The white-hot heart of populism is the uprising of ordinary people against political and economic elites. Characteristically, historical and contemporary populist movements have represented the interests of rural and regional constituencies in opposition to those of urban, cosmopolitan elites. Contemporary populist movements—typified by Brexit and Trump—have also been nativist and anti-immigrant. It is logical to assess such movements along a series of conventional axes: right vs. left, exclusive vs. inclusive, reasonable vs. unreasonable, strong leader/authoritarian vs. democratic. But this taxonomic approach has three problems: First, it misses the complex dynamics and grievances of contemporary populisms. Second, it obscures what is subversive, democratic, and potentially emancipatory about populist movements. Third, it treats “the people” as an empirical phenomenon which can be objectified and then subjected to a definitive criterial or conceptual analysis.

The question is not “Who is/are the people?” but “What people are we constituting?” “The people” is not an actual entity, but a social imaginary. Thus, the U.S. Constitution in speaking for “We the people” is making, as James Boyd White explains, a claim of authorship that issues “from a single imaginary author” consisting of all the people “including the reader, merging with a single identity in this act of self-constitution.” There are many peoples; every claim on their behalf is a political contestation of identity that stakes a hegemonic claim.

“The people,” then, are not the *pouvoir constituant* but *ce qui doit être constitué*. In contrast to “the people,” I examine Habermas’s conception of “the public sphere” and Dewey’s pragmatist concept of “the public.” Where “the people” tends to be backwards-looking, essentializing, and static, the “public” is potentially comprehensive and dynamic. But the deliberative and pragmatic conceptions of the public are not the same; they entail different normative orientations with distinctive weaknesses, problems, and promises.

Steven L. Winter is the Walter S. Gibbs Distinguished Professor of Constitutional Law. He is the author of *A Clearing in the Forest: Law, Life, and Mind* (U. Chicago Press 2001) and numerous articles on legal and democratic theory.