Political Imaginaries: A Preliminary Response

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The imaginary has recently re-emerged as a central problem in social theory and—in various guises—as a subject of major interest of research conducted in the various sub-branches of the social sciences. It is early days yet to decide if we are witnessing the emergence of a proper turn to imagination as the key to the deeper elucidation of social (and therefore also historical and political) phenomena, but undoubtedly the comparatively recent announcement of "social imaginaries" as a relatively autonomous field of research (Adams et al., 2015), along with the resurgence of interest in the works of Castoriadis, Taylor and Ricoeur indicate the deep-seated dissatisfaction of a considerable number of theorists with the currently dominant conceptual frameworks in their fields.

The present special issue of *Social Epistemology* evidently partakes of the belief that the imaginary presents social theory and the neighboring disciplines with a challenge (396). In their introduction to the special issue Craig Browne and Paula Diehl specifically allude to the changing character of the political field and to the need to address the radical transformations of the political via the exploration of the transformations of the political imaginary (393). Their concise introduction is certainly quite telling regarding the aims, the scope, and the width of this collective project.

The authors of the introduction explicitly link the adequate conceptualization of the constitution of the political as a field, of the emergence of values and norms and of processes of legitimation, with the exploration of the 'political imaginary'. In the context of western metaphysics imagination has served (especially in its radical manifestations) as an indication of both freedom and indeterminacy, while often it has been contrasted with 'reality' in both positive and negative terms. In this respect, imagination has been seen as a potentially liberating force not only in the works of the authors mentioned above, but also in the works of other thinkers, like Marcuse (especially in *Eros and Civilization*), Arendt (especially in her interpretation of Kant) and Cassirer to name just the most obvious and well known cases among the established thinkers of the past century. However, we should not let ourselves be misguided by this potentially liberating character of imagination and we have to acknowledge its Janus-faced potentiality.

The Ontological Status of Imagination

Indeed, we have to acknowledge radical imagination's both creative and destructive characteristics (following, say, Castoriadis, but this insight can be traced under different guises in the works of other thinkers as well), although admittedly it is quite difficult to reach universal and unequivocal judgments even as to the significance of creation and destruction as such. In addition to this, the imaginary as a field seems to claim a status of relative autonomy from the symbolic and the linguistic spheres, although it has to be noted that all these terms are notoriously difficult to pin down as they acquire different meanings in the works of various authors. What is more, the concepts of radical imagination and of the radical imaginary pose a challenge to established ontological conceptions about the social realm in its various manifestations and the social individual. It comes as no surprise then that all the contributions to the special volume acknowledge the unique ontological status of the

radical forms of imagination and the imaginary field. Wolfgang Knöbl's (2019, 452) critical assessment of the volume is a fine piece of exploration of this complex issue. Knöbl begins his paper with a citation from Durkheim's classic *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, in order to show that early sociologists were no less aware of the importance of the "political imaginary" than we are today.

In tracing the concept of the imaginary back to Durkheim and especially to the concept of collective representations, Knöbl finds himself in good company, as Adams et al. (2015, 18) and Arnason (2017) have also highlighted the importance of this concept for the development of current accounts of the imaginary. Arnason (2017) also establishes wider links between Castoriadis's conception of the social-historical and Durkheim's approach to sociology. Like Adams et al., Knöbl identifies Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, as well as the works of Castoriadis and Ricoeur and Charles Taylor's *Modern Imaginaries* as important steps in the development of the question concerning the imaginary in philosophy and the social sciences. Of great importance is however Knöbl's inclusion in his account of the works of Jauß and Iser and especially the reference to *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*, which the author argues has much greater a value than that of a mere contribution to aesthetic theory, insofar as the argument developed in this book deliberately blurs "the distinction between the real, the fictitious and the imaginary" so as to engage the reader with the question regarding the status of these dimensions and their possible relations (Knöbl 2019, 454).

