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# Civilizing Left Populism: Towards a Theory of Plebeian Democracy

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## Abstract

This article discusses how to overcome the limitations of liberal democracy whilst remaining committed to a constitutional political order based on individual rights. Combining insights from Hispanophone and Anglophone scholarship, we argue that the tradition of specifically *plebeian* republican political thought offers resources for overcoming the perennial liberal problem that socio-economic divisions beyond the state are rendered politically invisible, leaving democracy vulnerable to oligarchic capture. Thus, we outline an institutional vision of plebeian democracy based on two insights. First, starting from a republican notion of liberty as material independence we understand social (property) rights as constitutive for the democratic body politic on a par with political-judicial rights. Second, we advocate the need for separate institutions of elite accountability as checks on oligarchy. To connect theory and praxis, we illustrate this framework through a critical-affirmative analysis of the discourse of Bernie Sanders and Podemos leader Pablo Iglesias. Although both are viewed as “left populists” due to their invocations of an elite-people antagonism, they are more accurately described as plebeian democrats, who share an ideal of democracy as a civic and rights-based, republican model of government.

*Keywords: Oligarchy; republican liberty; left populism; radical democracy*

# 1. Introduction

*We may have democracy, or we may have wealth concentrated in the hands of a few, but we can't have both - Louis Brandeis<sup>1</sup>*

In recent years, the issue of economic inequality has emerged as a central political problem (Piketty 2014; Winters and Page 2009). The growing impact of the ultra-rich on politics through campaign donations and media influence has been a trend since the 1970s. But since 2008 the problem has increasingly been addressed at the grassroots level, as new movements have (re)framed the issue of inequality as a problem of *oligarchy*, understood as the unfettered power of an ultra-rich minority to undermine democratic decision-making (Winters 2011).<sup>2</sup> The early 2010s saw a wave of street-based protests against bailing out the banks while offering austerity to the rest, and - importantly - in favor of a radical expansion of democracy. The Indignados-movement in Spain and the Occupy-movement spreading from New York across the world in 2011 are prime examples. These mobilizations were followed by a wave of unexpectedly successful left-wing electoral campaigns such as Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain, Bernie Sanders in the US, Mélenchon in France, and Corbyn in the UK.

Discouragingly, both social scientists and mainstream media have overwhelmingly chosen *not* to treat this post-crisis, left-wing wave of political mobilization as a *sui generis* phenomenon, requiring an explanation of its own. Instead, it has been subsumed under a larger “populist” wave of discontent that lumps together left- and right-wing movements (Müller 2017; Mounk 2018). The shared trait of e.g. Sanders and Trump, Corbyn and Farage, or Mélenchon and Le Pen that supposedly makes them expressions of the same underlying logic is their anti-elitist rhetoric. Populists of all stripes invariably promise to challenge the morally flawed *elite* in the name of the pure *people* (Mudde & Kaltwasser 2018). Although it is recognized that the ideological articulations of populism vary, both left and right are nevertheless seen as protagonists of a similar assault on the institutions of liberal democracy, due to their shared predilection for antagonizing the establishment and threatening the status quo.

Our take is different. We agree that ‘liberal democracy’ - defined heuristically as a constitutional political order with parliamentarism, pluralism, universal suffrage, individual rights (to free speech, association, private property) and a sharp separation between the public and the private sphere<sup>3</sup> - is increasingly under siege from both the right and left. But to understand why it is challenged - and whether there is anything to learn from the

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted from Lonergan (1941:42).

<sup>2</sup> By following Winters’s material concept of oligarchy, we employ a narrower definition than found elsewhere in the literature. Most significantly, Jacques Rancière (2014) uses a more expansive definition, by which oligarchy denotes any sort of power concentration in the hands of a minority, including elected representatives. Cornelius Castoriadis (1991, see also Premat 2006) similarly describes modern representative government as essentially a ‘liberal oligarchy’.

<sup>3</sup> “Liberal democracy” can be defined in multiple ways, since the liberal tradition is extremely heterogeneous, spanning from Habermas to Hayek. Accordingly, our definition is merely a point of departure.

challenges - we must reject the notion that the only possible alternative to a “liberal” position is essentially an authoritarian, undemocratic one. We must insist on distinguishing between the communitarian or neo-fascist critique of liberal democracy from the right, and the radical democratic critique from the left. This paper focuses entirely on the latter kind.

Our aim is to outline a vision of *plebeian democracy* as a political philosophical reflection on the current conjuncture, which can be described as an ‘anti-oligarchic moment’. This was first expressed in the 2011 Square Movements, and since in an array of electoral campaigns. Both types of political mobilization reject the liberal democratic status quo not for being *too* democratic or permissive, but for being *insufficiently* democratic. In particular, the response to the 2008 crisis – when the financial sector evaded punishment while ordinary people paid the bill - is interpreted as a function of the corruption of democracy. Drawing on insights from scholars who have worked to recover the plebeian or popular-democratic tradition within republican thought, we argue that the analytical lens of plebeian democracy offers not only a useful tool for understanding post-2008 left-wing political movements, but also the conceptual foundation for a distinct political philosophical vision of radical democracy. Specifically, we contend that plebeian democracy promises to transcend liberal democracy by 1) constitutionalizing social (property) rights that ensure the material independence of individuals and 2) countering the problem of oligarchy by constructing institutions of elite accountability. .

We view plebeian democracy as an analytical alternative to ‘left populism’ as recently theorized by Chantal Mouffe (2018). Mouffe interprets the concept of populism in neutral, non-pejorative terms and accordingly does not worry about conflating radical democrats with anti-democrats on the right. She proposes embracing the moniker ‘left populism’. Her thesis is that any efficient vision of radical democracy is dependent upon the discursive articulation of an antagonism between people and elite. The only way to combat right-wing reactionaries is to construe an open and pro-democratic notion of ‘the people’. While accepting the strategic value of Mouffe’s argument, we however find that the concept of left populism remains under-defined in terms of democratic theory. Because the theory of ‘left populism’ operates on the strategic plane, it remains rather insubstantial as an *institutional* vision of democracy. Mouffe’s ambition is to propose a new *strategic orientation* for various kinds of social movements struggling for democracy, not to articulate concrete pathways of institutional transformation.<sup>4</sup> Thus, moving beyond Mouffe , we propose that ‘plebeian democracy’ provides a useful entry point to theorizing the *institutional* nature of radical democracy. Table 1 schematizes the difference between Mouffe’s left populist imaginary and our plebeian democratic imaginary.

