such as Rousseau, Burke, and Tocqueville. The book is also timely, and spot on. It helps the reader in connecting the storming of Bastille and the ambiguous commitment to "ballot and barricade" in 1848 (124)—a particularly captivating passage given the present crisis of liberal democracy—with contemporary popular assemblies, and their use of aesthetics to transport and elevate us to a different place—and "make us aware of that elevation" (12). Think of the clenched fist of BLM, the yellow vests of car-borne in France, the becoming "like water" of Hong-Kong protests (xiii), or indeed, the use of the confederate battle flag in the storming of the United States Capitol in the US on 6 January 2021. They are all aesthetic representations of the constituent power of the people.

Above all, the book is engaging. As a reader, I find myself associating the tropes of the book with present-day practices in unexpected ways. One example is when Frank discusses Rousseau's "silent assemblies" (41-68). Rousseau was not fond of passionate speech and discussion. He thought it distracted people from tuning into the general will. The people should be present, but silent: everyone should think alone, yet do so in the presence of others, and so become what Frank calls a "living body" (43). This reference to a living body of people may sound antiquated. How can it be radical to go local when power is global? In our new digital reality, however, where bots, propaganda, and fake news can portray a small minority as a large majority and vice versa, mere presence can be radical. By taking to the streets, the people can see themselves assembled—look, this is how *many* we are, or this is *who* we are, a multitude of women and men, young and old, black and white—and through this experience find new ways to envision themselves as a collective actor. This is just one

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example of how this book moves the reader, and inspires new connections and associations.

At the same time, the trouble with popular sovereignty introduced in the beginning of the book—its eclipse of social class and potential degeneration into a tool for reactionary dictatorship—keeps popping up during the reading. I would therefore like to conclude by raising two questions that put pressure on the link between popular sovereignty and emancipation.

The first question concerns the link between social class and peoplehood. In short: What is *radical* about the democratic sublime? As Frank points out, the concern with the political in post-Marxism has replaced the sociological essentialism of class with the symbolic constructivism of the people (xii; here, Frank refers to Breckman 2013). This means that for Frank, who agrees to this intellectual shift, popular assemblies cannot be reduced to a particular social interest. A popular assembly "is the emergent or incipient domain of the people before they are given form as an identity, organized into institutions, or articulated as a coherent voice" (11). This means that the yellow vests, for example, always mediate something more than what they happen to speak for (such as a solidarity tax on wealth)—namely, the emergent reality of the constituent power of the people. And so, of course, do the confederate battle flag bearers who, at the former President's signal, stormed the US Capitol in 2021. Is the democratic sublime indifferent to the social interests that lie behind these two aesthetic representations of who "we, the people" are? Differently put, how does the democratic sublime square the distinction between partisanship and peoplehood?

The second question concerns the link between aesthetic representation and democracy. In short, what is *democratic* about the democratic sublime? As Frank argues, the democratic sublime addresses the emergent stage before the constituent power of the people hardens into law or institutions. The aesthetical contours of popular assemblies—like the yellow vests, the clenched fist, or the confederate battle flag—are in this respect creative and prefigurative. Rather than referring back to an already existent people, they help construct the very people they claim to represent. How to account for this representative aspect of popular assemblies is a thorny issue in the literature on representation. What distinguishes a democratic from a non-democratic representation of the people in the absence of elections? (Näsström, 2015) This question haunts Frank's work as well. Popular assembly is described in the book as a particular form of "democratic representation" (16), but what makes it into a *democratic* rather than a merely political representation is not clear. Frank admits that aesthetic representation can be democratic but also

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"anti-democratic," as in the rhetoric of Burke (111). But how does he tell them apart, and on what basis does he make this claim?

Today there is no shortage of actors drawing on aesthetics to awaken the sovereign people and make them rally around the leader and the flag against the enemy. They abound. In that sense, this is a remarkably important book. It wants to wrest aesthetics out of the hands of reactionary forces—who know how to use it—and show its potential for radical democratic theory. Frank's new book goes a long way to achieve that aim, yet more work is still needed to clarify the difference between democratic and undemocratic ways of aesthetically representing the people. I hope the book is widely read, and that scholars take up the challenge that it poses to radical democratic theory. For, as Frank writes, Marx's fear of Bonapartism "still resonates powerfully today" (ix).

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Beyond the Age of Democratic Revolution

Jason Frank

I am grateful to the editors at *Democratic Theory* for organizing this symposium, and especially to Karuna Mantena, Adom Getachew, and Sofia Näsström for engaging *The Democratic Sublime* with such generosity, acuity, and insight. The questions and critiques they raise open promising new lines of inquiry, while also pressing me to further address the troubling resonance between the political dilemmas explored in the book and the democratic crises of our present. The essays provide me the opportunity to reflect further on problems left insufficiently articulated in the book and more clearly see the roads not taken.

The Democratic Sublime examines a central but theoretically underexplored political problematic that appeared during the late eighteenth-century age of democratic revolutions, and that has haunted the history of popular sovereignty ever since. As the personal and external rule of the

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