

Moses and Aron: Reconsidering holistic politics

Kolja Möller 
TU Dresden, Germany

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Abstract

Drawing on Arnold Schönberg's seminal opera "Moses and Aron", the comment focuses on the role of holistic politics in Andrew Arato's and Jean L. Cohen's "Populism and Civil Society". It argues that their anti-populist stance is too quick in dismissing a politics which is driven by representing and re-constituting the whole of the social order. Against this backdrop, a rejuvenation of the political left may not consist in a rejection of holism as such but in a popular politics which relies on functional equivalences.

Keywords

Arnold Schönberg, democracy, holism, populism, regression

(...) he does not want the part, he demands the whole (...).

Arnold Schönberg, Moses und Aron (from the libretto)

Arnold Schönberg composed his seminal opera "Moses und Aron" in the 1920s and 1930s. The plot revolves around the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt as told in the second book of Moses in the Old Testament and, in particular, in the passages on the golden calf. While Moses is on his way to God to receive his commandments, the Israelites suffer in the desert. God chooses Aron to serve as spiritual leader in the meantime. Schönberg stages the conflict between the two leaders, Moses and Aron, who both rely on competing approaches to the question of how to represent God and unite the people.¹ On his way to God, Moses takes his time. Aron, in contrast, has to react to the growing impatience of the Israelites and, most importantly, the lingering danger that they may turn back to their old gods. Thus, he sets in motion magic tricks and deeds. By turning Moses' staff into a snake and the water of the Nile into blood and back again, he reinforces his

Corresponding author:

Kolja Möller, TU Dresden, Institut für Politikwissenschaften, Bergstraße 53, Dresden 01062, Germany.

Email: kolja.moeller@tu-dresden.de

leadership. Then, he incites the people to start a ritual festivity and to establish a worldly representation of God on earth—a golden calf—which is worshiped. After coming back, Moses is upset. To his eyes, God eschews every picture and must not be represented. At the outset of the opera, Moses claims: “No picture can give you a picture of the unimaginable, knowing the invisible, thinking the unimaginable.” The people of God must be constituted not by Aron’s rituals but by consciously endorsing God’s law which cannot be grasped from the perspective of human agency.

In Schönberg’s opera, the conflict between the two approaches is reflected on the level of form (Gyger 2008). Aron sings and appeals to the Israelites’ emotions: “A people can only feel. No nation can believe what it does not feel. So make yourself understood by the people in a manner appropriate to them.” Moses, however, is unable to communicate with his people. He has to admit that “my tongue is awkward, I can think, but not speak.” Finally, he accuses Aron of simply bolstering his own political ambitions in an autocratic vein through his deeds: “So you won the people not for the Eternal, but for yourself” But Aron’s breach of the picture ban as well as his appeal to popular emotions leads to beneficial short-term consequences; it prevents the Israelites from a regressive return to the old gods. Schönberg’s Aron—who was once characterized as being the “man of images and imagination” by Theodor W. Adorno (Adorno 1992, 230)—says: “And since the people had long expected both law and commandment soon to issue from your mouth, I was compelled to provide an image for them.” The breach of the picture ban can be seen as a compensation for Moses’ incapacity to relate to the people. Though Schönberg was, while composing the opera, chiefly concerned with the future of the Jewish people and the role of abstraction in the arts, a closer inspection of the libretto reveals a “representational paradox” (Prieto 2012, 124) which is deeply political: “Is it better, as Moses claims, to preserve the absolute purity of the idea of God – even at the risk of alienating the *Volk* – or, as Aron believes, to provide whatever partial knowledge images can convey to the people, even if this necessarily involves a certain oversimplification or misrepresentation of the idea of God?” (ibidem).

In their book “Populism and Civil Society”, Andrew Arato and Jean L. Cohen tend to side with Moses. Drawing on resources of constitutional theory, comparative political science, and studies on populism, the argument centers around an equivalent to the picture ban which they call a “taboo against the language of embodiment” (Arato and Cohen 2021, 193). The argument runs as follows: once a democratic constitution is in place which fixes procedures and subjective rights in order to allow for self-legislation, the embodiment of the people as a whole already ex-ante—before these procedures have played out—breaches this taboo. Thereby, such embodiment undermines the constitutional framework both on the level of ideology (the spread of vulgar and wrong approaches to the idea of democracy) and practice (a resulting de-democratization of constitutional orders). Since it is the characteristic trait of populism to embody the people ex-ante, it is casted as rigidifying the exercise of power and unavoidably collapsing into autocratic rule—a position which is widely spread among critics of populism nowadays (see, e.g., Urbinati 2019; Müller 2019).