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<sup>4</sup> The closest Mouffe (2018:48) gets to being concrete about institutions is her insistence that the “constitutive principles of the liberal state”, by which she understands the division of power, universal suffrage, multi-party systems and civil rights, should be defended and radicalized. This is parallel to the position taken in her post-Marxist magnum opus with Ernesto Laclau, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* that ‘radical democracy’ involves an ambition to “deepen and expand” liberal-democratic ideology, not a break with it (Laclau & Mouffe 1985:176). Beyond this, however, Laclau & Mouffe are not primarily concerned with outlining what such a deepening would mean, in institutional and constitutional terms. ‘Radical democracy’ is not a proposed ‘state project’, but rather a new discursive nodal point for establishing a chain of equivalences between a plurality of social movements struggling for equality and against domination. We take this approach further by discussing how such a movement could actually democratize the state once in power.

**Table 1. Left Populism vs Plebeian Democracy**

	<i>Left Populism (Mouffe)</i>	<i>Plebeian Democracy</i>
Domain of political theory	Strategy	Philosophy
Determinant antagonism	'The People' vs 'The Elite'	Demos vs Oligarchy
Real world reference point	Electoral movements	Institutions
Conception of rights	Liberal negative (Protection of individuals vis- a-vis against state )	Republican negative (Protection of individuals against elites inside <i>and</i> outside states)

The adjective 'plebeian' originates from 'plebs', an ancient Roman socio-political category, opposed to the holders of political and economic power, the 'patricians'. Originally, the plebs were excluded from the symbolic order controlled by the patricians, and only gradually won a modicum of political rights (see Breugh 2013:4-11). Extant literature tends to focus on this *political* aspect of the plebeian spirit, as a form of autonomous subjectivity generated, often spontaneously, as a rebellion against exclusion from a political order (Rancière 1999; Breugh 2013). However, while we share the view that the demand for political equality is an essential part of plebeianism, our aim is *also* to highlight the socio-economic sense in which 'plebs' correspond approximately to 'commoners' or 'the lower classes', i.e. a negatively defined group term uniting all those excluded from a position of privilege.

In seeking to reaffirm a combined political and socio-economic interpretation of plebeianism, we have two purposes in mind. First, to identify a socio-economic class subject that is more inclusive than the industrial working class, *the proletariat*, preferred in Marxist orthodoxy, yet narrower than 'the people', which has the unfortunate ambiguity of lending itself to an ethno-cultural definition (as in right-wing populism). Our aspiration of 'civilizing left populism' is precisely that of replacing the ambiguous elite-people distinction with a vertical socio-political conflict line, which invokes the trans-historical struggles of 'the many' to achieve both political and socio-economic justice through transcending polities dominated by the wealthy minority. Our second goal is to point to the major difference between the vision of democracy we outline and *liberal* democracy – i.e. the degree of attention paid to social class in the political realm. Our aim in invoking *plebeian* democracy is to make democratic theory class conscious again. It takes us back to Aristotle's (1995) famous definition of democracy as not simply the rule of the *many*, but also of the *poor freemen* (insofar as this class made up the majority). We specifically highlight the blindness to social class as the cardinal sin of liberal democracy. Liberal democracy is a vision of political equality within the realm of 'the state' combined with a conspicuous lack of concern for how socio-economic hierarchies beyond it play back into the functioning of democracy. The problem with the vision is not the political equality part, but that it is poor at conceptualizing, let alone

mediating, the threat to democracy that oligarchy poses. Briefly put, liberal democracy leaves itself vulnerable to capture by oligarchic interests.

A caveat is necessary. It is conceivable that the term ‘plebeian’ would lead some readers to associations with mob rule and disregard of individual rights - a system in which brute class domination trumps deliberation and reasoned debate. However, our vision of democracy beyond liberalism does not involve overturning the legal framework and protection of individual rights associated with liberalism. Indeed the idea in the plebeian framework is rather to deepen the protection of individuals by providing constitutional protection not only from ethnic, political and religious persecution, but also from predation by the rich and powerful. Our conception of plebeian democracy is that it starts from an unbendable adherence to constitutional “rules of the game” and to individual civil rights as the basis of any just political order. Our goal is to identify ways to constitutionalize the plebeian spirit and erect a framework that allows for critique of any political project that throws such adherences into doubt. Our critique of liberal democracy concerns its inability to conceptualize the threat of oligarchic capture and the means that any democratic system needs to have at its disposal to mediate it.

The outline is as follows. Section 2 takes stock of extant theories of plebeianism and reviews the ‘republican revival’ in political theory. Section 3 outlines a theory of plebeian democracy by combining insights from two scholars: the Spanish political philosopher Antoni Domènech (2004) and John P. McCormick (2011). Section 4 compares selected texts from two preeminent ‘left populist’ leaders - Bernie Sanders (2016) and Pablo Iglesias (2015), in order to highlight and affirm their parallel ‘plebeian’ sensitivities. Section 5 concludes.

## 2. The Plebeian Tradition and the Republican Revival

Among the few scholars to treat plebeianism as a positive normative concept is Jeffrey E. Green (2016), who calls for theoretical recognition of how liberal democracy will necessarily produce an instinctive plebeian reaction to its (supposedly) unfulfillable promise of political equality. Thus, Green specifically calls for a plebeian theory *of* liberal democracy, not a radical alternative to it. In contrast, a more radical engagement with the importance of the plebeian tradition is found in the political philosophy of Jacques Rancière. The figure of the plebs plays an integral role in Rancière’s theory of democracy, representing the self-propelled political subjectivity of the radically excluded that suddenly manage to burst into a given symbolic-political order to demand recognition, thus changing the political rules of engagement. The historical significance of the first plebeian secession in Rome, 494 BC, was for Rancière that it led to the establishment of a ‘common stage’ for

politics that the ruling patricians were now forced to share with a hitherto excluded counterpart (see Breugh 2013:91-98).<sup>5</sup>

The key reference point for our discussion of plebeian-republican democracy, however, is Martin Breugh's 2013 landmark study of 'The Plebeian Experience'. Breugh makes a triple contribution by combining a magisterial overview of the relevant literature from Machiavelli and Vico to Foucault and Rancière with a set of original case studies – the *sans-culottes*, the Jacobin *London Corresponding Society*, and the *Paris Commune* – and an inventive theorization of the plebeian condition. Like Rancière, Breugh (2013:xxi-xxiv) emphasizes the *political* dimension and identifies 'the plebeian experience' with a set of recurring attempts of subaltern groups to end their sub-political status. He arrives at an anatomy of 'the plebeian experience' that highlights its three ostensible cross-historical characteristics. It is *communalist* (constituted "from below" and based on the direct revolutionary action of the many), *agoraphilic* (in favor of enabling the many to participate actively in government), and *discontinuous* (plebeian action as an "irruptive event that temporarily fractures the order of domination" and "leaves traces" on the political order, but which is intrinsically unable to endure).

