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On “Conceptualizing the Political Imaginary”

Brian C.J. Singer, York University, bsinger@yorku.ca

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I have been asked to write a reply to the 2019 Special Issue of *Social Epistemology* (33, 5) “Conceptualizing the Political Imaginary.” As I read the issue, I felt that I was about to join, if somewhat belatedly, an already existing, and very rich conversation. Moreover, the last article by Wolfgang Knöbl (2019) provides a reply to the other articles in the issue. Added to my tardiness, then, is a risk of redundancy. I will try to circumvent this risk by adding my own spin, while addressing some of the difficulties of conceptualizing the term “imaginary,” then the term “political,” and lastly the “modern democratic political imaginary.”

Conceptualizing “Imaginary”

The problem with the term “imaginary” is that like the term “social” with which it threatens to become synonymous, it can attach itself to almost everything that crosses its path. Wolfgang Knöbl, in order to counter this tendency, proposes to resuscitate the triad of reception theory, which distinguishes what is imaginary from what is real and what is fictitious. But as Chiara Bottici (2019) notes what one understands as real depends on one’s social imaginary, the medieval imaginary understanding reality as “perfection” (and therefore only God is truly real as only God is perfect). If reality is to be understood as an imaginary social signification, it follows that what is understood as fiction depends on the social imaginary. In effect, the triad is swallowed up by one of its terms, and a term that potentially encompasses everything, can end up saying nothing—though it may serve as a badge of “conceptual correctness.”

There are two ways of counteracting this danger. The first is to consider what, in a given case, the term seeks to accomplish; for if it is meant to accomplish a specific task, it cannot, or at least should not, encompass what lies outside its compass. The second is to consider its relation to what in principle can still be considered external to it. With regard to the first, the term has different uses. There is a very general usage, exemplified by almost all the authors who use the term. In opposition to the “positivist” tendencies of the social sciences, the term imaginary suggests that “social reality” is mediated symbolically, as that reality must be made to appear meaningful, as a world that we seek to hold in common. The implication is that all materialist, and all functionalist and, more generally, all explanations in terms of “social conditions” are inadequate if they fail to consider this symbolic dimension when speaking of social reality. This general usage demands that social analysis change direction; it does not, however, specify in what direction precisely, let alone how, it should proceed.¹

Cornelius Castoriadis, who is the author most responsible for the term’s use (1975), had an additional purpose—to investigate the limits of rationality. Craig Browne (2019) is correct: Castoriadis discussion originated in his critique of bureaucracy, understood in Weberian

¹ Though when provided with a specific topic in which social science explanations are clearly inadequate, it provides one with a handy term on which to hang one’s analysis. Knöbl mentions, in his short history of the terms usage, the importance in the English-speaking world for the study of nationhood of Benedict’s work *Imagined Communities* first published in 1983; let me add an earlier work by a renowned medievalist, George Duby’s *Les Trois Ordres ou L’Imaginaire du Feodalisme*, published in 1978 (mistranslated as *The Three Orders: Feudal Society Imagined* in 1981).

terms as the privileged organizational form of the rationalization of the West. In *The Imaginary Institution of Society* he posed, at the level of a social ontology (as opposed to that of contemporary socio-historical analysis) an imaginary dimension in opposition to its identitarian-ensamblist dimension, the latter understood as rationality stripped to its most basic elements, and seen as indispensable for any stable form of institution (that is, institution *tout court*). When he opposed the imaginary dimension of societal institution to its identitarian-ensamblist dimension, he was suggesting the former was equally indispensable, and that there could not, therefore, be a fully rational institution of society—though the latter is an imaginary utopian (or dystopian) horizon of the modern world.

If Browne and Diehl (2019) in their introduction can note that Castoriadis did not explain “how the concept should be applied in the analysis of the social sciences,” it was because he had other purposes in mind, even if there are hints at social analysis (as opposed to social ontology), if only in a germinal and, indeed, primitive state.^{2,3} This does not prevent the authors of this issue from seeking to turn Castoriadis’ writings to purposes of social and political analysis by trying, for example, to squeeze conceptual nourishment from the categories of the instituting and the instituted, sometimes with the former assimilated rather too hastily to that of the radical imaginary. It also requires that the authors find it necessary to supplement Castoriadis with other theories and other traditions to meet their own purposes, as when Johannes Grave (2019) in a very intriguing article turns to picture theory in order to develop a groundwork for a “politics of images.”⁴

The question then remains: how is one to employ the imaginary for analysis relative to fields—here the political field—associated with the “social sciences” (the term science being placed in quotes, because the imaginary pushes against that sense of objectivity that the term science suggests)? What sorts of supplementary purposes, tied to what sorts of concepts, can be developed in order to counter the imaginary’s tendency to an all-encompassing vacuity.

