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Making the People.

An Interview with Paulina Ochoa Espejo, *Haverford College*.

Interviewers: David Cortés Ferrández and Sandra Nava Nieto, *University of Kentucky*

Paulina Ochoa Espejo is an Associate Professor of political science at Haverford College. She is the author of On Borders: Territories, Legitimacy and the Rights of Place (OUP, 2020), The Time of Popular Sovereignty: Process and the Democratic State (PSUP, 2011) and co-editor of the Oxford Handbook of Populism (2017).

Hi, nice to meet you. First of all, we would like to give you the opportunity to introduce yourself: what do you do, how did you end up here?

Paulina Ochoa Espejo (POE): Well, hi, I'm Paulina Ochoa-Espejo. I am a political science professor at Haverford College. I work on Political Philosophy and Political Theory, and most of the work that I do is normative and interpretive. So, I try to think of questions that have to do with how and why we legitimize government and power.

So, you write about populism and you basically have described it in a historical way or in a hypothetical way, but what is populism for you?

POE: This is something very interesting! I have to confess that I don't find the debate about what populism is so exciting. I think that defining populism has kept us from doing things that are more interesting; to figure out other things: what does populism do, how do populists recognize themselves, what does one do after recognizing populism... Definitions and concepts are very important, but when we are thinking about democracy, we don't spend all of our time defining democracy. We also think about other things about democracy. So, I'm not going to say that I don't think that is important, but it's just not the part of populism that interests me the most. For the most part, I've decided that I think I'll just go with the ones that are out there, so I've chosen to stick with what Cas Mudde has defined: it's an ideological or ideational definition. I don't think it's perfect, but I do not want to go out and give one myself. I do care a lot about concepts, but my concept—the one I care about—is The People, not populism.

I wanted to start talking about Podemos and this concept in Spain that says that Podemos is a populist party. My question is if this party would fit in the definition of populism?

POE: That is fascinating for two reasons. The first one is that Podemos is a self-conscious populist party. Most of them are not, right? So, most parties are whatever they are and then there is a critic or there is a commentator who says, 'that is a populist party.' But Podemos is a party that was crafted, that was self-consciously thought of as a populist party. And it was a populist party constituted in a very specific model, which is Laclau's model of populism. So, I would say that it is a populist party because they say so themselves, but I think that also for that reason I would consider them a populist party is that they are trying to create a People both by inclusion and by exclusion. And so, that is something that fits well with most definitions of populism including the one that I use, which is Mudde's. But also, I think that there is a second reason. So, first, self-consciously populist, according to him they are populist, and also, second, because it fits the model. How well it fits the model? Well, that is the historical part, right? I mean, do they manage to create a People? Have they managed to include and exclude those they wanted to include and exclude? Did the party itself generate the kind of movement that creates a People of the left? I am not sure. Actually, I don't know enough of Spanish politics. I mean, history can tell you whether it has succeeded, but it seems that at this point and time they are sort of at a point which it seems they are not succeeding. But, you know, these things are long term and they happen over time, so I guess part of what I bring into this debate is that the People is not something that happens at once. The People is an extended process in time. So, let's see. You know, it's still an open possibility.

You mention that populist parties and movements think of The People as a unified, non-changeable, homogeneous group that they target. That could be Trump with white American men, anti-muslims, etc. So, when I read one of your articles, it made me feel that this idea of The People may work because of fear — fear that The People is going to change and you're not going to belong to it. So, staying in the homogenous group led by a populist makes you feel safer. Why do you think that works?

POE: Well, I think that it's fascinating. The whole thing about the social psychology of group-making is that it's an empirical matter. It's something you need to go and figure out. What I've noticed from what I've known is that people like groups. People like to be in groups. And politics is about group-making. That's the truth. There are always groups, and I think it would be hard to avoid that that is the case.

Now, what are the psychological mechanisms that make you want it? I don't know exactly, but what I do know is that not everybody feels the same. Any political theorist would win if they could say, 'human beings are always like that.' So, for example, Hobbes had a moral psychology, so did Locke, and so did Saint-Thomas. They had a theory of moral psychology. But in the case of Hobbes, he wants to say, as an empirical matter, 'people are like this' — except when they are not! And that's the thing, right? If we could count on them to always be exactly the same, then we could have a theory that would say "it's always that way", but the problem is that people love to make groups... but not always. Sometimes, they dissolve the group. Sometimes, there are people who are completely individualistic, or there are people who feel safer when there's no one following them around, or there are people who go crazy to have followers. So, there are

tendencies, but I don't think that you can say this is a feature of the human mind. Maybe it is a feature of the human mind on most occasions, but there are some exceptions. So, I don't think you can rely on social psychology or on moral psychology to do a theory about populism.

