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## Review of Democracy as Popular Sovereignty by Filimon Peonidis (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013).

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**Abstract**

Review of *Democracy as Popular Sovereignty* by Filimon Peonidis (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013).

**Keywords**

Popular sovereignty, Institutional Reform, Democratic Constitutionalism

Deliberative democracy has become perhaps the dominant paradigm for democratic theorists and practitioners over the past two decades. Democratic legitimacy has been severed from pluralist models, in which citizens serve primarily as an occasional check on the power of elites, and the promise of democracy as a system of governance is increasingly tied to the exercise of deliberation across a host of institutional and associational locations. However, as Thomas Kuhn reminded us over a half-century ago, paradigms enable vision while also creating blind spots. Along these lines, it is fair to ask whether or not the emphasis on deliberation has siphoned theoretical attention and practical energy away from other, equally important aspects of democratic governance. Given this possibility, Filimon Peonidis's *Democracy as Popular Sovereignty* is an especially welcome contribution to ongoing debates within democratic theory and practice.

Peonidis has given us a refreshingly short book (104 pages including notes), which still manages to pack a big punch. Peonidis is able to craft a significant contribution in such a small amount of space because he focuses, hedgehog-like, on a “single but complex normative idea”—popular sovereignty—and “seeks to explore its practical implications” (ix). Once again, whereas the deliberative paradigm has focused attention on how citizens might gain more influence within governing structures, or how policymaking can become more responsive and rational, this has largely come at the expense of the question of popular sovereignty or “rule,” which is one translation of the Greek word “Kratia” that resides, stubbornly, within the word democracy. Peonidis's book can be seen as correcting this imbalance by re-focusing attention on the ideal of popular sovereignty, which he defines as based “on the idea that citizens...should meaningfully and substantially participate in political decision-making as equally valuable and fully participating members of a self-governing collectivity” (ix). In other words, Peonidis implores democratic theorists and practitioners to think beyond deliberation towards *decision*, and to re-imagine political institutions so that they maximize citizens' share in power. Importantly, for Peonidis this would not require the abandonment of developed democratic institutions in favor of a romantic vision of classical Athenian direct popular power. Instead, Peonidis argues that representative institutions, constitutionally-guaranteed rights, and practices like judicial review can be reimagined and re-interpreted as “integral parts” of a more participatory and substantive form of democratic governance (ix).

Peonidis's argument is broken into three chapters. The first chapter focuses on the concept of popular sovereignty, arguing that “rule by the people” is the “quintessential idea of democracy” (2). With this as his starting point, Peonidis focuses attention on *how* the people may rule, arguing for institutional mechanisms involving direct universal participation and, where that fails, popular authorization of representatives who can be held accountable to the will of the people—what Peonidis refers to as “indirect participation” (22-23). The fact that Peonidis includes the delegation of officials within the ideal of popular sovereignty means that this concept is consonant with representative institutions. However, as Peonidis goes on

to argue, the purpose and organization of such institutions would change if they were organized around the normative ideal of popular sovereignty.

This latter argument is developed within the second and third chapters. In chapter two Peonidis discusses two notable (and increasingly widespread) innovations within democratic practice—the spread of popular referenda and the proliferation of deliberative mini-publics such as deliberative polls. Finding shortcomings with both practices (referenda because they are susceptible to strategic manipulation by governments or organized groups, and mini-publics because they are removed from political decision-making), Peonidis praises citizen assemblies such one organized in 2004 by the government in British Columbia order to assess their electoral system. Citizen assemblies combine deliberation with decision (although not yet a power of *final* decision), raising the stakes of the conversations and better matching up with the ideal of popular sovereignty. As Peonidis puts it, “democracy as popular sovereignty envisages citizen assemblies as the main vehicle for realizing substantial and meaningful direct universal participation” (41).

Peonidis also discusses the pros of cons of other democratic institutional innovations from the vantage point of popular sovereignty, such as the idea of selecting citizen assembly members through lot or sortition. Selection by lot has been seen as one of the most significant aspects of classical Athenian democracy, in part because it seemed to reflect a bedrock assumption that all citizens had both a right to, and a capacity for, participation in public decision-making (42-45). Peonidis is measured in his praise for citizen assemblies organized by lottery, because he is sensitive to the ways it might undermine the possibility of holding selected officials accountable for their actions, since they will not have to defend themselves again through competitive elections.

In the third chapter Peonidis moves beyond discrete institutional innovations to discuss the idea of a constitution organized by the ideal of popular sovereignty. The virtue of this chapter is that it inspires an aspect-change in our view of democratic principles. Well-trod notions of the separation of powers, constitutionally guaranteed rights, and judicial review take on a different light when viewed through the principles of popular sovereignty. Peonidis even broaches the idea of putting a thirty-year expiration date into the constitution, so that every generation will have an opportunity to re-imagine their fundamental political document (66).

Combined, these three chapters press us to re-examine the presuppositions within the dominant paradigms of democratic theory and practice. Is democracy in contemporary polities reducible to deliberation or to the search for more effective resolutions for collective action problems? Or does democracy still retain something of value from the problematic, complex, troubling, yet simultaneously stirring ideal of popular sovereignty? By focusing exclusively on the concept of popular rule, Peonidis’s argument has the capacity to enliven our democratic imagination at a time when apathy and disinterestedness are widely dispersed civic maladies and traditional democratic institutions are almost universally disparaged.

Despite its obvious strengths, Peonidis's book does have some shortcomings. Although Shakespeare famously noted that brevity is the soul of wit, brevity can create problems for those entering into the thickets of democratic theory. In particular, the abbreviated nature of Peonidis's arguments means that he does not seriously engage competing visions of democratic sovereignty, such as Jürgen Habermas's procedural account. Habermas's endorsement of deliberative democracy stems in part from his idea that in contemporary polities popular sovereignty must become procedural and de-centered. Aside from a few passing mentions in the notes, Peonidis does not take up this argument. Nor, for that matter, does Peonidis engage seriously with radical democratic theorists—many of whom, such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, are leery of the ideal of sovereignty due to its exclusionary aspects, and who prefer a more disorderly and unruly concept of the people as “the multitude”

Even considering these shortcomings, Peonidis's book is highly recommended for democratic theorists and practitioners alike. Peonidis's hedgehog-like insistence on the “one big idea” of popular sovereignty is a valuable reminder that democracy's promise is not exhausted today by laudable attempts to make our political landscape more deliberative. Amidst a steady crisis in democratic legitimacy, Peonidis's efforts at reviving the ideal of popular rule could help citizens and policymakers in their efforts to create a more democratic form of life.