As Knöbl himself acknowledges, this insight is pivotal in our attempts to illuminate the social-historical, while aspects of the relationship between fiction, reality and imagination have been explored by Ricoeur and—to a much lesser extent—by Castoriadis. The importance of Ricoeur's work in this respect seems to me quite significant, since among other things it allows us to enter into a fruitful dialogue with a vast number of philosophical and scientific approaches that he uses in order to develop his positions. Also, I believe that it is not only Ricoeur's works that tackle head-on the issue at hand that are significant, but also his excellent work on selfhood and identity, viz. *Oneself as Another*. Considering this work together with writings such as *Time and Narrative*, *The Rule of Metaphor*, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* and *Memory, History, Forgetting*, opens up the conceptual space necessary to address the various aspects of the entanglement between the subject and the social-historical, taking into account also reality, fiction and imagination.

The Logic of Magmas

There is however a crucial point to consider in relation to Castoriadis's and Taylor's views on imagination: If we endorse Castoriadis's perspective on radical imagination we would be forced to admit a certain degree of primordiality for both imagination in its subjective manifestations and for the social imaginary. The uniqueness of Castoriadis's theoretical perspective arguably resides in its being premised on the conviction that the mode of being of the 'imaginary' is resistant to the operations of ordinary (enseidic-identitary) logic and that its impact on social life could only be adequately explored in the event of the development of a mode of logic that would do justice to it. Castoriadis (1978, 276-277) calls it the "logic

of magmas" using the same metaphor with the aid of which he attempted to point to the enigmatic nature of imagination in general and of the deep roots of socio-historical imaginaries in particular. It has to be noted in this context that Honneth raises an important objection to Castoriadis's use of the "magma" metaphor, which in his understanding occupies in Castoriadis's work a similarly central place with that of the élan vital in Bergson's thought. In Honnneth's view both quasi-concepts are used in such a way that they "substantiate" creative potentialities that are perhaps peculiar to the human world thereby imposing them as universal ontological principles. For Honneth this "sleight of hand" results in the degradation of a theory of revolutionary praxis to "metaphysical cosmology", which in his view cannot be "discussed with scientific arguments" (Honneth 1986, 77).

Contrary to Honneth's assertion though, I believe that Castoriadis's attempt to trace a magmatic aspect in the plurality characterizing beings in general is rather important especially in an era when the cosmological model proposed by physics is much more flexible and indeterminate than the mechanical one proposed by Newtonian physics. I also do not believe that Castoriadis had any deceitful purposes in his application of the magma metaphor, which—let us not forget—he does not employ to indicate simply a chaotic state-of-affairs, but rather an enigmatic "mode of organization belonging to a non-ensemblistic diversity" (Castoriadis 1987, 182). It has to be noted of course, that Castoriadis's thesis concerning the radical character of imagination has often been met with disbelief and suspicion, as a remnant of the kind of metaphysics that Castoriadis himself severely criticized and attempted to surpass. Characteristic is in this respect Habermas's critique of Castoriadis's project in his short *Excursus* to the *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*.

It is well known that in Habermas's interpretation, Castoriadis develops a theoretical perspective premised on the philosophy of praxis which is essentially but a socially-centered version of fundamental ontology that allegedly (ironically) culminates in a subjectivist understanding of socio-historical creation. What is more, Habermas even claims that he can trace a "personification of society as a poetic demiurge that releases ever new world types of itself", and which in Habermas's view gives a new twist to the old problem of theodicy (Habermas 1987, 332-333). I suppose that the irony of linking the social-historical with the figure of the demiurge that is at the heart of Castoriadis's (1978, 196) concomitant attack on the Jeudeo-Christian and the Platonic traditions in relation to their convergent conception of creation as the outcome of the act of a divine demiurge was not lost on Habermas. I have expressed elsewhere my reservations against Habermas's interpretation of Castoriadis's work (see Mouzakitis 2010, 47), which examines exclusively Castoriadis's magnum opus *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, neglecting other very important works that could shed light in Castoriadis's complex theorizing of the social historical and the social individual. To this I only need to add here that Habermas's point regarding the substitution of the anonymous social-historical for the individual creator of traditional metaphysics looks rather hasty and in need of further qualification.