² The significance of what Castoriadis accomplished can be measured by its implicit critique of the Frankfurt School, the latter bemoaning the formation of a totally rational (in an instrumental sense), totally administered, one dimensional society.

³ It would have been nice had Castoriadis returned to his analysis of bureaucracy but understood in terms of its imaginary dimension. It would have provided a bridge between what many years ago, I termed the division between the early and the later Castoriadis (1979, 1980). For the early Castoriadis, the major critique of bureaucracy was that it could not function on the basis of top-down rational control alone but required the spontaneity and individual initiative of the workers. In a sense, the appeal to the radical imaginary in the later Castoriadis continues the reference to human spontaneity and initiative, but now within a very different and much larger context.

⁴ I speak of “groundwork” here because it raises a number of questions, relative to picture theory that would be interesting to pursue with a view to contemporary shifts following on the increasingly digital character of political discourse. In a manner reminiscent of Baudrillard, Grave speaks at one point of “simulacrum”; and it strikes me that “memes” are particularly open to picture theory. What I find intriguing is the suggestion that simulacrum and memes allow for new forms of reflexivity, where one may rather too hastily think the opposite, that they are by their very nature destructive of all forms of reflection.

Claude Lefort and “The Symbolic”

Beyond Castoriadis, there is another author often referred to in these essays: Claude Lefort. Where Castoriadis speaks of the imaginary, Lefort tends use the term “the symbolic.” On the very few occasions when he does speak of the imaginary, he draws on Jacques Lacan’s triad of the imaginary, the symbolic and the real. For Lacan, the imaginary is rooted in a stage of childhood development prior to the acquisition of the symbolic (itself associated with the Oedipal stage) when the child has yet to acquire not just language, but a sense of the otherness of the other, or in Freudian terms, a “reality principle” separated from the self. Thus when Lefort speaks of the imaginary, he appears to suggest a tendency to turn away from the sense of reality established via the symbolic, as if to preserve a group, and its sense of the world, from what it perceives as intolerable about that reality.⁵

One might hypothesize that Castoriadis speaks of the imaginary rather than the symbolic because he wishes to emphasize the imagistic character of the imaginary, which has primacy over its strictly linguistic (or better, semiotic) character.⁶ Moreover, the term “imaginary” when drawn from Lacan appeals more to the “fictive” sense of the term, as a faculty turned away from “reality,” while its purported specular character does not speak to what Castoriadis understands as the imaginary’s creative potential. Be that as it may, Castoriadis also adopts the Freudian idea of “primary narcissism” (arguably in a stronger sense than Lacan), when he claims that the psyche first appears in a state of monadic madness. Chiara Bottici objects: such a move immediately poses the individual psyche in opposition to the social. What she does not note is that, for Castoriadis, once the infant has come out of the womb, and begins sucking on the breast, it begins the slow, and always incomplete, process of exiting from that monadic state. Still, in contrast to Lefort, this discussion of the individual psyche’s development is without a correlate in his analysis of the socio-historical—despite Castoriadis’ predilection for drawing lines between the individual psyche’s radical imagination and the societal instituting imaginary.

Bottici is quite correct to point out that there are real problems with attempts to generalize from the individual to a more collective existence, and I admit to being intrigued by her advocacy of an “ontology of the transindividual.” But I do wonder what is being lost. For this ontology, by refusing to mediate between the individual psyche and the social imaginary, but seeking instead, if I understand it correctly, to dissolve the differences between the two levels, would appear not to be able to speak to tendencies to self-closure, or to what resists such tendencies, whether at an individual or collective level.⁷ A similar argument can be

⁵ As an example, “que désormais le théologique et le politique sont dénoués; qu’une nouvelle expérience de l’institution du social s’est dessinée; que la réactivation du religieux se fait aux points de sa défaillance; que son efficacité n’est plus symbolique, mais imaginaire” (1986, 299-300).

