Democracy, Its Contradictions, and the Political Imaginary

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I would like to thank *Social Epistemology* for opening the debate on the political imaginary and to Brian Singer (2020) for agreeing to write the commentaries and challenging the contributing authors of the *Conceptualizing the Political Imaginary* special issue. I am indebted to Brian Singer for raising many questions, which we could not discuss in the publication.

Multiple Views on the Political Imaginary

One question concerns all the articles in *Conceptualizing the Social Imaginary*. Singer is completely right when he approaches the problem of dealing with the imaginary in Castoriadis's sense by adding the adjective political. Reading between the lines, these concerns are closely linked to the divergent points in the arguments of Claude Lefort and Cornelius Castoriadis. In *Society, Theory and the French Revolution* (1986), Brian Singer also faced similar difficulties. His concerns with the challenges of conceptualizing the term "imaginary" in his commentary, especially linking it to the term "political", build the backdrop for this special issue of *Social Epistemology*; the question was: how to deal with these concerns?

There are two ways to tackle this problem. The first would be to specify the definitions of the political and the imaginary before bringing them together. Yet, this is not an easy path. There are a variety of perspectives in both concepts. The concept of the political can be defined in very different, and oftentimes contradictory, ways. Hannah Arendt, Claude Lefort, Jacques Rancière, Chantal Mouffe, and Carl Schmitt provide examples of this. Depending on the perspective applied, the inquiry can go in different directions, thereby offering divergent views on the same subject or, in some cases, even bring about new subjects of inquiry. This is also the case when looking at the notion of the imaginary.

There are manifold epistemological cuts and contradicting theoretical presuppositions, such as Lacan's theory of the mirror stage, Gilbert Durand's anthropological approach to symbolism, Charles Taylor's view of modernity(ies), or Cornelius Castoriadis's concept of the social imaginary as magma that encompasses both the radical and instituted imaginary. Moreover, depending on the authors one refers to, points of intersection or divergent perspectives appear when placing these two terms side by side. Sometimes they overlap, while other times the two concepts pinpoint different things. To make a long story short, narrowing the concepts of the imaginary and the political would force the contributing authors of "Conceptualizing the Political Imaginary" to adopt the same perspective before they begin to explore possible approaches to the topic.

For this reason, we took another path. We decided to postpone the difficult task of harmonizing the concepts of the imaginary and the political in order open out many different pathways for the authors to follow in addressing the political imaginary. To a certain extent, we did however presuppose that the imaginary not only be considered in its instituted dimension, but that we should take the amorphous unarticulated manifestations of the imaginary in its radical sense (Castoriadis) into consideration. We also limited the scope of reflections on the imaginary to its political aspect. In this sense, the adjective 'political' should address common issues of a collectivity, the imagination of its shape and order, but

also the roles of representatives and citizens, and the idea that people make of the political institutions, norms and principles that are connected to political practice. For political theory, for example, considering the political imaginary offers a broader perspective for understanding modern democracy and political representation, as I show in my article "Temporality and the Political Imaginary in the Dynamics of Political Representation".

We are aware that adding the adjective political to the concept of the imaginary raises numerous interesting questions that could not be approached within the scope of this special issue. In addition, the term political imaginary creates a promising perspective for further interdisciplinary research.

Temporalities and the Political Imaginary

Regarding my own article dedicated to the temporalities of the democratic imaginary, Singer's comments and critiques enable me the chance to emphasize some important points of my argument and include others that could not be addressed in my text.

One of the questions Singer raises in his commentary is the problematic tendency of term imaginary to become ubiquitous by "attach[ing] itself to almost everything that crosses its path" (2020). I am not sure if this is the case, and I do not think that "the term 'imaginary' is that like the term 'social' with which it threatens to become synonymous", as Singer suspects. Moreover, the imaginary can be regarded as a cut into or perspective on the social. Although Cornelius Castoriadis alternate the use the words imaginary and society, especially when it comes to the process of instituting society—what he calls "*auto-création*" in French— by using the term imaginary he points to the capacity of society to institute itself. In this sense, the imaginary is used to designate "*la société instituente*" (Castoriadis 1975, 533), and therefore cannot be regarded in conventional sociological terms only as instituted society.

