

people

Thus the essential duality of “people” implicit in the definitive passage from the singular to the plural (cf. “themselves”) is carried out in the Federalist project. The multiplicity of interests (of the individuals) that compose the people become compatible with the common interest through the multiplication of the centers of power. It is this phenomenon of the fragmentation of power that Gordon Wood has defined as the “disembodiment” of power (*Creation of the American Republic*). The paradox is that the people exercises its sovereignty in and through this very disembodiment. According to Wood, this is clearly related to a radical transformation of the meaning of the word “people” and of the relationship to politics in general following the overthrow of the old Whig concepts. When the American Revolution began, the people were considered a homogeneous entity in rebellion against the rulers. But under the pressure of reality, the idea gradually emerged of a non-homogeneous people without any genuine unified interest. Thus Americans transformed the people in the same way that the British had transformed rulers a century earlier: they broke the relationship of interest among individuals (Wood, *ibid.*).

In conclusion, the political stake involved in the redefinition of “people” becomes clear. Politics could no longer be defined, Wood says, as a battle between rulers and the people: “In the future, political struggles would be internal to the people, they would oppose the diverse groups and diverse individuals that sought to create inequality on the basis of their equality” (*ibid.*).

We see that this new sense of “people” sums up the American innovation in politics (even if much could be said about its possible perversions; cf. Wood’s concluding chapter, which seems to deplore a disconnection of the social and the political and perhaps a lasting impoverishment of political thought in America), in its desire to truly implement the classical idea of popular sovereignty. Thus in the United States, the people as a source of power—which we find in the use of the term in the sense of “electorate” or, in the judicial field, in the expression “the People vs. X”)—was to coexist with the “people” having divergent community interests (black people, my people) or simply “people” in an indeterminate, pronomial way (people say), and even, in more casual language, “he’s good people.”

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PEOPLE / RACE / NATION

FRENCH	<i>peuple, race, nation</i>
GERMAN	<i>Volk, Rasse, Nation</i>
GREEK	<i>dēmos</i> [δήμος], <i>genos</i> [γένος], <i>ethnos</i> [ἔθνος], <i>laos</i> [λαός], <i>ochlos</i> [ὄχλος], <i>plēthos</i> [πλήθος], <i>hoi polloi</i> [οἱ πολλοί]
LATIN	<i>populus, gens, natio, plebs</i>

► CIVIL SOCIETY, DROIT, GENRE, GESCHLECHT, LAW, NAROD, OIKONOMIA, PEOPLE, POLIS, POLITICS, STATE

What the terms “people,” “race,” and “nation” have in common is that they designate types of geographical and historical, cultural, social and/or strictly political community. The difficulty of translating them has to do with the fact that from one language to another, and within each language from one period to another, they do not necessarily refer to the same types of membership, or distinguish, intersect, or share them in the same way. Hence by translating *dēmos* [δήμος] or *populus* as “people,” *ethnos* [ἔθνος], *natio*, or the plural *gentes* by “nation(s),” *genos* [γένος] or *genus* by “race,” we fall victim to a retrospective illusion that projects onto Greek or Latin notions, ambiguities, and problematics that do not belong to them.

Thus *dēmos*, like *populus*, designates both citizens as a group and the least wealthy (and sometimes the most numerous), least educated, and least noble part of that group, but never a natural and/or historical component of human diversity. But this is often the case for the notion of “people,” and still more for that of *Volk* (*Völker*), the uses of which give priority, on the contrary, to a community of birth or a shared history. Inversely, *ethnos*, *natio*, or *gentes* never had a political meaning (they do not imply any kind of citizenship), whereas the history of the term “nation” is understood as a history of its gradual articulation with the notion of the state, although its ethnic sense does not disappear.

Finally, the idea of race, although fluctuating (as a component of human diversity, as a social category), remains inseparable from various theories that make the war of the races the motive force in history—something the terms *genos* or *genus* never connoted.

I. People, Race, Nation

A. “People”

The Chevalier de Jaucourt’s article on “People” (*Peuple*) in the RT: *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* testifies to the fact that the word is dauntingly polysemous: “People: a collective noun that is difficult to define because different ideas about it are formed in diverse places, in diverse times, and depending on the nature of events.” In reality, efforts to define the word “people” turn on a twofold ambivalence: that between a political creation and a natural or historical given, and that between citizens and the masses positively or negatively valued. The modern definition of “the people” as a political creation and in this case, a contractual institution—a definition that stems from Rousseau—thus collided from the outset with a double resistance: “the people” is also a factual reality anterior to the contract; moreover, the word sometimes designates the part of the population that, because of its poverty or lack of education, is excluded from the exercise of sovereignty.