⁶ The influence of Pierra Aulagnier, with whom Castoriadis was married for a time should not be underestimated. At the origins of the psyche she posed a “pictographic representation” (already present in the child’s relation to the mother’s breast), and which engages, and gives primacy to a sensual, affective moment lacking in Lacan with his emphasis on the linguistic moment in the formation of the psyche. See François Dosse (2014, 164-67) as well as Aulagnier (2001).

⁷ Clearly these tendencies appear different when they concern the individual as opposed to the collective. Relative to the individual, one is not simply speaking of the “free imagination” in opposition to the social

made for “the real,” which in Lacanian terms must be distinguished from reality, the latter being encompassed by the symbolic (i.e. reality is what makes sense as real within a given symbolic order). “The real,” by contrast, remains external to the symbolic; being traumatic it must be repressed and can appear only indirectly, in distorted form. Again, “the real” cannot be simply transposed from the individual level of the psyche to that of a social imaginary or symbolic order without considerable conceptual labours. But it would be good, when speaking of the imaginary (or the symbolic), to have a pair of terms that, from opposite directions, point towards its limits.

The social imaginary could then be seen as sliding between two polarities, either towards “the real” (understood as a move outwards, not just in terms of what is traumatic, but what is unknown, unpredictable and unfathomable) or, alternatively, towards “the unreal” (understood as a move inwards, to protect a sense of identity, its coherence and value, when seemingly threatened, even as such a move can prove self-destructive).⁸ Now it is not that Castoriadis is without a sense of an outside reality: in his admittedly brief dialogue with Paul Ricoeur, he rejects the latter’s use of the term of utopia for that of project, as he taxes the critical impulse of “utopia” with being insufficiently concerned with whether or not it can be realized in reality (2016).

Nor is it the case that Castoriadis is unaware of tendencies towards collective narcissism, as evidenced, for example, by forms of ethnocentrism or racism (1990, 25-38). Still, it is not evident that these concerns can be thematized through the ideas bequeathed to us by *The Imaginary Institution of Society*. Such thematization would not simply help make normative judgments relative to a given social imaginary; it would serve to advance social analysis. For it allows one to ask questions about the institutional forms that enable (or disable) the social imaginary to become relatively open to the indeterminacy, and with it the uncertainty, that lies without (as implied by “the real”) but also within (as implied by the uncontrollable creativity of the radical imaginary). And such a thematization is not without relevance to one of his other central concerns: the institution of autonomy. In this regard it is not enough to summon the radical imaginary and its fluidity as a promise of increased autonomy; it is a matter of the institution of the autonomy, that is the institution of an instituting dimension (which supposes, in dialectical fashion, the presence of the instituted imaginary dimension, as well as the mutability of the identitarian-ensemblist dimension).

To take an example cited earlier, an imaginary that understands “reality” in terms of God’s perfection moves against autonomy not just because God, in his autonomy, proves heteronomous relative to human action, but because whatever appears contrary to God’s plan, can be dismissed as not really real because imperfect. (Indeed, if God is said to encompass all creation, his autonomy appears so complete as to be completely monadic; the absence of all otherness being the mark here of his sublimity, if not his madness). Or, to take

imaginary “that possesses us.” One is also speaking of madness, a term that, when applied to the collective as opposed to the individual level, has a far more metaphorical character.

⁸ The reader might say that I am reformulating the triad of reception theory, that distinguishes the imaginary from reality and fiction. And in a sense, the reader would be correct, but without the sliding scale, wherein one rarely actually leaves the imaginary, and with reality and fiction taken on very different meanings.

the opposite case, where “reality” points, from within the terms of the symbolic, to what lies outside the symbolic, the “the real” is provided at least a limited space (managed in advance as it were) within which to appear more directly, and in its indeterminacy.