The English translation of this passage reads: "That which in the social-historical is positing, creating, bringing into being we call social imaginary in the primary sense of the term, or instituting society" (Castoriadis 1987, 225). Yet, Castoriadis applies the concept of the imaginary with a double terminology: as the above-mentioned instituting or radical imaginary, and as the instituted imaginary for the existing material expressions of the radical imaginary in social life. In this case, society is again regarded through a particular lens, namely through the imagination (*Vorstellungen*) of what has already been institutionalized and structured by the imaginary significations. The concept of the imaginary creates awareness for the mechanisms of instituting society and the effects of this institution in what the sociology of knowledge calls "the social construction of reality" (Berger/Luckmann 1966), but without narrowing the scope of inquiry to the symbolic or to knowledge production.

Adopting Castoriadis's terminology allows one to elaborate on both dimensions of the imaginary and their interrelation, and it allows for a reflection of the political implications of this relationship. Here, the idea of different temporalities or *Zeitlichkeiten* (Koselleck) might serve as an interesting tool for understanding the discrepancies of modern democracy. In "Temporality and the Political Imaginary in the Dynamics of Political Representation"

(2019), I address the contradictions of modern democracies and their connection to political representation. These contradictions are present in many levels of political life and concern many different issues. The uses of religious symbolism in democratic rituals, such as swearing on the Bible at presidential inaugurations in the USA, using the Catholic sign of the holy trinity in parliamentary oaths in Switzerland, or the presence of an Orthodox priest at the inauguration of each new government in Greece, stand in contradiction to one of the major features of the democratic imaginary: the separation of religion and politics with the emergence of autonomy observed among others by Cornelius Castoriadis, Claude Lefort, and Marcel Gauchet. Further contradictions can be found in the personalization of power, which deploys the pre-democratic symbolic embodiment by the prince (Lefort).

Personalization and attempts to embody power contradict the principle of popular sovereignty established in modern democracy. Feminist theory has also pointed out a third contradiction of the democratic principle of equality, visible in the long history of denying women and minorities equal rights. I place an emphasis on the latter contradiction, because it is the most visible in this time. Social movements like "Black Lives Matter" clearly demonstrate the contradictions between the normative horizon of the democratic imaginary and the social norms and practices that continue to operate within numerous political and social institutions. Institutionalized racism in the police is one of the most visible manifestations of this contradiction.

The article argued that it was necessary to tackle the dynamics of democracy through applying different temporalities of when looking at social norms and the normative horizon outlined by the political imaginary.

Democracy and Its Contradictions

In addressing these contradictions, it was necessary to first understand the major imaginary signification of modern democracy, which serves as the primary reference for democratic representation: popular sovereignty. Castoriadis stressed that democracy is the power of the *demos*, but it was Lefort who placed the concept of the popular sovereignty at the center of democratic representation. For Lefort, popular sovereignty is a key concept for understanding symbolic transformations in modern democracy. Popular sovereignty is the political articulation of autonomy that was brought out through the American and French Revolutions. Lefort traces the genesis of democracy by focusing on the French case. He chose this event because of its particular radicality, which exposed the rupture with the pre-democratic imaginary.

The execution of Louis XVI was the symbolic event that marked the emergence of a new form of political representation. Previous to the Revolution, political representation had been configured as power embodied by the prince. Popular sovereignty emerges from a social-historical articulation of autonomy, which replaced the sovereignty of the monarch with a significant impact on political representation. First, popular sovereignty eliminated any legitime form of embodiment of power. Second, now power is imagined as belonging to the people, i.e. to everyone, and becomes disincorporated. Lefort's argument on the topic is well

known. In his famous article "*La question de la démocratie*" ("The Question of Democracy" 1988) and in his discussion of totalitarianism (2007, 1999a), Lefort depicts the symbolic upheaval brought about by the French Revolution. "If we bear in mind the monarchical model of the Ancien Regime, the meaning of the transformation can be summarized as follows: democratic society is instituted as a society without a body, as a society which undermines the representation of an organic totality" (Lefort 1988, 18). Henceforth, power needs to be symbolized as an empty place. Popular sovereignty became the primary reference that also structured political representation.