We consider this a useful and thought-provoking definition. However, in aiming for an institutionally specific theory of plebeian democracy, we nonetheless move beyond Breugh's account. In our view, rather than accepting the ephemeral nature of 'the plebeian experience' as something supposedly natural and non-contingent, we seek to discuss how to build robust, lasting political structures to allow for a *permanent* plebeian influence on the set up of society: How can plebeian democracy become the norm, not the exception? This is a question of finding ways to institutionalize the agoraphilic spirit of plebeianism. Furthermore, it directs our attention to the *republican* tradition, which centers on the discussion of what institutions are required to realize a just polity and a Good Society. Indeed, in turning to republican theory, we are seeking to articulate the plebeian spirit (the desire to end both political exclusion and socio-economic domination) with a positive theory of the democratic state. In what follows, we contend that republican political philosophy contains a neglected source of inspiration for a theory of plebeian democracy as a viable institutional alternative to liberal democracy. We begin by situating our approach in the landscape of contemporary republican thought.

In recent decades, the post-1945 liberal dominance in Western political theory has been challenged by a revival of republicanism. This revival centers on rejecting the liberal concept of *freedom as non-interference* ("the absence of coercion of the body or the will") in favor of a republican notion of *freedom as non-domination* ("the absence of the subjection to the will of others") (Pettit 2014:9,27). In the republican view, harking back to the Roman republic, an individual does not need to be actively coerced to be unfree. It is not the actualized interference, but the mere presence of a master (e.g. slave-owner, employer, or moneylender) who can choose to interfere at their discretion, that constitutes the loss of liberty. To live free was to be materially independent whilst enjoying civic rights that politically guaranteed this freedom. Scholars like Quentin Skinner (1998) and

Philip Pettit (1997) have shown how early modern philosophers revived this Roman notion for struggles against absolutism (political freedom requiring the absence of a monarch with arbitrary powers), only to be gradually overshadowed by the liberal notion elaborated by thinkers from Hobbes, over Bentham to Isaiah Berlin. Based on these pioneering efforts, a variegated literature has sought to restore and improve theories of human flourishing, politics, and the state on a distinctly neo-republican basis (for overviews see Laborde & Maynor 2009; Niederberger 2013).

This wave of neo-republican thought is not without its critics, however. Recently, a growing number of scholars have contended that the neo-republican revival has an aristocratic bias in its preference for openly anti-democratic thinkers like Cicero and James Madison. Consequently, they argue, it cannot serve as the theoretical foundation for a contemporary progressive alternative to liberal democracy. Instead, they study how the republican conceptual framework has also been reworked in many different historical-contextual guises to motivate *plebeian* political projects of extending or universalizing the privilege of republican freedom and citizenship beyond the aristocratic class (McCormick 2011; Gourevitch 2014; Roberts 2016; Thompson 2018).

Meanwhile, outside the purview of Anglo-American academia, a group of scholars whom we propose to call the Barcelona School has developed a parallel critique of mainstream neo-republicanism.<sup>6</sup> The Barcelona School's intellectual mission is to document the historical continuity of attempts by various plebeian political movements since antiquity to appropriate the vocabulary of republicanism as a weapon of legitimation in struggles against aristocrats, feudal lords and, in modern time, capitalists (key publications include Domènech 2004; Bertomeu & Domènech 2005; Casassas & De Wispelaere 2016; Domènech & Bertomeu 2016). The Barcelona School challenges mainstream neo-republicanism in two ways. First, by arguing that the roots of republican thought predate the Roman republic and are found in the Athenian centennial experience of uninterrupted rule of the demos, the social class of poor freemen. Second, by proposing that the concept of non-domination in Pettit in particular is too philosophically abstract and should be analyzed in concrete material-institutional terms, related to the distribution of *property* (Domènech & Raventós 2007).

A shared insight of critics of neo-republicanism on both sides of the Atlantic is that the republican tradition itself was always divided between an *aristocratic* tendency, which seeks republican freedom only for a minority of propertied males and a *democratic* tendency, whose proponents have sought to extend republican liberty to an ever greater proportion of the population (slaves, women, craftsmen, industrial workers) (Domènech & Raventos 2007). Our ambition is to bring the two wings of the democratically oriented republican revival - the Anglo-American and the Hispanophone - into dialogue. We do so by combining their insights in order to distill a vision of 'Plebeian Democracy'.

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<sup>6</sup> The school's institutional bases are found at the sociology department of Universitat Barcelona and the republican socialist journal *Sin Permiso* (2005-).



### 3. Plebeian Democracy: Towards a Theoretical Framework

Below, we draw on two prominent “plebeian” critics of neo-republicanism, Antoni Domènech of the Barcelona School (2004) and Chicago-based John P. McCormick (2011), to make two propositions about the limits to liberal democracy. In order to situate these propositions, we first need to clarify how the plebeian perspective on democracy differs from the liberal.

The main problem of liberal theory, seen from a plebeian perspective, is that it has traditionally only been able to imagine threats against liberty and democracy as coming from either the state or the mob. David Held describes classical liberal democracy as essentially a form of ‘protective democracy’ (Held 2005, 99). This means on one hand using the state to protect life and property against the mob, and on the other using the division of powers, rule of law, and (limited) representation to protect individuals against state interference or coercion. This emanates from a clear division of the social world into an economic and a political/legal sphere, with political action only legitimately exercised in the latter (Heilbroner 1985).

Of special concern to early advocates of liberal democracy such as John Stuart Mill (2008:302) was the threat of a ‘tyranny of the majority’ made possible by the introduction of representative government in the aftermath of the revolutions of the 18th and 19th century. Mill feared a combination of state coercion and perceived mob rule from the poor majority using the power granted by general suffrage to confiscate or tax away the wealth of the rich minority. It was crucial therefore to limit the democratic elements of the constitution and create institutions that should be “protecting minorities by admitting them to a substantial participation in political power” (ibid:302). Thus, liberal democratic thinkers envisioned protective institutions as necessary for protecting individuals against the state and for protecting executive state power against excessive democracy. This resulted in a set of anti-majoritarian institutions, such as powerful political courts with appointed (non-plebeian) officers, constitutional limits to democracy and a conception of rights that specifically excluded economic/social rights.

