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The Eyes of the People: Democracy in an Age of Spectatorship

Abstracts:

For centuries it has been assumed that democracy must refer to the empowerment of the People's voice. This pioneering book makes the case for considering the People as an ocular entity rather than a vocal one, arguing that it is both possible and desirable to understand democracy in terms of what the People gets to see, instead of the traditional focus on what it gets to say. The *Eyes of the People* examines democracy from the perspective of everyday citizens in their everyday lives. While it is customary to understand the citizen as a decision maker, most citizens in fact rarely engage in decision making and do not even have clear views on most political issues. The ordinary citizen is not a decision maker but a spectator who watches and listens to the select few empowered to decide. Grounded on this everyday phenomenon of spectatorship, *The Eyes of the People* constructs a democratic theory applicable to the way democracy is actually experienced by most people most of the time. In approaching democracy from the perspective of the People's eyes, the book rediscovers and rehabilitates a forgotten "plebiscitarian" alternative within the history of democratic thought. Building off the contributions of a wide range of thinkers — including Aristotle, Shakespeare, Benjamin Constant, Max Weber, Joseph Schumpeter, and many others — it outlines a novel democratic paradigm, centered on empowering the People's gaze through forcing politicians to appear in public under conditions they do not fully control.

Keywords: democracy, empowerment, the People, ocular, vocal, citizens, decision making, political issues, spectatorship, plebiscitarian

Cap. 1 Ocular Democracy

This chapter introduces in a preliminary way the main features of a theory of plebiscitary democracy whose elaboration and defense will be the purpose of the succeeding chapters. Section 1.2 argues that, in spite of both moral and intellectual suspicion of spectatorship as a legitimate topic of political study, it is after all possible to pursue democracy from the perspective of the political spectator: that there is such a thing as an ocular model of popular empowerment, and that it is precisely plebiscitary democracy's embrace of this model that makes it an important alternative within political thought. Further, not only is an ocular model of popular empowerment possible, but its pursuit

would lead to a meaningfully different account of the types of public goods at stake in the quest for a more democratic society. Plebiscitary democracy is not merely an alternate interpretation of familiar democratic processes, but represents a novel ethical paradigm that would reshape the way the moral meaning of democracy is approached and pursued. Sections 1.3 to 1.6 review the specific intellectual, aesthetic, egalitarian, and solidaristic values that would be realized by a theory of plebiscitary democracy and its ocular paradigm of popular empowerment. Section 1.7 concludes by detailing the overall plan for the book's remaining chapters.

Keywords: plebiscitary democracy, the People, ocular democracy, political spectator, empowerment

Cap.2 The Citizen as Spectator

This chapter defends the claim that being-ruled — that is, the spectatorial engagement with politics characterized by *involvement without participation* — is a form of citizenship that is extremely prevalent within 21st-century conditions, yet nonetheless something that has been neglected by the major discourses constituting the contemporary study of democracy. Sections 2.2 through 2.4 discuss Aristotle's theory of being-ruled and argue that whereas Aristotle might have had good reason for giving the citizen-being-ruled only slight attention within his democratic theory, modern institutions and moral commitments ought to elevate the figure of the citizen-being-ruled to a position of primacy. Yet the relevance of being-ruled has not been appreciated by modern democratic theorists. Sections 2.5 through 2.8 review the most influential perspectives within contemporary democratic theory — including civic behavior research, pluralism, and deliberative democracy — and demonstrate the systematic neglect of the citizen-spectator. Finally, Section 2.9 addresses what it would mean to develop a democratic theory oriented around the experience of being-ruled and how the plebiscitary model defended in the subsequent chapters affords respect to the citizen-spectator.

Keywords: spectatorial engagement, political involvement, political participation, being-ruled, democratic theory, Aristotle, plebiscitary democracy

Cap.3 Overcoming the Vocal Model of Popular Power

This chapter defends the claim that there is such a thing as traditional democratic theory. To this end, it argues that the vocal model of popular power — which considers the People as a decisional entity that expresses opinions, values, and interests — has defined democratic orthodoxy from the rebirth of democracy at the end of the 18th century, down to the present day. It demonstrates the pervasiveness of the vocal model among classical theorists of democracy: Rousseau, Publius, Bentham and James Mill, J. S. Mill, Tocqueville,

and others. It shows that notwithstanding that 20th-century political science began to challenge the underpinnings of the vocal model, this model perversely continued to exert its dominance even among those most aware of its shortcomings. The chapter also draws attention to the central weaknesses of the vocal model: specifically, its lack of realism (its overstated estimation of the capacity for voice on the mass scale); its inaccuracy (since it is only majorities or well-organized minorities that speak in mass democracy, not the collective People itself); and its hegemonic function (the vocal model conceals the exclusion from government that is fundamental to the phenomenology of everyday political life).