Now, it is possible to assert that there is a tension in the relationship between popular sovereignty and human rights, as Singer states. I do agree that such an opposition is only valid for democracy in practice. However, restricting popular sovereignty and citizens' rights to the territorial state can indeed be viewed in opposition to human rights, and nothing makes this tension more clear than the crisis of dealing with migration in Western societies. However, this explanation is valid as long as the territorial State remain acceptable.

If the understanding of democracy as an unrealized potential is taken seriously, as Claude Lefort has, the democratic horizon allows one to imagine a global society where territorial frontiers do not exclude individuals from participating in democracy—of course, this is an utopian perspective. Conceptually, this would require questioning the Western approach to democracy. That is why Pierre Rosanvallon suggests that "l'idée d'un universalisme fermé du modèle doit ainsi céder le pas à un universalisme ouvert de la confrontation des experiences" (Rosanvallon 2007, 3). Against this background, the tensions between popular sovereignty and human rights are the effect of contradictions between the normative horizon of democracy and the social norms and practices that my article underlines, rather than the outcome of an, in-itself, contradictory horizon of democracy, as Singer states.

Nevertheless, Castoriadis proposes a way of understanding democracy in terms of an intrinsic opposition between the power of the *demos* and its own self-limitation. Once society no longer accepts any transcendent or heritage norms, there is no conceivable limit to its power. Therefore, democracy must limit itself. "Il en résulte que la démocratie est, essentiellement, le régime de l'autolimitation (Castoriadis 1999, 181). Yet, this self-limitation can only come about by establishing certain norms. In such a case, human rights can be read as normative articulations of the *demos*'s self-limitation. The same applies to the constitution. Yet, the tension here does not emerge between democracy and the articulated forms of self-limitation, but it lies in the fact that limitation is a necessity.

Admittedly, there is another tension that Singer's commentary did not mention, but which is more difficult to revise. Modern democracy establishes secondary principles that create contentious relationships themselves. The principles of equality and freedom are good examples of this. The tension between them is independent of social practices and norms since they are part of the normative democratic horizon themselves. Such constitutive aporias of democracy are the focus of Pierre Rosanvallon's conceptual history of the political (2003), and there are many: the tension between "ideal people" as a political abstraction, and "sociological people" as a sociological condition mentioned by Singer is just one of them.

Rather than attempting to dissolve such aporias, what is at stake in my article is a search for a framework of analysis that enable scholars in the field to identify the situations in which contradictions "only" indicate anachronisms, and those in which they are signs of deep transformations of the political imaginary.

Political Representation and Temporalities

It is possible to speak of a structure of political representation that gives political society its shape. Representation is therefore conceived in broad terms and understood as a symbolic elaboration that generates the *mise en scène* (staging) of a political society, its *mise en form* (shape), and *mise en sense* (the process of giving meaning) (Lefort 1988 a. 1986). It is clear that the imaginary, not only the imagination, plays a crucial role in linking the *mise en scène* with the *mise en form* of society, even if Lefort did not make this connection explicit.[1]

In symbolic sense, representation contributes to the materialization of a political imaginary, which provides members of society with a normative horizon, even when the social norms and practices might not necessarily fit in this democratic normative perspective. Moreover, social norms and practices can carry anachronistic residues that contradict the democratic normativity. The point here is that by providing the political imaginary with a democratic normative horizon, society is able to transcend its own social norms. That is the reason that "democratic society is embedded in a political imaginary that formulates normative premises for its political practices, but the same society is not able to fully experience and apply these normativities" (Diehl 2019, 412), which generates the contradictions mentioned above.

In his essay "Heritage and Revolution" (1996a), Castoriadis briefly addressed the question of time and rhythm of magmatic transformations of the imaginary. For him, they are an integral part of creation, although he does admit that creation is never total. For Castoriadis, there is no social *tabula rasa*, because even in more radical forms of the imaginable revolution, the majority of the elements of social life remain unchanged. Castoriadis does not address exactly the same question as Koselleck's concept of temporality, but he introduces an element that can be investigated with the notion of temporality, since different parts of the magma are capable of developing different rhythms.