In contrast, the plebeian democratic perspective starts from conceptualizing socio-economic inequality as a distinctly *political* problem: it therefore rejects the idea of two distinct spheres, economic and political, with widely differing rules and regulations. Rather, economic concepts such as wealth and class are constitutive for the body politics, and the regulation of these are necessary components of any democratic order.

In this article, we define oligarchy as the political rule of the rich. We draw this definition from Jeffrey Winters’ (2011) Aristotelian approach. In *Politics*, Aristotle describes oligarchy as based in economic class, rather than in numbers: “Wherever men rule by reason of their wealth, whether they be few or many, that is an oligarchy, and where the poor rule, that is a democracy” (III viii 1280a1–3). This definition distinguishes the idea of oligarchy from a broader conception of elite rule. While ‘elite’ signifies anyone controlling power resources, including political and organizational power, our definition restricts oligarchs to those with a material

power base based on private property. This would exclude state elites, such as the Soviet nomenklatura, who, while indeed a closed elite, were dependent on state offices for their power, without succeeding in building material independent bases for themselves. The same goes for the union and party elites that Robert Michels (2000) described in his ‘iron law of oligarchy’, who were powerful due to control of offices and institutions, and not because of private property ownership.

This attention to inequality and oligarchy ties into the foundational republican notion of freedom as non-domination. As Skinner (1998) points out, this is a negative conception with the focus on protecting the individual against the predation of the powerful. This implies that our plebeian democratic vision shares liberalism’s emphasis on limiting state power, through a system premised on civic-political rights based in a constitution. But in contrast to liberalism, a plebeian-democratic perspective includes not only the means to curb the public ‘imperium’ of the state, but also the private ‘dominium’ of private actors (Cohen, 1927) in its conception of protection and rights. Both of the propositions that we unfold below follow from rejecting the public-private distinction and treating socio-economic inequality as a distinctly *political* problem. Table 2 compares the liberal democratic and plebeian democratic visions of democracy.

	<b>Liberal democracy</b>	<b>Plebeian democracy</b>
<b>Conception of freedom</b>	Non-interference	Non-domination
<b>Democratic rights</b>	Legal equality Political equality	Legal equality Political equality Socio-economic independence
<b>Protective institutions</b>	Rule of law (state) Anti-majoritarian institutions (against mob)	Rule of law (state) Anti-oligarchic institutions (against elite)
<b>Role of citizens</b>	Voting	Voting, Controlling, participating

***Proposition #1: Real democracy requires a constitutional guarantee of material independence for all citizens***

Within the liberal model of democracy, gradually developed since the nineteenth century, citizenship is granted without a view to class divisions. Its core is limited to juridical and political rights. Social rights that ensure social autonomy - may be added (as famously analyzed by Marshall (1950)), but they are not *constitutive* of democracy. From the plebeian democratic viewpoint, in contrast, any model of democracy that does not grant social autonomy as an integral part of citizenship is incomplete. To see why, it is useful to follow the Barcelona School's reading on the *liberty-property nexus*. In the republican tradition as a whole individual freedom, cannot exist for people deprived of property; however, it is nonetheless considered a prerequisite of political competence. Hence, socio-economic dependence, arising from the lack of property, renders individuals less able to engage reciprocally in decision-making processes. As Domènech's colleague, Daniel Raventós, puts it:

"...in the republican tradition, the independence conferred by property is not just a matter of private interest. On the contrary, it is of crucial political importance, both in terms of the exercise of freedom and in achieving republican self-government, because having a guaranteed material base of existence is indispensable for political independence and competence" (Raventós 2007:64).

Consequently, while it is possible to grant political rights of participation to people who are dominated (socio-economically unfree because they are devoid of property) – as has been done since 1800s – one cannot reasonably expect them to actually make use of such rights with the same vigor and civic virtue as people who are materially independent (non-dominated) (Domènech & Bertomeu 2005:38). Unless republican liberty is extended to the vast majority of the population – something which cannot be done without a political will to engage with the question of property – the political system will remain substantially (if not formally) undemocratic.

Following this argument, Domènech interprets an array of historical plebeian-democratic projects as being organized around the ambition to extend property ownership. The first is the Athenian democracy. In Athens, the party of the 'Demos' (a term covering not the entire citizenry but the popular classes of freemen, those who had to rely on working with their hands in order to survive, i.e. craftsmen, laborers) realized that democratic government presupposes a modicum of socio-economic independence for citizens. This explains why they launched a "revolutionary democratic program" involving land redistribution, abolition of debt slavery and guaranteed remuneration (*mishton*) for those selected to public office. The function of the *mishton* was to afford "...the material means for poor citizens to participate in government (Domènech & Raventos 2007:2).

Domènech's second case is the French Revolution. The significance of Jacobinism and Robespierre's thought in particular was to rearticulate –in the context of a modern nation-state - this vision of socio-economic emancipation for subaltern classes as a precondition for democratic rule. Robespierre agitated fiercely in 1791 against the distinction between 'active' and 'passive' citizens preferred by the more moderate revolutionaries

and invoked the right of the citizen to material sustenance as the most fundamental right of all.<sup>7</sup> In Domènech's estimation, the key innovation of the liberal constitutional paradigm that emerged after the defeat of Jacobinism and spread across Europe from the 1810s is precisely to grant equal juridical-political rights for the individual vis-à-vis the state whilst remaining blind to the socio-economic dimensions of citizenship. In liberal regimes, all (male) individuals were granted equal juridical status (and, decades later, equal political rights because of the pressure of popular movements for universal suffrage). However, the question of socio-economic inequality in the private sphere was left out of consideration.

The third step in Domènech's reconstruction of the history of republicanism subsumes the democratic socialist tradition of working-class organization under it. He views democratic socialism as the conscious continuation, under the conditions of industrial capitalism, of the ancient democratic-republican project of extending republican liberty – and political empowerment – to an ever-wider proportion of the population. The imaginaries of 'the Social Republic' and later Social Democracy (developed by workers' movements across Europe from mid-c19 to WW1) expressed the ambition of transcending the liberal form of the state by using democratic institutions to solve the 'social question' of property. For Domènech, Karl Marx's genius lay in drawing the political implications of the fact that capitalist dispossession had rendered the old republican program of universalized Small Property (as advocated by e.g. Thomas Jefferson and Tom Paine) obsolete; a new way to ensure the material independence of ordinary people was required. Thus, the triad of unionism ('constitutionalizing' the labor market to improve working conditions and increase wages), cooperativism (co-ownership and a practice ground for democratic society) and the socialization of the means of production through parliament – were the means to this aim.