The Imaginary and The Political

There is another term that is just as fraught as “the imaginary,” the term “political.” When one speaks of the political imaginary, how is it distinguishable from, say, the social imaginary discussed by Castoriadis? What exactly is meant here by the term political? One of the essays notes that Castoriadis does not, in contrast to Claude Lefort (and those influenced by Lefort, like Pierre Rosanvallon or Marcel Gauchet) distinguish between “politics (*la politique*) and “the political” (*le politique*). But then Castoriadis does not, and certainly not in a systematic sense, construct the political imaginary as a clearly delimited object of analysis. Now the distinction is not without relevance to such a delimitation, as the political imaginary will look very different, depending on whether one understands the latter in terms of politics or in terms of the political. If one understands it in terms of politics, one is speaking of one sphere among several spheres, where these other spheres (those of the economy, law, knowledge, culture, etc.) are relatively autonomous—a situation that is really only found in contemporary democratic societies. On the other hand, if one understands the political imaginary in terms of “the political,” one is dealing a very different object. For the political suggests a “doubling” of collective existence whereby it gains a certain distance from itself, from which it can identify itself as a coherent entity in relation to other collectivities, represent itself (that is, represent its order and value, its past and future) as well as, potentially, act on itself. In this regard, all collective entities bear “the political” as a constitutive dimension of their institution, even if they do not have a clearly delimited political sphere.

“The political” thus extends the political imaginary to the point that it embraces the collectivity as a whole and in its generality. This renders all talk of the social, or of the social imaginary, rather more complex. If one poses the political as a doubling of collective existence, one can posit the social as that which exists prior (in a logical, but not temporal sense) to this doubling, the latter serving to render the social present to itself through the political, whether in an autonomous or, more likely, heteronomous manner. What this implies is that the social can only be made available to itself from the perspective of “the political.” Continuing further, it means that if the social is distinguishable from the political, and distinguishable as being at the “base” of political institutions, this is because of the particular configuration of “the political”—a configuration associated with modern democracies. Thus, to speak of the contemporary democratic political imaginary in terms of “the political” is to suggest a term that, even as it embraces “society” as a whole and in its generality, establishes a division that limits its empire.⁹ Again, this is not without significance for a discussion of autonomy.

⁹ Note that such a claim cannot be made relative to ancient Greek democracy. Arguably, the distinction between the social and political cannot be made in a direct democracy, only a representative one.

To repeat, if one speaks of the political imaginary with a view to “the political,” then every society, as the quote from Lefort cited by Craig Browne in his wide-ranging and ambitious piece (406), has a political dimension even if it does not have a state or an instituted hierarchical order (beyond that formed by the two genders).¹⁰ The implication is that there is a dimension of power, even where there exists no visibly instituted power-holders.¹¹ Society, its order, sense and value appears instituted from somewhere, a somewhere that is presented as external to society in its immediate givenness (in the societies without a state related by Clastres that external position appears in their myths according to Lefort’s interpretation). In societies with a state, there are visible powerholders holding positions that are simultaneously in society and above society, and which serves to mediate between what lies within and what lies without. This must be kept in mind when speaking of hierarchy. The latter appears to be defined in terms of the unequal distribution of value, social status or social power (399). In my view, this definition may be too broad, at least if it is to be tied to the “political imaginary.”

Every year *The Guardian* ranks in descending order the 100 best albums. Presumably the higher the rank the higher the value, and the higher the value the higher the status of the artist concerned, and the higher the status the greater the artist’s power to command resources. Clearly, this notion of hierarchy does not belong to the political imaginary if understood in terms of politics (*la politique*). The latter requires one to be restricted to speaking of rank order relative to the political sphere, e.g. the relations of command within the state apparatus or, more contestably, the state apparatus in relation to the population.¹² But even if tied to “the political” (*le politique*), this understanding of hierarchy seems a stretch, at least if one does not relate it to larger questions concerning, to use Lefort’s vocabulary again, the *mise en forme*, *mise en sens* and *mise en scène*” (giving form and meaning to, as well as staging) social existence in its generality.

Here, as Craig Browne notes, the works of Louis Dumont prove invaluable, not least because he distinguishes a hierarchical society from the hierarchies that can be found in more egalitarian societies—a distinction that applies not just to ascriptive vs. achievement orientations, but even in terms of how ranking is to be understood.^{13,14} Moreover, as we are speaking of the *mise en forme* of collective existence, one must consider, relative to modern democratic societies, the hierarchical division between the political and other (social) spheres, not least because this division complicates the imaginary of autonomy. For we must

¹⁰ In the quote Lefort is referencing Pierre Clastre’s book *Society Against the State* (1972), which is based on Clastre’s anthropological studies amongst the Guayaki Indians in Paraguay

¹¹ This should be mentioned because it is contrary to certain anarchist notions that claim if there is no state there is no power. The perspective implied here is that if there is no power, considered in its “symbolic” dimension, there is no “society.” (I use the term “society” in quotes, because it took on its present meaning only as the social came to be distinguishable from the polity.)