The Ontological Turn

There is no denying however the existence of an ontological turn in Castoriadis's work, marked by the publication of the *Imaginary Institution of Society*, although in my opinion this turn is far more interesting—and pregnant with possibilities for future research—than Habermas's interpretation admits. In any case Castoriadis's ontological turn remains a source of contention even among philosophers and social theorists that are influenced by his works. I personally find Honneth's assessment of Castoriadis's perspective much subtler and convincing than that of Habermas. Honneth acknowledges the fact that the ontology of the social world and the social individuals developed by Castoriadis is hardly "traditional" or "subjectivist, as it removes the characteristic "of temporal and social exception" from revolutionary praxis and gives it the "ontological status of a supra-personal process of creation (Honneth 1986, 68), which however he also finds problematic. More recently Amalric's has expressed his reluctance to follow Castoriadis on the issue of imagination because of what he understands as the latter's commitment to ontology, which he fittingly calls "ontology of creation" (93). A similar mistrust of Castoriadis's treatment of imagination and especially on his conception of creation *ex nihilo* is evident in the attitude of thinkers like Arnason, Adams, and George H. Taylor, all of whom in their own distinctive ways wish to produce a wedding between Castoriadis and hermeneutics regarding the theorization of creation, imagination and history.

In her article, and despite acknowledging the importance of Castoriadis's work on imagination and the imaginary, Chiara Bottici expresses reservations about Castoriadis's alleged inability to surpass the dualism between society and individual, which she understands as one variant of dualistic metaphysics. Bottici argues that one way out of western metaphysics may be found in current attempts to develop a theory of the 'imaginal' as opposed to the imaginary, since in her interpretation the latter is the product of the aforementioned opposition. The very definition of "images" as "(re)presentations that can also be presences in themselves" (437) is an evident allusion to the rejection of the celebrated Kantian distinction between things-in-themselves and phenomena, and which gave rise to various attempts at its refutation from Hegel to phenomenology and beyond. In Bottici's account the overcoming of the dualism of western metaphysics is also sought in dialogue with Balibar's interpretation of Spinoza. Bottici argues that this monist perspective abandons the subject-object distinction to focus on processes and among other things does away with the body and mind dualism and in this respect I believe that this interesting approach invites a dialogue with the later works of Merlau-Ponty.

Myth and Reason

Now, the question concerning the nature of imagination and the imaginary brings to the fore, for historical if not for purely conceptual reasons, the juxtaposition between myth and reason. This juxtaposition has not only served historically as a way to delineate modernity and its—to a large extent "constructed"—opposite, but also as a means to trace, and discard "ideological" elements in the whole spectrum of the social and the political fields. However, reason also has been linked in its turn with oppression and mythology not only by early romanticism but also during the twentieth century and beyond by diverse thinkers and currents of thought. Moreover, a series of theoretical developments like the 'linguistic turn'

in its various manifestations, Ricoeur's work on metaphor, narrative, ideology and utopia, the work of Hayden Whyte regarding the modalities of historical narrative etc., have rendered the task of delineating and exposing ideological elements quite complex and precarious. The couplet 'myth/reason' invites us also to take into account the problem of the relationship between the sacred and the profane (to use Durkheim's famous distinction of which Habermas makes the most in the development of his 'rationalization of the lifeworld' thesis in *The Theory of Communicative Action*) and consequently on a complementary level, the problem of political theology.

In my mind Johannes Grave's contribution to the volume could be seen as indirectly tackling this problem, despite the fact that its main focus concerns the very important issue of the relation between the magmatic character of images as they emerge from the deep regions of the radical imaginary and "images or pictures in the sense of materialized pictorial artefacts that address the sense of sight" (443). I refer to Grave's quite important observation that pictures often indicate to the viewers the limits of representation. The author uses the example of religious icons (448) in order to highlight this interplay of presence and absence and visibility and opaqueness (447), but in so doing he alludes also to the intersection between the political and the religious that pictures and icons potentially (re)present and/or (re)create. Grave also pays due heed to the indeterminacy characterizing pictures (447), which is also very important when we consider the relationship between the political and the sacred. I also find of major importance Grave's (445-446) discussion of Rancière's emphasis on the distribution of the sensible and especially on the concept of the police (*la police*) as an impediment to the political (*la politique*).