What we take from the Barcelona School is an interpretive political philosophical key under which to view past and present struggles for democracy beyond its liberal form, but not as a one-size-fits-all institutional template. Indeed, the insight that democracy must somehow tackle class-divisions emerging outside of the state can lead to a variety of institutional strategies depending on the historical context. For simplicity, we can distinguish between a radical and moderate approach.

The radical approach is to set up democratic constitutions that allow parliamentary majorities to legitimately restructure property ownership: in other words, to make private property rights subservient to

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<sup>7</sup> In our view, Domènech's (2004) argument that Robespierre was a key innovator within republican political philosophy is pertinent (see also Escandell 2016). So is his reminder that the Jacobins preceded 'liberals' in defending individual rights (for a similar acknowledgement of Jacobins' central role in the modern progressive project, see Moyn 2018). However, affirming Robespierre is indubitably controversial when it comes to several other aspects of democratic theory, such as the problem of leadership or dictatorship within plebeian movements, the relationship between central government and grassroots constituencies, and the question of the institutional implications of the ideal of 'popular sovereignty'. The cynical approach of Robespierre and the Jacobins vis-à-vis the other wings of France's revolutionary-plebeian movement, especially the sans-culottes, is a case in point. For reasons of space, this article does not go into depth with these issues, but a caveat is required: we have no intention of glorifying the wartime realpolitik of the Jacobin government, nor its philosophical stance on political centralization. In emphasizing the ideal of republican liberty for individuals vis-à-vis both oligarchs (dominium) and the state (imperium), our proposed theory of plebeian democracy is not compatible with any institutional order in which the central state (whether democratically elected or not) can encroach upon the right of citizens to form independent political organizations.

democracy. This can be done defensively, through a constitutional stipulation that oligarchic wealth concentration threatening the neutrality of the state can be countered through expropriation without full compensation, or offensively, as in the Marxist vision of the full socialization of the means of production through worker and/or state ownership. However, plebeian democracy does not have to go this far. The moderate alternative is to enhance equal democratic participation by compensating politically-institutionally for socio-economic divisions. This was the Athenian strategy. Beyond land reform and the debt jubilee, property relations were left untouched and society remained divided by class. Instead, the lack of liberty of poor freemen was remedied through remuneration for political participation. With similar philosophical motivations, the Barcelona School's scholars advocate for a Universal Basic Income as a modern-day *mishton*, a compensatory institution to guarantee all citizens an economic floor or modicum of social autonomy that allowing them to escape exploitative relations in the workplace, but also to prioritize political participation. Guaranteed employment constitutes a similar means, as does universal welfare rights more generally.

Its analytical virtues aside, however, Domènech's vision does not quite provide a sufficient toolkit for a plebeian-democratic institutional alternative to liberal democracy. When it comes to curbing oligarchy, Domènech remains tied to the nineteenth-century democratic socialist notion that elections with universal suffrage will prove adequate. The problem is that this assumes that the plebeian movement – hegemonized by the industrial proletariat – will develop the strength to play modern representative democracy to its advantage. Winning the vote for working people in combination with a coordinated movement of working-class economic, political and cultural associations is assumed to guarantee victory in the long term.. In hindsight, this could be viewed as a mistakenly optimistic belief. It is paradoxical that Domènech - a great fan of Athenian democracy - retains none of the famous Athenian skepticism against elections as a method favoring oligarchic forces. Thus, we contend that a vision of plebeian democracy today needs to think *beyond* the construction of working-class parties (and/or popular fronts). We need to consider alternative ways to design democratic institutions that can hold would-be oligarchs accountable.

***Proposition §2: Real democracy requires institutions of elite accountability***

John McCormick (2006, 2011) develops his democratic perspective in a direct engagement with Machiavelli's thought. Contrary to Quentin Skinner and the Cambridge School, who see Machiavelli as a representative of the (aristocratic) mainstream of the republican tradition, McCormick interprets him as proponent of a popular form of republicanism, focused on curbing the influence of the rich and powerful on the lives of freedom for common men in the republic. Machiavelli problematizes the division of the republic into the rich and poor, and lauds the Romans for their institution of the People's Tribunes as a means to protect plebeians from the oppression of patricians, and to stop them from using the laws "not for the common

freedom, but for their own power” (Machiavelli, 1996:50). A free republic needs both a strong military for external defense and specific institutions to protect it from complete domination by the rich and powerful.

The office of the People’s Tribune, reserved for the lower order of plebs, was instituted with the powerful weapon of the veto as a means of curbing the power of the senatorial class (McCormick 2011:31). The fear of the monopolization of power by the elite also meant that there was a strong skepticism towards elections amongst the proponents of popular republicanism. Because of their greater wealth and fame, the rich had better odds of winning elections than candidates from popular classes. In Machiavelli’s time, therefore, elections were favored by proponents of the aristocratic republic, while the popular classes preferred sortition, or lottery, for public office (ibid:107).

Despite his focus on renaissance Italy, McCormick’s project is not only historical. Rather, he states that the sort of institutions of elite accountability then common among proponents of popular republics can be of use in our current time with rising economic inequality and the emergence of a powerful new oligarchic class: our current parliamentary democracies are inspired more by aristocratic than popular republicanism. In order to construct a democratic system, we must rediscover an institutional framework for curbing the power of the rich. In the article “Control the Wealthy and Patrol the Magistrate: Restoring Elite Accountability and Popular Government”, McCormick (2006) lays out the main elements in an anti-oligarchic framework. The first element is employing a mix of lottery and election in the appointment for political offices. The use of sortition balances the access to public offices, against the aristocratic bias inherent in elections. The second element is the use of class-specific offices and wealth-excluding institutions inspired by the People’s Tribunes, which were constructed as safeguards of the lower classes against the oligarchic power of the senatorial elite.

The use of institutions like People’s Tribunes and lotteries are not only constitutional safeguards against oligarchic encroachment upon democracy, but also ways of creating a ‘class consciousness’ among the popular masses, as a contrast to the ‘class neutral’ institutions of today’s democracies that render invisible differences in political and economic power. McCormick combines these two elements into a concrete proposal for a 51-person “tribunal assembly” to act as a non-oligarchic check on government institutions. The members would be drawn by lot, serve one-year terms with full wage compensation, and be given restricted powers to veto legislation or impeach magistrates. The wealthy (top 10% by wealth distribution) and powerful (current or former officeholders) would be restricted from participation. The important point, however, is not the individual proposals, but the philosophical commitment to institutionalizing checks on oligarchic power analogously to institutions that protect individuals from the state, such as independent courts, accountability of public servants and strict regulation to the individual power of public magistrates. In contrast, liberal democratic theory can only conceptualize threats against democracy as stemming from the excess of state power. Consequently, the only sort of protective institutions liberals can think of in a democratic state comprises anti-majoritarian institutions to protect minorities against the will of the majority. However, the rise in global inequality and the rising power of financial markets now pose a different form of threat to democratic

governance. Arguably, the sovereignty of elected parliaments is not primarily threatened by the growing power of the executive, but by the growing private power of ultra-wealthy non-state actors. The urgency of this trend is what brings us now to shift from the theoretical to the practical domain.