¹² More contestably because the claim that the state “dominates” society, implies something of a democratic deficit.

¹³ One must include here not just *Homo Hierarchicus* but the *Homo Aequalis* series (1977, 1991 but also 1996).

¹⁴ In properly hierarchical societies, the higher rank encompasses the lower one (as woman is included in man, Eve having been made from Adam). It is as if, to speak in terms of set theory, the highest rank was both the set and in the set—something that Bourbaki would have found somewhat paradoxical.

ask ourselves: is the ideal of autonomy advanced by an increase in the autonomy of the different spheres; or does it demand that clear primacy be given to the political sphere, which should be able to command or, at least, shape the other spheres?

Let me add that it is difficult to imagine an end to hierarchy even in the most egalitarian of socio-political orders. One can still imagine a ranking of the 100 best songs in an egalitarian world, with the subsequent unequal distribution amongst the artists involved of, to use Pierre Bourdieu's terminology, symbolic, cultural and social, if not necessarily economic, capital. The problem is that equality must be considered a more "imaginary" term than hierarchy, which almost always conjures up an actual, empirical rank order (unless, precisely, one speaks of a hierarchical society in Dumont's sense, which implies a hierarchical imaginary). Equality, by contrast, need not have a concrete referent, as it serves to condition how we see our relation to others. Equality implies, we see others as, to quote Tocqueville's term, our "*semblables*," no matter how much money, fame or authority they may have.¹⁵ This is why equality not only co-exists with hierarchies but, as Craig Browne points out, the push for equality can have the unintended consequence of creating new inequalities. What has to be understood then is how the imaginary reconstitutes inequalities, giving them a very different form, meaning and value.

Prior to the democratic revolution, one certainly did not see someone in a superior or inferior position as similar to oneself, and therefore as someone with whom one was in competition; nor did one see oneself as an "individual" in the modern sense, as one saw those above and below as part of oneself.¹⁶ This is not to suggest that the imaginary of equality is not in tension with hierarchies, even as it reconstitutes them; the prevalence of resentments against both those above and below one (as well as, alternately, admiration for those above, or sympathy for those below) provide ample evidence of both this tension raised by hierarchies and their constant reconstitution. Even less do I mean to suggest that one cannot and should not devise institutional mechanisms to limit the extent of inequalities or prevent them from rigidifying. As Browne suggests, the tensions internal to the democratic imaginary invite continuous political argument and struggle.

Let me conclude this discussion on hierarchy with one last comment meant to emphasize the importance of the imaginary. Knöbl claims that hierarchy is necessary to the division of labour, suggesting that hierarchy is to be understood as a social fact, which has a determinate influence on one's social existence independent of what one thinks about it. But the division of labour has, since Adam Smith, been justified in terms of efficiencies, with the latter presented as a value worth striving for. In a word, the division of labour only makes sense in terms of an imaginary that values efficiencies, and the fact that it values efficiencies implies it is turned towards a sense of "reality" that is not strictly symbolic. This means that efficiencies not only justify the division of labour and its extension, but that any given iteration of the division of labour must justify itself in terms of its efficiencies. Max Weber,

¹⁵ One might add that as we see others as being similar to us, we may have difficulty seeing and accepting the otherness of others.

¹⁶ One identified with one's superiors as such identification raised oneself, allowing one to participate in a higher order, while one viewed one's immediate inferiors as, in Tocqueville's words, "appendages" of oneself.

following this logic, spoke of bureaucracy's "indubitable technical superiority," claiming that it "compares with other organizations exactly as does the machine with non-mechanical modes of production" (1946, 137).

Sixty years later, bureaucracies were criticized for their inefficiencies; they were said to be too large, rigid, cumbersome, unimaginative, and therefore incapable of adapting to changing circumstances with sufficient speed. Hence, their size was reduced, their order "flattened" (at least at the level of middle management), and individual positions made more "fluid." Sometimes, such measures were taken in cases where such measures were rather inappropriate, particularly when measured in terms of their social disruption (but then "efficiencies" are never cut and dry, being subject to the imaginary dimension, as well as empirical "tests.") At the same time "efficiencies" as a value are associated, above all, with the economic sphere, and as such they are potentially in conflict with the values of other spheres, and not just those of democratic politics. Today, in the face of COVID-19, the efficiencies of the global division of labour are being contested for geo-strategic reasons.

