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Further Remarks on the Imaginary

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Brian Singer's (2020) commentary on "Conceptualizing the Modern Imaginary" (a special issue of *Social Epistemology*) invites further reflection on the discussion among the contributors. I welcome this opportunity. Many concerns with which I have great sympathy are raised in the diverse papers. The tensions within political modernity and democracy (Paula Diehl), the eternal return of hierarchies (Craig Browne), and how to conceptualize the imaginary beyond a vague substitute for the all-purpose term "culture" are key questions for the contemporary social sciences and the humanities more generally. In this reply, I focus on comments by Wolfgang Knöbl (2019) and Brian Singer (2020) while touching on Chiara Bottici (2019) and Johannes Grave's (2019) concerns.

First, I tackle the concept of the imaginary. I then turn to a central and particularly thorny issue for socio-scientific approaches—religion and secularization. This allows me to address the general problem of modernity and knowledge. Finally, I take up the question: "Why the French Revolution and Fehèr?" and speak to an objection to my reading of Lefort.

Conceptualizing the Imaginary

To counter the danger of the loose use of the notion of the "imaginary," which correctly concerns Singer, we need a precise elaboration of the concept. We also need to recognize that there exists a sociological deficit in the way imaginary has been lately discussed. Knöbl's opening quotation of Durkheim is, in this respect, on the mark. The imaginary has always been a focus of much sociological research, although quite different from the work of Castoriadis (1975), but with serious limitations. Freud, who was Castoriadis' starting point, also examined the imaginary. A central problem is the relation of the imaginary to both reason and reality. An additional problem is that "culture" was caught up in a stark polarization at the very beginning in political theory, the social sciences, and other humanities disciplines. Even Castoriadis fell into this trap. Here, I introduce my approach which I have been developing for a few decades.

Since the seventeenth century with philosophers such as Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Kant and Herder, and then later with sociologists such as Weber and Durkheim, the modern outlook on social life has been marked by a polarization between the individual and society—initially represented as the state. On the one side, we find individuals acting intentionally. On the other side, we find a social whole that was passive save for the capacity, rarely really described or properly explained, of influence over such individuals—what we can paradoxically call a "passive causality." How to connect these two poles became, to use Alexander's expression, a perennial "presuppositional" problem in the social sciences (as it is in overall modern thought). The interplay between individuals and society (or the state), as well as the interaction between individuals, appears in the work of all of these thinkers. However, utilizing Parsons's expression, both have mostly remained "residual categories"—they must be there, and are even sometimes named, but play no systematic conceptual role.

Take Weber, for example, the progenitor of methodological individualism beyond the blunter and caricatural instance of rational-choicers. What mattered for Weber was the

“subjective meaning” (*Sinn*) (and here we are already in the terrain of the imaginary) individuals attach to their “action.” He noted that this happens within interactions, but the focus remained on the individual. Even creativity was the property of the charismatic individuals—not of the mass of followers. Whether this methodological standpoint corresponded to an ontological one, Weber never clearly stated. Whether his investigations and narratives of historical developments corresponded to this methodological postulation remains open to doubt, since they are peopled by collectivities which appear as crucial makers of history.

Now, take Durkheim with his objective “social fact” over and above individuals penetrating and splitting their minds, forcing norms therein (another sociological view of the imaginary), which eventually became more flexible and pliable with the introduction of “collective representations” (as indicated by Knöbl). Creativity stemmed from “collective effervescence” rather directly—interactions as such were not theorized. Note that Saussure’s conception of *langue* as structural and *parole* as contingent but ineffectual action vis-à-vis the structure reproduces Durkheim’s approach.

This polarization is so strong that Castoriadis himself reproduces it, caught also in how it appeared in psychoanalysis—Freud’s radical individualism (though this was tempered by the interactive romance of family life and child sexuality) and Lacan’s inclination towards structuralism taken up from Saussure. Surely, Castoriadis’s monad is born and integrated immediately into socialization. His imaginary and the “magma” related to it are also much more fluid and constructive, rather than alienating, than anything Lacan imagined. Yet, the polarization persisted. Marx, Mead, and Parsons proposed different alternatives to the polarization, but their lessons, due to the *social* strength of the polarization starting with individualism and the state on the other side of the equation, in modernity constantly pushes alternative views to the background (including the 1970’s-1980’s “synthetic theories” from Habermas, Giddens, Bourdieu, Alexander, and even Luhmann).

Marx introduced the dialectic between agent and society in his critique of Feuerbach and, additionally, interaction as the underlying element of the commodity, the “elementary” cell of capital, which appears as a relation between things but is actually a reification of a relation between agents. Going further Marx introduced, without elaborating it at a more general level, collective agents—the social classes. This formulation implied a problematic, but interesting, understanding of the imaginary which I discuss further. Since the second phase of Parsons’s work dealing with the “social system” and the interaction between individuals, as well as among “collective actors,” was the basic category of his theoretical scheme, which also featured “culture” as an analytical focus of reference, in which “norms” play a central role (shoring up the creative plasticity and unpredictability engendered by the “double contingency” of interaction). Probably due the struggle between Chicago and Harvard for hegemony, Parsons barely mentioned symbolic interactionists, and certainly not Mead, but obviously drew heavily upon them. The latter developed his own view of the imaginary, centred on “significant gestures” and the “generalized other,” stressing interaction and creativity (the instituting “I” versus the passive and the instituted “me” internal to the individual but also an expression of social norms).