Nevertheless, by introducing Reinhart Koselleck's notion of temporalities (*Zeitlichkeiten*) and combining it with Castoriadis's concept of the imaginary as a magma, I have proposed a perspective for investigating the contradictions of democracy created by anachronic developments of social norms and, at the same time, for distinguishing them from the changing relationships between the normative horizon of democracy and social norms and practices that bring about a transformation of the political imaginary as a whole.

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[1] Lefort's occasional use of the imaginary is mostly as an adjective, and he does not specify its meaning. In *Democracy and Totalitarianism*, for example, the adjective "imaginary" is opposed to "real", even though it is not considered as fictional (Lefort 2007, 84).

Koselleck developed the concept of temporality in order to understand historical transformations. While he did not use the term "imaginary", his search for the implications of concepts in the imagination of society and politics indicate an affinity to the notion of the political imaginary that we use in our special issue of *Social Epistemology* dedicated to the topic. Koselleck is interested in the relationship between language/concepts and the imagination of social reality. The difference between an occurring history and its linguistic facilitation (2006) emerges as an important tool for investigating the political imaginary. Their different rhythms of evolution explain why Koselleck believes that "[h]istory in the actual course of its occurrence has a different mode of being from that of the language spoken about it (whether before, after or concomitant with the events)" (Koselleck 1989b, 649). Koselleck seems to assume that language structures the way individuals and society deal with historical events, but leaves it open if the inverse is also the case (2006), as I mention in my article.

In so doing, I acknowledge that both temporalities are not fixed and I do not think, that "one leg" is necessarily "behind the other" (Singer 2020) but, on the contrary, that both temporalities can change their rhythm and influence each other. Even though the democratic imaginary generates a normative horizon of democracy that transcends social norms, it does not mean that there is an "unequivocal direction of transformation in both aspects of the imaginary and that this transformation", as Angelos Mouzakitis suggests in his commentary (2020). Castoriadis seems to privilege the predominance of the radical imaginary over the instituted imaginary. According to him, new imaginary significations emerge from the transformations produced by the radical imaginary. However, he does not exclude the contrary, i.e. that social and political changes on the level of the instituted imaginary can generate transformations of the instituting imaginary and bring about new imaginary significations.

My attempt to approach the transformations of the political imaginary that takes the different temporalities into account does not exclude this possibility, but aims to integrate it into the analysis of transformations of democracy and political representation. This means that "the imaginary as a field" does not "claim a status of relative autonomy from the symbolic and the linguistic spheres" as Mouzakitis suggests. On the contrary, this brings up an underexplored question in examining the political imaginary: How might social practices influence the political imaginary in its creative activity? This raises the question of performative effects of social practices on the normative horizon of the democratic imaginary. Further, it allows one to address the transformations—and the dissolution—of the democratic imaginary, by not only conceding that the radical imaginary can become fluid and generate new crystallized layers—or institutions, to borrow Castoriadis's magma metaphor—but exploring in the extent to which social practices might heat the magma and make it fluid again.

Opening the Perspective for Further Research

By discerning two temporalities, my article adds another layer to the analysis of the constitutive tensions between the normative horizon that are set up by the modern democratic imaginary one the one hand, and social norms and practices on the other. This

urges scholars in the field to pursue the methodological question of how to distinguish between manifestations of anachronistic contradictions mentioned before and manifestations of deep change in the political imaginary? Identifying new imaginary significations, as Singer (1989) proposed, can certainly open new perspectives on current and past transformations of democracy.

At the same time depicting changes in social and political practices, such as new forms of social interaction, uses and production of symbols, symbolic actions, and pictures, as well as discourse transformation can be promising paths for better understanding of deep transformation of the democratic imaginary. Sometimes they can be materializations of new imaginary significations, other times they can be triggers of transformations of the magma. Following this path, certain phenomena, such as the increasing of fake news on the Internet and the idea of alternative facts in political rhetoric, might indeed be a sign of the emergence of something new in the political imaginary within Western democracies, something that cannot be named during the process, but surely can be explored using new methodologies.

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