Political Representation

Paula Diehl's (2019) article is directed towards questions of the democratic imaginary and the "dynamics of political representation." As such, there is little need to question what she understands by the term political when associated with the imaginary. Her argument is that democracy is self-contradictory because its "practices" and "horizons" run on different temporalities, the former being more stuck in the past, while the latter, identified with "popular sovereignty" is directed more towards the future. One is reminded of what has been said about American politics relative to race relations: the victory of the north in the Civil War was followed by Jim Crow and the Klu Klux Klan, the civil rights legislation of the sixties by Nixon's "southern strategy," and the election of the first black president by Donald Trump. The implication is that democracy, as an imaginary, bears a necessarily universalist, progressive horizon, leading to increasing equality, even if the particularisms of deep-rooted histories prove resistant. This was not the view of Tocqueville who predicted that with the end of slavery racism would become only more entrenched, as it would move from the more mutable level of laws to the more intransigent level of social *moeurs*.

Moreover, I would add that the notion of equality supposed here is located less at the level of "popular sovereignty" than that of the pre-political conception of modern natural law with its understanding of human rights. And the relation between human rights and the popular sovereign is not without tension. For if all humans have rights in principle, those rights become meaningful, only if granted by an existing sovereign power; and the latter cannot grant rights to everyone, as sovereignty supposes boundaries that define its citizens from the citizens of other sovereign powers, as well as, more problematically, from non-citizens.

The existence of non-citizens (or "partial" citizens, whose rights are not fully upheld) is aggravated by the fact that popular sovereignty is a strictly "symbolic" term that has no reference outside its own signification. This is to say that the sovereign people, by itself, does

not have a “real” existence, but must be related to a notion of the people that bears some reference to “reality.” It can be a “discursive” reference, first in the sense of a legal discourse that defines who is a citizen, whether it be in terms of the *jus sanguinis*, the *jus soli* or more voluntarist terms (Singer 1996); and in a second sense, often based on the first, which speaks of the supposedly typical characteristics of the people in question (and which implies some are, for example, more American or more French than others, as when one speaks of the “American heartland” or “*la France profonde*”). And these discursive references will translate into an “empirical” reference, which slides from all those deemed to be citizens, to all those citizens granted full political rights, to all those who are able—or, better enabled—to exercise those political rights.

In short, there are at least four definitions of the people: the strictly symbolic definition of the people as sovereign, which grants them absolute power; the legal definition, which constructs the “reality” of the people as a body of citizens, including some and excluding others; a “cultural” definition that has limited anchorage in “reality,” which often tends to be dismissive of minorities; and an empirical definition that, even as it provides a limited degree of “reality testing” through elections, tends to present the people as heterogeneous individuals, rather removed from the unified subject presented by the sovereign people, and from the “homogenizing” tendencies implied by the cultural definition. Much depends, as regards the tension between the universalism of rights and the democratic sovereign on the articulation between these different definitions of the people, the character of this articulation being itself a matter of political struggle.

Then there is the problematic posed by the sovereign people’s political representation, which complicates the claim that modern democracy is “the rule of the people.”¹⁷ The people, cannot, by definition, be identical to their political representation. An identity would mean that one of the two terms was redundant, either the representatives (and one would have a properly direct democracy) or the represented (with the elected leader monopolizing the people’s voice). Representation supposes a division between the representatives and those they represent, though the divide cannot be too great lest the relation appear as simply unrepresentative.¹⁸ It might seem paradoxical, but the concept of popular sovereign appears specific to modern representative democracies.¹⁹

¹⁷ Political representation, let me add, also serves to construct the division between the political as opposed to the other spheres; for the political representatives the political sphere is his primary sphere of activity, while it tends to retain a secondary, largely specular character for the rest of the citizen body.

¹⁸ We often speak, incorrectly in my view, of “direct democracy” as the attempt to close the gap between representatives and represented rather than to eliminate the representatives.