#### 4. Plebeian Democracy in Practice? Comparing the Visions of Bernie Sanders and Pablo Iglesias

This section applies the plebeian-democratic framework as an interpretive lens through which to analyze the discourse of the leaders of two key progressive political movements since 2008: Bernie Sanders and Pablo Iglesias. Both represent successful electoral campaigns building on earlier anti-establishment, street-level mobilizations for democracy, the *Occupy* and *15M* movements respectively. The purpose is to engage in a dialogue between theory and practice by critically affirming the parallel plebeian-democratic sensibilities in two figures often described as “left populists”. Table 3 summarizes the comparison.

**Table 3. Varieties of Plebeian Democracy: A Comparison of the Discourse of Pablo Iglesias and Bernie Sanders.**

	<i>Sanders (2016)</i>	<i>Iglesias (2015)</i>
<b>Primary Aim</b>	Restoring Democracy from Oligarchic Encroachment	Radicalizing Democracy ("socializing political power")
<b>Historical roots</b>	Jefferson, Lincoln, abolitionism, American Populism; Roosevelt's New Deal, Civil Rights Movement	Athenian Democracy; French Revolution
<b>Political Subject</b>	The 99 % "The Middle Class"	"The People" (as multi-cultural Demos, defined negatively by not being part of the caste)
<b>Political Antagonist</b>	"The Billionaire Class"	"The Caste" (domestic) / "The Party of Wall Street" (international)
<b>How does material dependence threaten democracy?</b>	Woeful living standards and deteriorating public welfare gives oligarchs better opportunity to get further cuts through	The lack of a constitutional guarantee for social existence makes true democracy impossible
<b>How does oligarchic agency threaten democracy?</b>	Campaign contributions, ownership of media, think tanks, university chairs, and political front groups	Corruption within state apparatus, media ownership concentration
<b>Proposed institutional transformation</b>	Money out of politics through campaign finance reform	New radical democratic republican constitution

*Bernie Sanders: Democratic Revolt against the Billionaire Class*

The rise of the Sanders movement ranks among the most important developments on the American left for decades, turning a presidential primary campaign into a progressive insurgency. A long time independent who labels himself a ‘democratic socialist’, Sanders’ 2016 platform included free college admission and universal health care, paid for by drastically raising taxes on the rich. This represented a clear break with the neoliberal economic line that had dominated the Democratic Party since the 1990s. It came as a surprise to most observers that Sanders mounted a serious challenge to Hillary Clinton in 2016. Pinning down his ideology is not easy. While his self-professed socialism represents a radical break with the dominant political discourse, his actual slate of policies fits within the tradition of ‘New Deal’ social liberalism, albeit on its radical wing. This has led some to argue that Sanders is a traditional social democrat. However, it is more adequate to understand Sanders as a plebeian democrat with American characteristics.

One clear example of Sanders’ plebeian side lies in his unequivocal identification of ‘the billionaire class’ as a political antagonist. By framing politics in terms of conflict and struggle, rather than harmony and mutual benefit, he distinguishes himself from traditional social democracy. This creation of a dichotomy between people and elite fits Mouffe’s category of left populism. However, the significance for the Sanders



project goes deeper than the discursive creation of an antagonism. Sanders is specifically concerned about the influence of moneyed interests on politics. In the 2015 speech announcing his presidential run, he stated his motivation as changing a situation where “the billionaire class (..) now owns the US government” (Sanders 2015)”, and the first chapter of *Our Revolution* which lays out his political program is titled “Defeating Oligarchy” (Sanders 2016:185). By focusing on the corrupting influence of wealth, and framing inequality as a political, rather than a social or economic problem, Sanders places himself in the radical tradition of plebeian republicanism, a continuity evoked through the term “oligarchy”.

Indeed, Sanders consciously situates his project within the US tradition of radical republicanism. Citing the *Declaration of Independence*, he stresses how men in government are “deriving their just power from the consent of the governed”. While building his argumentation on Jefferson, he also notes that the Founding Fathers had severe democratic deficiencies and how, consequently, “...amidst bloodshed, struggle, and turmoil, the American people have sought to expand democracy and make it more inclusive” (ibid:186). The contemporary problem is, however, that despite this historical success of expanding the franchise through successive popular movements (abolitionist, suffragist, workers’ and civil rights), the trend towards greater democracy has reversed because of the corrupting influence of money. Sanders relates how

“[t]hese oligarchs are threatened by what ordinary people can accomplish through the democratic process. In order to protect their vast financial holdings, they utilize their incredible resources to make us a less democratic society” (ibid:188).

The main vehicle for this influence is the direct corruption of elected officials through campaign contributions, but it also includes “ownership of media, think tanks, university chairs, and political front groups” (ibid:190).

Furthermore, the democracy Sanders envisions requires material independence to function properly. Citing Franklin D. Roosevelt he states that “true individual freedom cannot exist without economic security and independence”, and that “economic rights” are as important as “the political freedoms” when it comes to securing liberty (ibid:242). Thus, in plebeian-republican fashion Sanders positions his social policies, such as universal health care and the minimum wage as inexorably linked to meaningful political independence.

There are limits to Sanders’ program, however. While his policies on universal health care and a national minimum wage are concrete and, in an American context, potentially transformative, his agenda for controlling oligarchic influence in politics is limited. His main proposals concern the rollback of Citizens United, campaign finance reform, and reinstating the protections against disenfranchisement in the Voting Rights Act. While these are laudable ideas, they are also defensive, and primarily aimed at recreating the status quo ante, before the neoliberal counterrevolution of the 1980s. They do not problematize the basic US constitutional framework. This program hardly matches his radical analysis of the problem of oligarchy and corruption of politics. Despite his rhetoric, he stays closer to the focus on material independence of the Barcelona School than to McCormick’s anti-oligarchic approach. Thus, there seems to be an unfulfilled potential in the Sanders project, as intellectual

space has opened for a more radical expansion of the functioning of democratic institutions. This could take a concrete form if Sanders would draw on the plebeian-republican tradition not only for rhetorical resources, but also for specific institutional reforms aimed at curtailing oligarchic power.