To cut a long story short, let me note that I synthesized all this in my theory of *collective subjectivity* (Domingues 1995) that features a sociologically-based ontology of “transindividuality” (but not “collectivist” such as Durkheim and others). It takes social life as an ongoing, endless, interactive process among individuals and collectivities with a greater or lesser level of “centring” (identity awareness and organization; that is, they may be loose, including causally, and unaware of selves, though they may be well-organized internally and sharply aware of themselves) and intentionality (which is dependent upon their level of centring). This leads us beyond polarization.

This basic ontology/theory of social life connects to, and is completed by, a view of the imaginary that stresses how it is perennially (re)produced in interactive processes (Domingues 1995, chapters 1-2; 2016). The imaginary seems to be, to some degree, pre-linguistic as Castoriadis stated drawing upon Freud’s two “topics” (which, like Lacan, he mixed indistinctly speaking alternatively of unconscious/conscious and of the “it”—or “id”—*es/* and the “I” —or “ego”/*ich*, plus the “superego”). Nevertheless, contrary to Castoriadis, its generative mechanisms are within both the individual psyche and interactive processes between individuals and collective subjectivities which unfold as floating webs of meaning and practice. Images (non-linguistic though possibly acoustic) and linguistic elements (typical of human significant gestures according to Mead) are also present in these interactions. More or less “identitary” or counting on “displacement” and “condensation” (mechanisms Castoriadis recovers from Freud and that inhabit the creative “radical imaginary”—“imagination” in later texts), these processes entail the conscious/unconscious, id/ego/superego, as well as diverse reflexivities, more or less rational-systematic or practical.

This understanding of the imaginary breaks with Castoriadis’s individualism and collectivism. We move beyond the instituting individual moment of individual (a-rational) creativity (close to Mead’s “I” and Parsons’ “double contingency”) and the collective instituted moment—which Castoriadis fails to properly elaborate. Moreover, it allows for a more precise view of the “magma” which Castoriadis also does not fully conceptualize. While magma is plastic, non-identitary, and constantly re-created within interactions, institutionalized social relations (a staple of sociological theory) makes meaning (the “symbolic” in Castoriadis) more stable. That is, stabilized interactions lock in contingency reducing it to manageable levels (as Luhmann correctly fathomed).

Imaginary and Knowledge

In his book on the French Revolution, Singer (1986, 13-19, 51-52) stressed how secularization was crucial for the “discovery of society.” Henceforth, secularization was placed on the dimension of immanence. It cannot be traced back to God differently from the “religious imaginary.” Social change became possible to imagine. Particularly relevant is his thesis that a “fissure” opened up between “signifier” and “signified,” “discourse” and “referent.” If representation was once a necessary mediation in the composition of social reality, which arose as mere appearance, now it may block access to “reality’s truth.” While knowledge, directly connected to religion, was, as such, power, it is no longer efficacious per

se. It is action that implies power. We could bring up Aquinas's synthesis of faith and Aristotelianism, Eisenstadt's view of the "axial revolutions" and the introduction of a tension between immanence and transcendence, hence a push for social change. We could add Heidegger's thesis on the substitution of reason for God and religion as the mediator that certifies true knowledge. But that would be beside the point. It is the tension between knowledge and imaginary that is relevant in Singer's argument.

Let me observe that secularization and religion exist only for each other. Before the idea of secularization was introduced, there was no religion. I do not mean only that now people can identify religion as ideology or the like. What I mean is that secularization and religion are imaginary elements that cannot but go together, before that there were other imaginary constructions, not religion as modernity defined it. That is the reason why Weber and Durkheim's concepts of 'religion' are almost incommensurable. They spoke about different things.

While Durkheim was keenly aware of the imaginary as "social fact" and later "collective representations," Marx also had a strong notions of the imaginary. Initially, Marx phrased it as "ideology" and then as the "fetishism of commodity" a metaphysical magical thing that clouded the perception of people in a reified world. In his youth, Marx said as much about the state and sovereignty as, respectively, an imaginary community and locus of power. These figures, necessary in such social reality, were negative. They blocked access to truth. Once class domination and capitalism were overcome reason would, however, prevail. What would then happen to the imaginary? As far as we can tell from his writings, it would vanish. There would be no longer a place for symbolism, apparently, except in a sort of language that truthfully and transparently corresponded to reality. Despite his strong recourse to dialectics, in this regard Marx might be seen as moving in the vicinity of logical positivism.