¹⁹ Democracy amongst the ancients means literally rule by the people, but the ancients had no concept of a sovereign people. The idea that the people was the basis of all power, and that that power was absolute would, one suspects, be understood by the Greeks as an outrageously hubristic claim. The modern sense of sovereignty was developed with absolutist rule. Not only did it specify the monarch’s power as absolute, it rendered power relatively independent of religion (the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio*), and admitted the existence of many sovereignties, in contradistinction to the normative horizon of empire, bequeathed by ancient Rome. (Manin 1997; Grimm 2015)

Here I can only underline Paula Diehl's emphasis on popular sovereignty as being at the center of the modern democratic imaginary. Not only does the term specify who has ultimate power within a nation's borders; it ensures that the division between representatives and represented cannot be totally eliminated; and it places the question of collective autonomy (or self-determination) front and center. For the popular sovereign is auto-nomos in the literal sense: it gives itself its own laws, and in giving itself its own laws, gives itself its own constitution, that is, it constitutes itself. Through its self-constitution it establishes the constituted powers, but behind the latter the sovereign retains, if only in reserve, its constituting power, a power that can, in principle, always overthrow and remake the constituted powers. There is a clear resemblance between the *pouvoirs constitués* and the *pouvoir constituant*, and Castoriadis' distinction between the *imaginaire institué* and the *imaginaire instituant*, though constitution suggests a much shallower and more rationalist notion than that implied by institution (Merleau-Ponty, 2010).

What I want to suggest is that the modern democratic imaginary, even as it establishes autonomy as a central normative horizon, problematizes it. We already noted that, with reference to its political institution, autonomy is confronted with a set of dilemmas: the relation of the political sphere to the other spheres, the articulation of the different definitions of the people, and the division borne by political representation. What this suggests is that democracy is contradictory not just in the sense that its practices do not always live up to its normative horizon; but more importantly, that its normative horizon is itself contradictory, setting up a series of antinomies, which set the stage for a variety of conflicts. This claim moves against any teleological conception of democracy, wherein its normative horizon pushes in a single progressive direction behind which a given society may lag or even regress. Democracy may well entail different temporalities,²⁰ but it is difficult to align them against a single timeline when democracy is fundamentally indeterminate and pushes in potentially very different directions.

Speaking to Contradiction

This brings me to the essay by José Mauricio Domingues (2019); it has the merit of speaking directly to the contradictions internal to the democratic political imaginary. Still, I would have been happier had Domingues read the work by one Brian C.J. Singer entitled *Society, Theory and the French Revolution*, and subtitled *Studies in the Revolutionary Imaginary* (1986). But the fact that Domingues had not read it is perfectly understandable, given the thousands of books written on that Revolution. Nonetheless, he would have found in this work strong echoes of his own central claims and rendered in a manner that may have clarified some of his arguments.

²⁰ Paula Diehl notes that concepts (associated with democracy's normative horizon) have a different temporality than reality (associated with actual political practices). This is certainly true, but it is not simply that the one lags behind the other; for concepts always overshoot and undershoot reality (overshoot: in that concepts bear their own logic, which leads to one-sided, inflated conclusions; and undershoot: in that concept never encompass all reality, but at best only aspects of it). In effect, one is dealing with very different levels, with very different temporal logics.

Domingues argues that “all the contradictions that beset and drive political modernity can already be discerned” in the French Revolution and, more particularly, its Jacobin period. He then lists some six such contradictions or tensions in seemingly random order. I would have preferred him to have ranked them in a more “hierarchical” fashion, in accord with a conceptual development based in the antinomies inhering in the idea of popular sovereignty. In this sense, what he refers to as the tension between radical secularization and the Supreme Being appears deservedly last in his list. With what Marcel Gauchet terms “the exit from religion” (1997), the political generally no longer requires reference to the divinity; though one could argue that, in its immanence, the sovereign people or nation, acquires a sacred character (Kahn 2011).

Regarding the personalization of power, there is a fundamental misunderstanding of Lefort’s claim that the place of power is empty. It is not that there is no-one in a position of power, but that that person can never be identical to the sovereign, the fissure between the position and place of power, and between the political representatives and the represented, being precisely where the “emptiness” enters in. If someone filled the place of power, not only could that person not be publicly criticized and voted out of office, he would enjoy a seemingly transcendent aura not just by virtue of his power, but because he would embody both truth and justice, knowledge and law. As such, it would appear as if the regime’s very existence, its order and coherence, was suspended on his person alone. To the degree that in democracies a limited personalization of power exists, much depends on contextual factors, some of which are quite contemporary (for example, presidential democracies are more personalized than parliamentary democracies; where parties are hollowed out, they become more closely identified with the party leader; and with television, 24 hour news channels and digital news feeds, and now Twitter, the nation’s president becomes visible and audible to a degree never before possible).