You say in one of your articles that, more than biology or performance, group identities are formed by a common aesthetic judgement. So, what do you think are the aesthetic judgements shared by Podemos and the people that follow Podemos, and the right-wing party Vox? That is, what could be the difference between the aesthetic judgement that a person would draw to join Podemos rather than Vox?

POE: This is interesting. So, what I was trying to do in that article—I was criticizing Kennan Ferguson because he wanted to say: 'ok, what makes a group that we can call a People?' Right? Most people would think that is either shared genes or a biological link, and some think that what makes a People is like a shared performance. His proposal was like, 'no, what makes a People is a shared aesthetic judgement.' I think that I could agree with him. A group can be made by shared aesthetic judgements, and it is usually a group that is better defined than a group defined by the other two criteria, because people always behave in different ways at different times and because it is very, very hard to make a group follow anything that is biological. So I thought that was a good definition.

But notice that this is what makes a group that considers *itself* a People. I don't think a political party is that kind of a group. It is not a People. A political party is a group of citizens that want to fight for power. If those citizens want to characterize themselves as a People, then they are making a point about their right to be separate, to self-determine. The problem is that, when a party claims to be *a* People, they have a tendency to want to be *The* People—The People who then have a right to exclude others from their territory or from their institutions, and they think they have a claim to exclude others from their spaces. So, I think at that point when a party thinks that they are a People, then they tend to say, 'well, we are The People; we want a different country.' So, unless a party thinks that they want a different country or to exclude people, they shouldn't call themselves a People.

Podemos hasn't made that claim, but they do have this idea that the way you make politics is by excluding others. To what degree they want to exclude them? I don't know exactly how it has played out in practice. Do they consider themselves part of the Spanish People? I think they do—the new Spanish People. What makes them smart is that they are displacing the New People to the future, which is something I sort of agree with. But that is exactly what liberalism does: to displace People into the future, so in that respect, it is surprising, because they consider themselves a party that is not a liberal party.

The next question is about resistance. In one of your articles, you have written about how populism is created by political communities of resistance created by right-wing and left-wing populism. Is there any difference? Why? Is it a resistance to democracy?

POE: Did I think of them as a People? I hope I didn't. What I think is that you have communities and we tend to make groups. And those groups can be friends, or families, or political parties. And groups make power. Sometimes you want to resist oppression and injustice, so it is important to build groups to achieve purposes. One of the important purposes of group-making

is resisting injustice. So there needs to be certain kinds of solidarities to resist injustice, and those allow you to create groups against interests that want to perpetuate injustice. Are those The People? I don't think so. I hope they don't see themselves as a People.

Answering your question about if you wrote whether they were People or not, I think you wrote: "the populists make them feel as People, but they are not People."

POE: I mean, I guess they can become A People, but I hope they are not.

You mean they are not self-considered People, but the Populists use them?

POE: That's right. It's just so easy to use that kind of identification and say, 'let's create more power out of this.' Of course, if you identify the group with The People, it's so much easier to get more power, because there is a tendency to stick together in order to defend something that has a right for self-defense, a right for self-determination, a right of being a union. There is that tendency. However, I think those types of communities undermine democratic practices.

If democracy is supposed to be the best system, for being just and plural, then why would you want to create these groups of resistance? If democracy is so good that you want to live in it and you are part of The People, why create resistance to that system?

POE: If there would be an ideal democracy, I would not want to have resistance to it. I have not seen one yet. Most existing political systems aspire to be one thing or another, but they often foster a lot of injustices and oppression. So in those kinds of circumstances, I can see reason for communities of resistance.

What about the "mistake" that democracy makes? What are the drawbacks of democracy? What is the failure of democracy?

POE: In that article, one of the things that I have in mind is that those groups that want to become a political group around a national or cultural identity, normally I would say those groups are fantastic because they foster a sense of identity. It makes it clear, in terms of who you are and who you want to be. They foster your self-esteem and goals that you wouldn't be able to accomplish on your own. So collective aims and trust, reciprocity, solidarity... All of those things are good things on their own.

