

Symbolizing the People and Popular Sovereignty

Format: International Workshop

Date: 29 – 30 January 2026

Location: Hamburg Institute for Social Research, Mittelweg 36, 20148 Hamburg

Organizers:

- Paula Diehl (Kiel University)
- Luciana Villas Bôas (Federal University of Rio de Janeiro)

In cooperation with:

- Hamburg Institute for Social Research
- International Populism Research Network

Registration: No registration is required. However, the number of available seats for external participants is limited in the event location.

Abstract: Democracy is grounded on the people and on the notion of popular sovereignty. Yet, the relationship between popular sovereignty and representation has been described as tension (Manin), aporia (Rosanvallon) or even contradiction (Rousseau; Ankersmit). In the historical process another pressing question emerged: the formation of the people as a political subject is not necessarily a democratic formation but can entail ambivalent and contradictory imaginations of the people and popular sovereignty. Historians (Michelet; Furet) and early psychologists (Le Bon) or psychoanalysts (Freud) have articulated the fear of the masses when looking at the French Revolution. Symbolic and sometimes violent acts of symbolic manifestation of the people in Fascism and even in our days show that the symbolic articulation of the people as a political subject is not necessarily a democratic one. The proliferation of contradictory notions of the people and of the people's role in legitimating the political order represent a challenge to our understanding of the symbolic processes and practices within democracy. Given the ambivalence and entanglement of symbolic repertoires used in representations of the people, it has become all the more urgent to seek criteria that allow us to distinguish between democratic and anti-democratic notions of the people and popular sovereignty. While departing from a broad variety of concrete examples of how the people are symbolically and medially communicated and enacted, this workshop will focus attention on the elaboration of criteria for delimiting the chances from the threats currently posed to democracy. The workshop examines the shifts and the ambivalences based on which democratic claims are symbolically articulated. We invite scholars from political science, philosophy, sociology, law and especially cultural studies to discuss the symbolization of the people and popular sovereignty, their pictures and images, performances, vocabulary but also symbolic articulation in constitutions and other law documents.

Workshop Programme

29 January 2026

2:00 pm – 2:30 pm | Welcome and Introduction

2:30 pm – 4:30 pm | Panel 1: Performing the People and Popular Sovereignty

- *Jason Frank* (Cornell University): „The Aesthetics of Popular Constituent Power“
- *Ino Augsberg* (Kiel University): „Exposing Power – ‚Phryne in front of the A|reopagus‘ and the idea of a *pouvoir prostituant*“

4:30 pm – 5:00 pm | Coffee Break

5:00 pm – 7:00 pm | Panel 2: The Locus of Popular Power

- *Luciana Villas Bôas* (Federal University of Rio de Janeiro): „The people against the seat of power? Reflections on the iconography of popular sovereignty“
- *Benjamin Loy* (University of Munich): „The pueblo as potential and problem. On symbolic (dis-)articulations of popular sovereignty in Chile from the Unidad Popular to the present“

30 January 2026

9:30 – 11:30 am | Panel 3: Constructing the People

- *Carlos de la Torre* (University of Florida): „Constructing and Performing the People“
- *Stefan Jonsson* (Linköping University): „We Were Never One Hand: Figures of Solidarity and Popular Sovereignty in Egypt's 25 January Revolution“

11:30 – 11:45 am | Coffee Break

11:45 am - 1:45 pm | Panel 4: From Representation to Formation

- *Mattias Lehtinen* (University of Helsinki): „Logics of (Un)representing the People: Democratic Accountability and Immediate and Mediated Negativity“
- *Christine Blättler* (Kiel University): „Collective unconscious and irrational real“

1:45 pm – 2:45 pm | Lunch Break

2:45 pm – 3:15 pm | Concluding Remarks

- *Paula Diehl* (Kiel University)
- *Luciana Villas Bôas* (Federal University of Rio de Janeiro)