Weber also dealt with the imaginary. With the disenchantment of the world, "meaning" took a leave of absence. That is, while "religion" (until Protestantism) allowed for symbolic production, once capitalism and the modern state (rationalization overall) set in, it would cease. We can hardly understand how individuals could attribute meaning to their actions thereafter if not in strictly rational terms (which Weber confusedly adumbrates in his methodology). Marx dreamt of reason. Weber came to think of reason as a nightmare. Knowledge and reality were divorced. Marx thought of critical, rational knowledge as empowering. For Weber, resignation was the inevitable outcome (see Domingues 2019a, chapter 1).

Therefore, we have a problem. If we accept simply that the imaginary precludes access to reality then, at best, anything goes. The absurd idea of accepting non-meaning scientific symbols would seem a solution. However, this notion miserably failed. It had to. Scientific knowledge is part of the imaginary as Wittgenstein (only partly), against his former philosophical self, realized. But we must not see it as merely any other "language game" as recurring interpretations of the late Wittgenstein, like Winch's, suppose. Here, we would need a longer argument, but *in nuce* what I mean is as follows.

Although we all, inevitably and always, live within an imaginary in the positive constructive sense, “rationalization” is not simply one more imaginary signification contrary to what Castoradis (1975) suggested. Due to a particular and contingent development the separation between the social, the natural, and the subjective world in the modern imaginary allowed for a high level of objectification of reality; hence, a deeper knowledge (as Popper and Habermas, for different reasons and despite the former’s neo-positivism and the latter’s unilinear evolutionism, realized). That is why grasping the “reification” of the social world of “collective representations” is not equivalent to flat-earth talk, although Marxism, Durkheimism, and the latter’s sort of regressive mentality are all imaginary constructions. That is why grasping the progressive “disenchantment of the world” does not merely produce a sort of knowledge others can verify. As science, it must correspond to reality (producing “adequate” knowledge to Rorty’s annoyance).

This brings us now to the issue of “epistemology.” The issue would have perhaps to do with alternative southern or even multiple modernities theories, in the form the San Domingue/Haitian revolutionary process, might summon along with its straightforward adoption of modern values such as rationality, freedom, equality, and solidarity. Without these values we seem doomed to barbarism, although there is no reason to stop there since history has not finished with modernity—its immanent critique is still crucial as part of its hopefully progressive overcome. As Knöbl correctly underlined, I view modernity as one—though it has become in the course of its expansion hybrid and highly heterogeneous.

Scientific epistemology, in its plurality beyond the Cartesian caricature that post-modernism and post-colonialism/de-colonialism usually provide, is part of the modern imaginary, but also provides for an adequate grasp of social, natural, and subjective reality. It empowers, or may empower, us, though by now we are far from the absolute certitude and hopefully arrogance we once thought it authorized, thanks to several critical outlooks. If science has become, or should become, more modest, it consists in a historical conquest we can hardly exaggerate whatever else we add to it. It is now the extreme-right that has been wont to downplay science along with its political values.

Final Remarks

Let me take up two additional issues.

I agree with Knöbl that the American revolution/war of independence, the English Glorious Revolution and the Latin American wars of independence are landmarks in the development of modernity. These wars dealt with similar problems. I believe, however, that the French Revolution, which encompassed San Domingue’s, condensed them. Fehèr’s account of the metropolitan process was especially balanced, sharply addressing modern political tensions and contradictions, as well as the future of revolution, which was more clearly played out in the French Revolution.

Finally, regarding Lefort’s “empty place of power.” Singer’s reading is not incorrect—against the absolute sovereign, the issue was initially how to prevent a permanent occupation

of the place of power. Lefort recognizes this but slides towards a broader thesis maybe without realizing it. This is true regarding his discussion of “totalitarianism” in which it all started—the problem arises when a political current or leader tries to “concentrate in itself all the forces of society.” While power now is no longer “supernatural,” things become even worse, and apparently more oppressive, in that this phenomenon becomes “purely social” (Lefort [1980] 1981, 100-01).

Whereas Lefort sees this as a sort of authoritarian perversion, I prefer to argue that this recurrently occurs, without hinging on or entailing either “totalitarianism” or “populism” (the now surrogate *bête-noir* of liberalism—embraced by Laclau through his unifying “empty signifier”). This is rather a dynamic *intrinsic* modern and post-modern political systems—such as organized by liberalism or fascism as well as post-modern authoritarian collectivism or, if you prefer, “real socialism.” This does not mean that this does not entail authoritarianism or that it may not become authoritarian, on the contrary. Yet it is much prosaic than Lefort deemed it. The fact that in democracy “power belongs to nobody” does not mean that “power has no body” (Lefort [1983] 1986, 20-31; [1981] 1986, 291-92). It does not mean that it is not somehow substantialized and incorporated (Domingues 2019a, 77, 280; 2019b).

Modernity is fraught with tensions between, among many other things, the universal and particular and the abstract and concrete. From the very beginning the Jacobins, as well as revolutionaries in Britain and the Americas, had to deal with them.

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