Craig Browne's paper has the merit of addressing the major transformations that produced passages to modernity from the medieval world via the often-neglected dimension of hierarchy. Browne exemplifies how 'modern' political imaginaries developed out of their "opposition to the hierarchy of the *Ancien Regime* and the theological interpretations of the world that justified it" (400). This opens up an extremely interesting field of research, since with the element of hierarchy Browne seems to add yet another dimension to established accounts regarding the relationship between modernity and the rationalization of worldviews and institutions, mainly through a very interesting contrast between personal relations of power described by the famous lordship and bondage parable in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* and the formal rationality of modern bureaucracy as described by Max Weber.

I believe that this important juxtaposition can be developed even furthered so as to address the problem posed by Weber's treatment of charisma (and its routinization) as well as his discussion of hierocratic and political institutions in *Economy and Society* (see e.g. Weber 1978, 55-56). What I find also extremely interesting on the theoretical plane is the more detailed tracing of differences and linkages between the deeper regions of imagination, the imaginary, the formation of worldviews and the various forms of scientific and political discourses that make up the symbolic universe of given socio-historical formations. I believe that Browne's paper also alludes to the importance of further clarification of this problem.

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Paula Diehl's essay contrives to explain the contradictions of contemporary democratic regimes from a complementary perspective to that of the persistence of hierarchy in modern political imaginaries as explored by Browne. Diehl explores various forms of resistance to democracy that put obstacles to the fulfillment of democratic principles, and she focuses her attention to the persistence and mutations of non-democratic or anti-democratic elements in the political imaginaries of contemporary democracies. Her approach to the problem relies mainly on the application of Koselleck's understanding of different temporalities to the imaginary and on the endorsement of Castoriadis's radical interpretation of the creative powers of the imagination and the imaginary. Dielh's thesis that the contradictions of democratic political imaginaries can be attributed to the different temporalities of the political imaginary, presents us with a novel and very useful heuristic device.

Diehl distinguishes between an aspect of the political imaginary that crystalizes around the "primary reference of democratic representation" and an aspect that is linked with the (re)production and radical alteration of social norms and practices (412). The relationship between this "primary referent" and Castoriadis's "core significations" is implied but not clearly defined. The postulation of different temporalities is—as I've already mentioned— important but might as well be in need of some further elaboration. As it stands, the argument seems to imply that there is one unequivocal direction of transformation in both aspects of the imaginary and that this transformation is impeded by the different temporality of one part of the social imaginary. Leaving aside the question of how to unequivocally distinguish (even analytically) between the two parts or aspects of the imaginary, I think that this reliance—in the last instance—on some notion of cultural-imaginary atavism is not entirely satisfactory.

Following Gauchet, Diehl's account stresses the importance of rationalization and the disenchantment of the world as prerequisites of modern democratic political imaginaries. Perhaps this aspect could be further explored in relation to the *problématique* of re-enchantment already present in Weber's account (see e.g. Mommsen 1989, ch.9) or with Nancy's attempt to make sense of a post-nihilistic state-of-affairs in his *Dis-enclosure*. Again, as the author suggests in the final paragraphs of her paper the field is vast and the answers have to be inconclusive.

Jose Mauricio Dominges offers the reader a quite rich in historical detail and theoretically important paper, which examines the French and the Haitian Revolutions as essentially belonging together. He wishes to show that the Haitian Revolution was not simply shaped by the French one, but that it also did not fail to influence developments in the periphery and to determine in its turn political modernity. This interpretation of the French/Haitian revolution allows the author to argue in favour of the abandonment of "methodological nationalism" and for the development of an epistemological approach that pays heed to modernity's global character (428-429).

A Global Imaginary

From the point of view of the special issue though, the most relevant argument advanced by this author is the postulation of the preeminence of a "globally shared" imaginary. Dominges acknowledges of course that this imaginary takes up different guises in the various parts of the world, but he seems to suggest that its central elements are shared by almost the entire globe. This conception seems self-evident to a certain extent, but it inevitably generates further questions, especially since Domingues's argument operates throughout via the employment of the distinction between center and periphery. Again, it is not clear how the imaginary itself is conceptualized in this perspective, and therefore the relationship between imagination, the imaginary, institutions, and forms of social action is also in need of further explication.

The special issue succeeds in bringing together thinkers with varying interests and fields of expertise and thereby it opens up discussion on a very wide range of issues related with political imaginaries. I believe that the richness of its contents, the plurality of the themes and the novelty of the approaches presented therein won't fail to generate further groundbreaking research in the field.

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