The tension between the social question and *laissez faire* speaks to the problem of the relation between the political and (one of the) other social spheres. At the top of the list lies in my view lies what Domingues refers to as the pull between elective dictatorship and direct democracy (and what I have referred to as the division between the representatives and those they represent). Associated with the latter is the problem of the divisions within the political representation (the embryonic party perspective vs. the representation of the nation in his terms) and the divisions within the represented (the homogeneity of the nation vs. individual heterogeneity, again in his terms). The Jacobins were unwilling to countenance any of these divisions: the sovereign nation was “one and indivisible,” as was its representation, resulting in a “*chasse aux divisions*” that culminated in “*la Grande Terreur*.” The result was the Jacobins’ self-destruction as the Terror moved ever closer to the center and began to threaten even members of the Committees of Public Safety and General Security.²¹

²¹ And on both the right and left sides of these committees, though when the National Assembly was brought in, matters moved decidedly to the right and someone like Jacques-Nicolas Billaud-Varenne found himself exiled to the French Guiana (he was to die in Haiti).

In Conclusion

Let me conclude by addressing some of the criticisms of the Domingues essay by Wolfgang Knöbl. My own work did not consider the French Revolution outside France. Domingues speaks of the Haitian revolution as inspired by the events in Paris, while admitting its syncretic character; he then suggests that the Haitian revolution presents, if not a paradigm, then the beginning of waves of anti-colonial struggles. Knöbl contrasts this position of “conflictive transculturation” with a theory of alternate modernities that would require one to consider alternative ontologies and epistemologies. My own view is that, in order to strengthen his argument, Domingues would have to consider more closely the political imaginary of the Haitian revolution and how it confronted—if it confronted—the contradictions that he claims beset political modernity, and which can be found in nuce during the French Revolution. This could be a very interesting project.

Knöbl also faults Domingues for relying on Ferenc Feher’s interpretation of the Revolution, which was formed in the shadow thrown by Soviet rule. I would simply point out that the dominant interpretations of the Revolution, and not just in France, were informed by the experience of on-going revolutionary traditions, and since 1917 by the establishment of the Soviet Union. François Furet, who famously declared that “the French Revolution is dead” (1978), by which he meant the revolutionary interpretation of the Revolution was dead, still remained obsessed by the Soviet experience, as evidenced by his last book, translated into English as *The Passing of an Illusion: The Idea of Communism in the 20th Century*. As for the claim that with Thermidor society resumed its ordinary role as the primary determinant, it is somewhat disingenuous (Thermidor marked the beginnings of the White Terror), and anachronistic when applied to the Ancien Régime (from the perspective of that period’s imaginary, it would have made absolutely no sense to claim that society was in control). The last criticism that I want to consider is how can one speak of the French Revolution as the beginnings of political modernity at the expense of the American Revolution.

I would argue that the French Revolution was the first explicitly democratic revolution, with its claim that the people were sovereign. As such, it had to confront, and sought to resolve, what we have called the contradictions of democratic rule.²² To the degree that democracies have proved relatively viable, they have had to find ways not so much to resolve these contradictions (they appear largely irresolvable) as to mediate their polarities—and here political practices were often in advance of democratic theories. In a sense, the English with their mixed regime, and the Americans with their balance of powers—which owed much to Montesquieu’s interpretation of the “English constitution” (Singer 2013)—precisely because they did not claim to be democracies proper, had something of a head start in figuring out how to mediate these tensions. That being said, today we know that, as clearly demonstrated by the Brexit referendum, the people of the United Kingdom are sovereign in practice, even

²² One should remember that if the Jacobin period of the Revolution was said to give rise to a revolutionary tradition, the Girondin period was explicitly posed as the inspiration of less revolutionary forms of democracy (notably the French Third Republic). It should be said though that relative to the contradictions noted, Girondin thinking was often not that different from that of the Jacobins, but the Jacobins were closer to the Parisian sans-culottes, and were much more bloody-minded.

if the “King in Parliament” remains the sovereign in principle. As for the United States, the system of checks and balances is under considerable strain as Donald Trump, with the backing of the Republican Party, is pushing towards what could be termed an “unmediated” form of democracy. In short, the contradictions of the democratic political imaginary remain very much with us.

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