In the following, I aim to elaborate two caveats which challenge such anti-populist stances:

- The first concerns the role of holism in politics: since approaches which claim to embody people still play an important role in politics and our constitutional orders, we should not be too hasty to dismiss them in their entirety, at least if a correspondence between theory and political practice is to be maintained (I).
- The second concerns the envisaged alternatives to populism: as populism performs a particular function within the political system, alternatives must demonstrate a portion of functional equivalence in order to be a viable alternative (II.).

In sum, holistic politics need to be reconsidered and—given the recent surge of identitarian populisms—it may be that a recalibration of Aronite and Mosaic elements is more promising than the resurrection of picture bans (III.).

I Holism in politics

It is one of the merits of Arato and Cohen’s “Populism and Civil Society” to thoroughly expand on the anti-populist stance. According to the argument outlined in their book, every attempt by agents to embody the people as a whole ex-ante while, in fact, still being a faction of society misconceives democracy and is likely to threaten self-legislation. Ultimately, such embodiment antagonizes the political sphere and transforms agonistic contestation into the exclusion of those who are suspected of being “enemies” of the people (Arato and Cohen 2021, 93 ff.). Thus, the concept of populism sharply refers to such embodiment and, therefore, it can be opposed other forms of popular politics, most notably social movement politics.

Indeed, the book is still indebted to Arato and Cohen’s previous works on civil society (Arato and Cohen 1992). Taking its cue from the political scene of the 1960s onwards, progressive civil society movements which pushed for democratization on both sides of the iron curtain were seen as a promising type of political agency, keeping a distance from both traditional social democracy and authoritarian party communism. Articulating “excluded issues” and “rejecting repressive cultural stereotypes” as well as “socioeconomic injustices” (Arato and Cohen 2021, 59), they seemed to circumvent totalizing truth claims, dogmatism, and statism and, in contrast, emphasized plurality and open discourse. Thus, they appeared to be not only a promising political force but also to match smoothly with a procedural conception of democracy as put forward in various strands of political theory. It may be left open at this point whether or not this provides a comprehensive reconstruction of the social movement scene from the 1960s onwards, but this approach has made its way through most currents of political theory ranging from radical to republican or liberal conceptions: in one way or the other they stress the importance of democratic social movements. Against this backdrop, populism remains a dubious candidate because it relies on a holistic mode of political representation and establishes a shortcut to the seizure of political power. There is no running away from analyzing the

obvious pitfalls of populism both on the level of form and the level of its concrete trajectories (see my remarks in Möller 2022). However, it seems that the widespread anti-populist stance requires reconsideration and a flat-out rejection of holistic politics—that is, a politics which claims to represent, embody, and actualize the whole of the social order in the name of the constituent power of the people—may be too hasty.

In recent decades, several studies on the advent of constitutionalism have stressed its revolutionary roots (Berman 1983; Brunkhorst 2014). Most notably, Harold J. Berman, in his masterpiece “Law and Revolution”, has argued that constitutionalism was not only a matter of expanding the judicialization of public powers, but was driven by holistic claims: starting from the papal revolution of the middle-ages, Berman moves to the revolutions of the 20th century before demonstrating how they have influenced our understanding of law and democracy. The characteristic revolutionary driving force consisted in a holistic approach to history and society. Berman identifies six great revolutions and demonstrates that each of them was characterized by “recurrent periods of violent upheaval,” “overthrowing preexisting system of political, legal, economic, religious, cultural, and other social relations, institutions, beliefs, values” and searching for “legitimacy in a fundamental law, a remote past, an apocalyptic future” (Berman 1983, 18). In this sense, each of these revolutions must be considered “total” revolutions, “in that they involved not only the creation of new forms of government but also new structures of social and economic relations, new structures of relations between church and state, and new structures of law, as well as new visions of the community, new perspectives on history, and new sets of universal values and beliefs” (Berman 1983, 19). Taking this into account, the constitutionalist legacy was heavily driven by holistic politics.