### *Pablo Iglesias: Socializing Political Power*

Since its emergence in 2014, Spain's Podemos Party has been studied primarily through the lens of left populism. This is not unreasonable since both Iglesias and Podemos' former chief theorist, Iñigo Errejón, framed its formation as an attempt to test the hypothesis that the articulation of an antagonism between people and elite would allow for a restructuring of the political space of post-crisis Spain (Iglesias 2015; Errejón & Mouffe 2017). We probe what lies beyond the strategic-discursive commitment to populism by asking: For what substantive philosophical and institutional vision of democracy is Podemos' "left populism" a vehicle?

One salient starting point is Pablo Iglesias' (2015) *Politics in a Time of Crisis*, in which populism is not a major concern.<sup>8</sup> Instead, avoiding strategic meta-analysis, Iglesias frames the book as a practical compendium of "political ammunition for public use", i.e. arguments and ideas that ordinary citizens can use in everyday political debates. As he is aware, constructing a "Demos" requires establishing a tie of historical continuity, in this case by passing on knowledge about Spain's tortured and partially repressed political history. In our view, Iglesias' position is plebeian-democratic for two main reasons.

Firstly, because he frames the project of *deepening democracy* beyond its known liberal confines as the *raison d'être* of Podemos. Rejecting the (Schumpeterian) idea of democracy as "...a selection procedure among elites to decide who controls the administration", Iglesias defines democracy as:

"...a movement aimed at wresting power from whoever monopolizes it (the monarch or the elites) in order to distribute it among the people, who are called to exercise it for itself or through its delegates" (ibid:1).

By transplanting the language of resource inequality from the economic to the political domain, Iglesias highlights a plebeian class-conscious view of democracy. Furthermore, the ambition of "socializing political power" indicates a conscious ideological transposition from an orthodox Marxist focus on socio-economic redistribution to the quintessentially plebeian demand for *political* redistribution.

Secondly, this interpretation finds support in Iglesias' rendering of the ideational roots of his vision of democracy. Like Domènech, he points to the Athenian city-state and the French Revolution (and specifically Robespierre whose definition of democracy is quoted approvingly in the opening sentence).<sup>9</sup> It was in Athens that the notion of democracy was first defined as the counterpoint to any system of "monopolized" political

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<sup>8</sup> Apart from two strategically focused *New Left Review* articles included as appendices, the concept appears only once.

<sup>9</sup> To our knowledge Iglesias has never cited the work of Antoni Domènech or other Barcelona School theorists, but as a political scientist is likely aware of it. Arguably, the argumentative parallel illustrates the rootedness of a plebeian-democratic imaginary in Spanish left political culture.

power. In 18th century France, meanwhile, this struggle for the ‘socialization of political power’ reopened on a modern political terrain, vitalized by those revolutionary groups who wanted to go further than the Girondins in redistributing political rights to commoners. Iglesias thus embeds his project in a political tradition predating democratic socialism. While he adds that the 19<sup>th</sup> century socialist movement is “the most democratic” of all movements (ibid:5), he refers back to a point of departure for political agency that comes before socialism both chronologically and theoretically. Indeed, we could say that he subsumes the goal of socialism (socio-economic nivellation, which is characteristic of both Communist and Social Democratic movements) under the goal of democracy (political nivellation). He returns to a pre-socialist mode of orientation, which sees the ‘Constitutional Question’ as logically prior to the ‘Social Question’.

The plebeian-democratic logic of Iglesias’ position is further shown by his appeal to a republican concept of freedom and, in extension, the status of constitutionally secured social rights as a *sine qua non* of true democracy. He does this first by distancing himself explicitly from the “liberal” concept of freedom as “the thing that allows the rich to coerce the rest without constraint” (ibid:4), and second by stressing how freedom can only ever exist on the basis of political rights:

“For democracy to exist, it is necessary for the many to hold power and for the few to lose their privileges. Once privileges are democratized, they turn into *the rights that are the very basis of freedom*. For this reason, whoever attacks civil rights and social rights attacks democracy. And whoever makes the right to health care, education, retirement and disability benefits, and decent work into a privilege open only to the few, attacks democracy” (ibid:4-5, our mark-up).

Thus, for Iglesias the rights of the individual vis-a-vis the state *constitutes* freedom; freedom is not, as for liberals, to be free *from* the political. Rather, one can only be free *in* the political. Consequently, social rights are not to a possible addition to democracy - a kind of “Democracy Plus solution” - which may be introduced insofar as this is politically expedient and economically feasible. On the contrary, to the extent that social rights are dismantled, democracy itself is dismantled. Social rights are *as* fundamental as juridical and political ones.

Finally, Iglesias’ plebeian-democratic disposition is shown in the way he construes the main antagonism in society. The enemy that Podemos struggles against is not a class whose “crime” is to exploit the working class economically (as for socialists of most stripes). Rather, it is a “polis” enemy whose crime consists in being “hoarders of power” (ibid:3). The central antagonism is political, not socio-economic. This is made historically concrete through the articulation of The Caste (*la casta*) as the name of the networks of power that use favors and family ties to unify Spain’s political elite with its economic upper class in a closed and deeply corrupted circuit. Indeed, Iglesias prides himself and his party in having successfully contributed to changing political discourse through the articulation of this particular image:

“The word ‘caste’, used to describe the thieves who erect political frameworks for stealing democracy from the people, has taken hold in the Spanish political lexicon. Today we can cheer the pathetic spectacle of the political architects of the crisis pleading through crocodile tears, ‘I’m not of the caste’ (ibid:8).

While Iglesias’s pride is understandable, we must question whether Podemos has managed to articulate efficient *institutional* solutions both for breaking the power of Spain’s “caste”, and for preventing its reappearance in new historical incarnations. Podemos has called for a new constitution to transcend the democratic deficiencies of the current historical compromise, which led Spain to become a liberal democracy after the death of Franco. This call has highlighted the need for stronger social rights, thus echoing the plebeian-democratic vision. However, Iglesias and the Podemos leadership have been less clear on how to translate the plebeian impulse into robust anti-oligarchic institutions. In parallel with Domènech, the nineteenth-century strategy of building an election-winning plebeian party and using its majority to transform society remains the premise of political praxis. Perhaps the experiments with sortition for candidate selection in some grassroots branches of Podemos (Sintomer 2018:348), could inspire a more ambitious (and, most likely, electorally appealing) national proposal for rethinking representation beyond the impasse of liberal democracy.