Keywords: traditional democratic theory, vocal model, popular power, the People

Cap.4 The Concept of Plebiscitary Democracy: Past, Present, and Future

This chapter revisits the overly maligned concept of plebiscitary democracy, reviewing its historical development, and arguing for its relevance as a present-day ethical paradigm. The chapter is organized as follows. Section 4.2 reviews the standard, purely pejorative interpretation of plebiscitary democracy that has arisen among contemporary political scientists: the understanding of plebiscitarianism as a politics of diremption. Against this reductive and negative interpretation of the meaning of plebiscitarianism, Section 4.3 returns to the theoretical origins of plebiscitarianism and recovers a forgotten, highly innovative, ethical component of plebiscitary democracy: namely, an ocular model of popular power whose basic features were introduced in Chapter 1. Finally, Section 4.4 turns to two of Shakespeare's Roman plays, *Coriolanus* and *Julius Caesar*, as concrete examples that illustrate the ocular model in action and that demonstrate the moral logic for wishing to revive a plebiscitarian alternative within contemporary democratic thought.

Keywords: plebiscitary democracy, plebiscitarianism, Coriolanus, Julius Caesar, ocular model

Cap. 5 Max Weber's Reinvention of Popular Power and Its Uneasy Legacy

This chapter elaborates the ocular model of popular power implicit in Weber's neglected and overly maligned account of democracy. Sections 5.2 to 5.5 reconstruct Weber's democratic theory. It is shown that underlying Weber's concern for charismatic leadership lies an ocular understanding of popular power and, with it, the threefold shift repeatedly invoked to characterize the plebiscitary model of popular power: the shift in the object of popular power (from law to leader), in the organ of popular power (from decision to gaze), and in the critical ideal of popular power (from autonomy to candor). Having rehabilitated Weber's novel contribution to the study of democracy, the final

two sections, 5.6 and 5.7, discuss why this contribution went largely unrecognized throughout the remainder of the 20th century. While there are numerous causes for this, it is argued that the plebiscitary theories of Weber's two most influential successors — Schmitt and Schumpeter — lent the nascent plebiscitary tradition, unnecessarily, an air of unpalatability.

Keywords: Max Weber, popular power, ocular model, Weber's democratic theory, plebiscitary democracy

Cap. 6 Putting Candor First: Plebiscitarianism and the Politics of Candor

This chapter demonstrates how a plebiscitarian commitment to a politics of candor shapes a distinctive approach to reforming democratic institutions. Sections 6.2 through 6.5 explore the consequences of making candor the primary value in democratic reform, by analyzing three practices of contemporary mass democracy: leadership debates, public inquiries of leaders, and press conferences. Section 6.6 concludes by summarizing the logic of putting candor first.

Keywords: plebiscitarian commitment, politics of candor, reforming democratic institutions, plebiscitary democracy, leadership debates, public inquiries, press conferences

Cap. 7 Popular Power in Sight

This concluding chapter addresses the important question of how plebiscitarianism ought to be reconciled with traditional norms of participatory citizenship. Because the plebiscitarian principle of candor regulates leaders instead of everyday citizens — and because it refers to how leaders ought to appear, rather than how they are to decide the most pressing issues of the day — certain readers will object that plebiscitarianism is irresponsible or, in any case, of limited significance to citizens committed to using whatever influence they possess to serve and improve the common good. In response to these concerns, the chapter explains how plebiscitarian ethics plays three different roles for three distinct types of citizens. It supplies an ethical perspective to the passive spectator, supplements the ethical perspective of the active partisan, and supplants the ethical perspective of the democrat committed to popular sovereignty (redefining popular sovereignty in terms of candor rather than self-legislation). One's reception of plebiscitarianism depends, then, on a certain degree of self-knowledge about the type of citizen that one is.

Keywords: plebiscitarianism, plebiscitary democracy, candor, participatory citizenship