The fact that these concomitants still inform our understanding of politics is neither surprising nor outdated. From a political theory perspective, it may be tempting to delve into the writings of Hannah Arendt or Claude Lefort, which provide critiques of holism as not being in line with democratic credentials. Further, one can identify totalizing, dogmatizing, rigidifying, apocalyptic, or messianic vices or even deem holism as ultimately “anti-political” since it undermines plurality (Rosenblum 2010, 28). However, in political reality, holism is still a force, and nowadays—given the populist surge around the world—one that is more vibrant than ever: notwithstanding the writings of Arendt and Lefort, a large portion of politics still revolves around holistic claims. What we expect from politics is often connected to a grasping of the whole. Certainly, holistic approaches remain ambivalent and their obvious risks are observable, for example, the collapse into absolutistic truth claims or “purification” practices (Walzer 1965). But they are also connected to the liberating aspiration of rejecting and re-constituting the whole of the social order.

A politics of social transformation which abstains from holistic aspirations as such is hard to identify in history and difficult to imagine. Almost all kinds of political movements were driven by pars-pro-toto embodiments of a coming whole: starting from the movement of the *Volkskirche* against the *Amtskirche* in the Reformation (Bloch 1969),² to how the socialist workers movement involved the laboring people against the elite (Calhoun 1982), to the various social movements of the 20th century (Hobsbawm

1995)—they all in one way or another saw themselves as bearers of the whole. Admittedly, from the 1950s and 1960s onwards, one could observe certain strands of social movements which themselves embraced a rights-based conception of democracy (see, for instance, the human rights movement: [Moyn 2018](#) and the civil rights movement in the US: [Ackerman 2014](#)), but a large part of new social movements took a holistic stance, such as national liberation movements, the Black Panthers, communist, or radical feminist groups.

Not least, critics of holistic approaches should also have a look at our contemporary world. The movement for climate justice claims to represent the whole of mankind. But is it, thereby, entangled in an anti-democratic trap or, to the contrary, does its appeal lie exactly in this holistic ambition? Should it renounce the gesture to represent the demands of mankind as a whole and abide by restraining itself to being one societal faction among others?

One could adopt a constitutional court-perspective, claiming counterfactually that politics should follow the lines of a dialog between constitutional judges, and, certainly, the insistence on procedural arguments has good reasons on its side. But, in fact, politics is essentially about taking collectively binding decisions, and the struggle around the exercise of political power. Here, holism is still present as a bolster, as a horizon, as an expectation, as a pragmatic reaction pattern (Aron), and as a liberating aspiration (something that is often overseen by critics of holism). In sum, if one likes it or not, *pars-pro-toto* claims are part of the game. If one is interested in an immanent mode of critique which does not aim at evaluating whether political practices conform to political theory but which engages in a rational reconstruction of social practices with a view to learning processes, a more nuanced inspection is needed. It may be that holistic politics assume a more contradictory role and it should be asked whether transformative or “good” holisms which foster instead of undermining collective learning processes amount to an option (see [Möller 2023](#)).

II Alternatives to populism? The challenge of functional equivalence

In the concluding chapter of “Populism and Civil Society,” Arato and Cohen focus on possible alternatives to populism ([Arato and Cohen 2021](#), 185 ff.). Most prominently, they argue in favor of combining the civil societal movement sphere with rejuvenated party politics. In this popular politics, so the argument goes, agents quest for change and engage in the fight for social justice but renounce all *ex-ante*-claims of already embodying the whole of popular sovereignty (*ibidem*, 191). However, there lurks a particular problem here. Arato and Cohen have started with a sharp definition of populism (*ibidem*, 5). They claim that it is not only a mode of mobilizing the people against the elite, but a shortcut to attain and rigidify political power. Hence, populism may not only be seen as an ideology, but as a functional device in the context of the political system: by drawing on populist types of mobilization, it seems likely to threaten existing office holders and transform the constitutional order. Their recurrence in politics is not only driven by majoritarian democratic ideals but is also due to the arising shortcuts and apparent efficiency.