The question mark over Podemos’ ability to institutionalize lasting egalitarian political mechanisms also extends to the internal dimension of party-building. Whereas Iglesias’ project to transform the Spanish state is committed to the anti-monopolization of political power, it is not evident that he accepts the need for a similar degree of equality to apply within Podemos itself. Podemos’ well-known post-2015 split into three factions - with Iglesias’ supporters wedged between the *anti-capitalist* grouping and Errejón’s faction - covered disagreement not just on how to approach the parliamentary game in Spain, but also on party organization. Both Iglesias and Errejón have insisted from the beginning on the need for a firm, hegemonic leadership of the party, and the construction of an ‘electoral war machine’ (Rendueles & Sola 2018). This inevitably involves a tension with the party’s grassroots democratic structure of bottom-up organization in so-called ‘círculos’, which was inspired by the participatory ideals of the 15M-Movement and defended most forcefully by the anti-capitalist faction. It is, in conclusion, important to remain critical of potential gaps between the discourse and practice of ideological figureheads, not least in relation to the complex issue of *leadership* within plebeian democratic movements. This is also true for the Sanders movement: while in campaign mode, the contradiction between its mass base and its professional, media-oriented leadership is likely to remain relatively low. However, should Sanders win in 2020 we would expect to see more contestation of his leadership from the grassroots.

## 5. Conclusion

In this article, we have outlined a vision of plebeian democracy. By putting the issue of oligarchy at the center of political thought, we open the horizon for a reformulation of the democratic project beyond its liberal form. The concept of oligarchy entails seeing inequality in economic and political resources as a constitutive problem

for the political process, rather than merely as a social pathology, meaning that the issues of inequality and oligarchy need to be fundamental to the constitutional framework. Safeguards are required both to protect individuals from state power and to shield plebeian individuals and democratic institutions from domination by wealthy non-state actors. We propose two main forms of anti-oligarchic safeguards, inspired by the works of Domènech and McCormick. The first is the constitutionalisation of the right to social existence, to insure the material independence of all citizens. The second comprises institutions of elite accountability, such as sortition and class-specific offices, to prevent democratic systems from being dominated by wealthy minorities.

This plebeian framework does not replace the liberal-democratic ideal of negative liberty and personal rights with an ideal of unbridled popular sovereignty. Rather, it is an extension of personal protection, motivated by the notion of freedom as non-domination, from the legal to the socio-economic sphere. This of course restricts the freedom of oligarchs to dominate the body politic, just as the institution of juridical egalitarianism in liberal democracy restricted the freedom of feudal lords. But the insight from plebeian thought is that just as you cannot have the rule of law while allowing aristocrats special legal privileges, you cannot have democracy while allowing oligarchs unrestricted rein to use and abuse their socio-economic privileges.

We believe the plebeian perspective is relevant, because we can see elements of it in the new political formations emerging in recent years.. By comparing Iglesias and Sanders, we show that both actively mine the political culture of past generations of activists to cultivate and update republican-plebeian motifs for the current conjuncture: Both are similar in assuming that freedom means material independence, and in pointing to the oligarchic corruption of democracy as the central political challenge. The plebeian-democratic label captures some of the novelty of the new formations whilst simultaneously recognizing their embeddedness in older traditions. Indeed, it might even replace the increasingly obsolete post-war categorization of left-wing parties into “reformist” or “revolutionary” camps.

The most promising attempt at capturing the novelty of these new formations comes from Chantal Mouffe’s work on left populism and the construction of an elite-people antagonism. Her perspective, however, also has problems. By focusing on the discursive level, she does not capture the substantial political common ground that unites some of the new movements. Yes, these are left populist, in Mouffe’s term, but the populism label is too broad. The antagonism between elite and people is of a very specific kind, tied to the question of democracy – specifically defending democracy against oligarchic corruption. Labelling these movements as populist focuses solely on the level of electoral strategy, rather than on substantial content. In an age when democracy itself is under threat, the specifically democratic nature of the movements is central.

Identifying these political movements as plebeian is not an exercise in objectivist classification. We simply claim that reading the movements as plebeian-democratic opens up a productive dialogue between theory and political praxis. Thus, we offer a constructive critique of both Sanders and Iglesias for a certain unfulfilled radicalism in their discourse. While they draw on discursive resources from the plebeian republican

tradition, they are not fully backing their anti-oligarchic rhetoric with concrete institutional proposals to overcome the inherent flaw in liberal-democratic systems.

Our plebeian-democratic perspective is constitutional and institutional in nature. This is a conscious choice, as we believe that 20th century radical democratic theorists from Rancière to Mouffe have largely neglected the constitutional question. Hence, we follow McCormick and Domènech in their engagement with the republican tradition to rediscover the radical potential in the constitutional question, which was central to earlier generations of plebeian democrats. This is not to deny the role of popular movements and engagements from below. Indeed, it is hard to imagine any part of the plebeian-democratic vision brought into being without strong popular organization. Without democratic, institutional channels for plebeian power however, movements will find it hard to make permanent improvements when opposed by organized oligarchic power. The plebeian-democratic perspective therefore points toward the development of a positive dialectic between popular mobilization outside the state and anti-oligarchic constitutional reforms within it.

Finally, we point to a key challenge for the plebeian democratic project. Since the French Revolution the national level has remained the natural level of politics for plebeian democrats, both in terms of institutional visions for the nation-state, and in the projected formation of national-popular movements and coalitions. The question is, however, whether this national scope is sufficient in an era when wealthy minorities can project power globally through multinational corporations and integrated financial markets. Perhaps the unprecedented degree of international mobility and coordination of oligarchic forces requires novel institutional formulas. Here, much work – both theoretical and practical – lies ahead to clarify what plebeian democracy and elite accountability would mean at the international level. While incipient attempts to escape the traps of national politics are emerging - such as the internationalist ‘radical municipalism’ advocated by Barcelona’s left-wing mayor Ada Colau or Yanis Varoufakis DIEM25 movement - the attempts at taking on oligarchy internationally remain wanting. Without developing ways of dealing with the internationalization of capital, either through the limitation of global capital mobility or the development of anti-oligarchic institutions on an international level, the development of a plebeian democratic bloc on a national scale remains inadequate. The fate of the Syriza Government in confrontation with the EU institutions shows this very clearly. Still, regardless of geographical scale, any democratic vision must be founded on certain ideals. If we have convinced the reader that both social rights and anti-oligarchic institutions are keys to transcending liberal democracy, we will have achieved our goal.

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