Now, my concern is that when you have subgroups like that within a state, they often have a tendency not to want to share with other groups, and so fostering those groups, they tend to break communities by exclusion. That may be a problem when those groups don't exist on their own as states, or when those groups do not exist homogeneously in one particular territory, which happens all the time. It is important to foster those groups if they have been oppressed as a People. But if they have not been oppressed as a People, sometimes it is not the best idea to have them to separate themselves from the rest, because you end up physically having to divide them. And that creates pain. So, I doubt whether you could have a world where you have territories for specific peoples, and it would not be able to exist even in the ideal world. Does that make sense?

So, there is not going to be an ideal democracy.

POE: I think an ideal democracy would be a plural democracy.

But you would need to have right-wing groups.

POE: Sure, but that would be *groups*. They wouldn't be The People. I would never imagine, nor want, a country where everyone thought the same. In my view, an ideal democracy would be a plural democracy where all sorts of groups existed and overlapped, groups that were different kind of groups. And one could belong to different groups without having to be exclusive to be a member of one of them. If that is too abstract, I think you should be able to root for a football team, and like certain colors. They are cross-cutting cleavages, as political science says.

And my final question is about the mottos that populists use: Take our country back, Make America Great Again. They are used by right- and left-wing parties alike. So what are the differences in the usage of these mottos and in which way would they differentiate?

POE: So that is where you wanted to get at when you were asking about a common aesthetic judgement. What would differentiate a populist among the right and the left? What makes them similar is that they both imagine themselves as being The People, which means that they have a particular understanding of popular sovereignty, they think that The People is sovereign and cannot be wrong, so that means that the leader cannot be wrong if they embody The People's will. How are they different? The right usually associates The People with a nation and the left with the poor, or even with the working class. So, you could have a populism like Pope Francis wants, the virtue of the poor, and a populism that is a Marxist populism, that imagines The People as a group made of the workers. But what differentiates the populist from the Marxist is that the populist is murkier; they tend to fall into the nation as well, so the extremes touch, the right and the left, in the murky part. The right emphasizes the hierarchical structure, the top-down aspects, something in common between populism and fascism, but they are not the same. Right wing populism tends to be xenophobic, but there are instances of the left being xenophobic as well, like keeping migrants away because they take the jobs away from the poor. There are differences and points in common. Moralistic ideas you can have in both sides. It seems to me that these differences are associated with the nation, mostly.

Finally, we talked about how the system is not fair. Does fair mean that it doesn't obey people's will, as politicians claim? How does, then, disobedience work in this system? Should we accept laws that are not made by us? Should we keep giving this system the power? Or, otherwise, should we just disagree and protest and change? Maybe even fight against it?

POE: This sounds interesting. Let me ask you one question: when you say the system is not fair, what do you mean by system?

The system as democracy. In your article, you claim that democracy is thought to be by the People, for the People, and right now democracy is probably neither by the People nor for the People. People don't decide

those who rule them, and people don't decide their rules, and then, as a consequence, they are not rewarded by those rules.

POE: Given that democracies are supposed to be legitimate because everybody has a chance to participate, and people have not had a chance to participate, maybe these democracies are not fully legitimate. I think that is the case, so the question is: given that democracies are not fully legitimate, should we reject them? Should we have a chance to overturn democracies? I think there are two types of considerations.

One is a pragmatic choice: maybe we have a right to overturn them, but is it convenient? Is it convenient to overturn a system that is not a very good political system but might be better than the alternatives? That's kind of the Churchill take on democracy. The democracy we have is not very good, but it's better than the alternatives. In these pragmatic terms, maybe you should try to change it from the inside, if you don't have anything better to substitute it for. The second one is: What if we could make it better? What if it would be possible to have more participation? Should we fight to make it better? I say yes!

The question is: how does one fight? I think it depends on the circumstances. In some cases, it seems that the best way to destroy oppression is to highlight the injustices by organizing in groups using the mechanisms that already exist in Constitutional democracy. That is the best way to do it. Sometimes you have to overturn the existing laws and there are different ways that are, from a pragmatic perspective, more efficient. I think a good example, because it worked relatively well, were the civil rights movements in the United States and in other places. From my perspective, I remember how people in Mexico managed to go from an authoritarian regime to something that is a bad-functioning democracy, but we can fairly say it's a democracy. It was hard to get there, and I admire those who turned Mexico from an authoritarian regime to a democracy, and I think we should not let go of it. So, yes, I think there has to be some organized movement in order to do it. Is that a populist movement? I don't think so. I think this all happens within democracy, and I don't think you need populism in order to do that. Appealing to The People in that sense actually pushes us further away from the democracy that we would like to have.