This raises higher stakes for discussing possible alternatives. At the heart is a comparative endeavor: in order to constitute not only a *different approach*, but an *alternative*, the “other” practice should be not only feasible as such but also likely, in the sense that it reacts to the same problem but does so in a possibly better way. Admittedly, the debate around functional explanations in the social sciences has a long history and this is not the place to delve into this debate (Van Parijs 1981, 26 ff.). But the issue of alternativity remains, one that was once discussed by the systems theorist Niklas Luhmann as functional equivalence. He argued that in such comparisons the relation “between the problem and its solution will thus not be grasped for its own sake; rather, it serves as a connecting thread to questions about other possibilities, as a connecting thread in the search for functional equivalences” (Luhmann 1995, 54 ff.). Accordingly, a functional equivalent to a given practice has to demonstrate some overlaps: one could imagine, for example, that the political community is not organized by a state which is distinct from society—but then, so the argument goes, the community has to come up with a mechanism which performs the function to take collectively binding decisions (which is, according to Luhmann, the key feature of politics). Now, if we ascribe to populism not only a specific ideology but also a particular function in the constitution and exercising of political power, the search for an alternative cannot consist in a maximal distance. As populisms are concerned with easy-to-have contestation of existing office holders and a strategy to assume governmental power, an alternative can neither consist in returning to regular party politics nor in laborious civil societal movement politics which foregrounds majorities in the political system. Both projects can be completely plausible, but they do not offer an *alternative* to populism.³ Since populist practices rely on popular embodiments and shortcuts, practices which are essentially characterized by *not* providing some of these elements do not amount to a feasible alternative.

III A singing voice

These caveats may lead to a reconsideration of holistic politics, one which stresses the mutual dependency of Moses and Aron. Aron’s breach of the embodiment taboo can be seen as a reaction pattern which is—at least in a given moment—able to block the regressive return of the Israelites to their old gods. Though not mirroring the Mosaic standpoint, it can be seen as a step in the process of constituting the people of God. Jan Assmann has argued that, in Schönberg’s opera, Aron is staged not as Aron but, essentially, as the Moses of the Old Testament—as somebody with a genuine political interest in the liberation of its people—while the Moses of the opera tends to engage in a purely negative theology which is unable to communicate.⁴

Coming back to the challenges in our contemporary world, it may be that a Mosaic approach to issues of power and counter-power is not able to counter the apparent regressive tendencies. Aronite elements are urgently needed in order to block the ascendancy of identarian varieties of populism. Not least, it may not be accidental that in some countries, such as Spain, Greece, France, Chile, Portugal, or the US, left and progressive forces have re-invented themselves during the last decade (2010–2020) through a popular politics which is different than both regular social democratic politics and societal

movement politics. One does not have to be an ardent follower of left-populism to acknowledge that such popular politics has proven more successful in countering the overall decline of the left, which, in many countries of the world, finds itself completely erased from political life. Popular politics needs both Moses' thinking and Aron's singing—without a singing voice Moses is unable to communicate and leaves the people to regression.

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ORCID iD

Kolja Möller  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5384-0714>

Notes

1. “The opera expresses a constant grappling with the tension between idolatry and representation, a desire for completion that cannot be met, and the recognition that the tension of an anticipation for that which is not yet forms the basis of all truth, including artistic truth” (Banitzky 2001, 86).
2. See, for example, Ernst Bloch's study on the revolutionary peasant wars during the Reformation and one of its leaders Thomas Münzer. Bloch noted: “Everywhere at its beginnings, but especially in the autochthonous sect type of the Münzerschen secret society, the Anabaptism, this chiliastic tendency is recognizable, trusting in its own revolutionary power, in the revolutionary primal phenomenon of the Parousia of Christ” (Bloch 1969, 173).
3. This can be put in a different way: for a committed cannabis smoker, speed is no alternative because it does not tranquilize, but drinking beer, for example, can serve as a substitute. When it comes to overcoming drug addiction, with all its devastating consequences, even methadone and substitution can have a positive effect—even though they do not completely break with addictive patterns.
4. “Schönberg's Aron is the biblical Moses, and Schönberg's Moses is a figure of whom the Bible knows nothing and who has his roots in Greek thought, in the negative theology of the Areopagite, in the pervasive rationality of Rabbi Mosheh ben Maimon, in the spiritual theology of a of Sebastian Franck and in the iconoclasm of modernity” (Assmann 2005, 12).

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