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A Dialogue Over Hierarchy and the Political Imaginary

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I would like to thank Brian Singer for his stimulating and very generous commentary on my piece, as well as the Special Issue on Conceptualising the Political Imaginary as a whole. I have learned a great deal from his work in the past (Singer 1979, 1980). Similarly, I am deeply appreciative of Angelos Mouzakis's highly perceptive insights and his equally generous observations on my paper and the Special Issue. The depth of Singer and Mouzakis's knowledge is evident in their formulations of the themes with which my paper engaged and, more generally, their overviews of the background to conceptualizing the political imaginary (Mouzakis 2020; Singer 2020). I certainly feel that they outlined some of my paper's intentions and implications better than I had myself (Browne 2019a).

Singer and Mouzakis rightly emphasise the alternate, and to some extent competing, projects that might ensue from the systematic elaboration of the concept of the political imaginary and its implications. These potential divergences are, of course, somewhat conditioned by the differences and tensions between the two theories that have most influenced interpretations of the political imaginary: those of Cornelius Castoriadis and Claude Lefort. It is well-known that they had been leading members of the political group *Socialism or Barbarism* and that this group's theory and practice posed a number of questions that inform their respective later theories. These questions are particularly relevant to my paper's theme of the problem of hierarchy, like those of organization, leadership and bureaucracy.

Imaginary and Hierarchy

One of my paper's intuitions was that the concept of the imaginary enables hierarchy to be interrogated in ways that are difficult for other notions. These conceptions, to put it crudely, incorporate the epistemological suppositions of a hierarchical organization of the world. In other words, hierarchy is an integral part of the justification of these political conceptions. This partly owes to the 'identitarian-ensemblist' logic, in Castoriadis's terms, of social institutions, that is, the distinguishing and organising of social relations into stable patterns and structures (Castoriadis 1987; Browne 2016, 2019c).

Identitarian-ensemblist logic is a source of rationality, including the rationality of concepts and theories, and it is expressed by rationality, yet it does not fully derive its intentionality and purpose from itself. Rather, it derives its purposes and the intensity of its operation from the capacity of the imaginary to project significations and to invest things with additional and greater meaning, whether it be the 'body politic' or the signification of 'market efficiency'. If this perspective is correct, then the critical analysis of hierarchy has to elucidate how the imaginary is constitutive of hierarchy and its intertwining with identitarian-ensemblist organising.

Conceptualising the political imaginary involves the double process of clarifying the significations of the political and the constitution of these significations. In modern secular societies which have lost some of their investment in theological hierarchies, the creation and reproduction of these significations can be recognised as political, and they are therefore, supposedly, no longer theological political (Browne 2009). While this erases some

of the original sense of hierarchy as proximity to God or the sacred, it leaves open the determination of the political and by no means does it mean the end of hierarchy. The question of the signification and representation of the political concerns its symbolic institution. The *mise en sens* and *mis en scène*, in Lefort's terms, that is, the form constituted by the giving of meaning and the staging of the political (Lefort 1988, 11).

Lefort once wrote that we typically look for the political in places where it is not and that the political is primordially the symbolic ordering of the social (Lefort 1988, 1-11). Singer's observation that Lefort challenged Clastres' thesis that tribal societies without a state resisted the political discloses a critical issue concerning the origins of hierarchy. The political imaginary in 'making the social visible to itself' means that "there is a dimension of power, even where there exists no visibly instituted power-holders" (Singer 2020, 6).

It would take a long account to try to explain the historical emergence of the modern political imaginary and the connections that it has in the West with the path out of religion (see Gauchet 1998; Browne 2019b). It seems to me that the political imaginary of hierarchy has comprised the symbolic order orienting the constitution of the domain of the political. In effect, political institutions have been constructed in a manner that is commensurate with hierarchy. In other words, the political imaginary is implicated in the constitution of social form and serves as its interpretative matrix. The preservation of a hierarchical sense of order has conditioned modern attempts to found the political, including those that sought to overthrow the *Ancien Regime* and preceding hierarchy. In this way, the modern political imaginary has simultaneously not entirely freed itself from the theological political while informing attempts to construct hierarchical organization on the basis of rationality.

The Modern Political Imaginary

The modern political imaginary has, nevertheless, in at least some of its democratic manifestations, opened the way to a politics that places in question not just a specific institution of hierarchy in favour of another hierarchy but also, rather, the imaginary of hierarchy altogether and its organising of social relation. One can recognise its contemporary expression in notions like self-organization and leaderless movements (see Browne and Susen 2014) These movements are reactions to the hierarchical forms of, what I term, the double dialectic of control that has undermined many emancipatory political projects (see Browne 2020, 2017). The double dialectic of control results from parties and organizations belonging mostly, but not exclusively, to projects opposed to domination and injustice endeavouring to control the wider movement and its forms of contestation and resistance.

In radical democratic theory, there were two strands that particularly opposed hierarchy, or significant aspects of hierarchies, through developing the nexus between democracy and the creativity of imagination and the imaginary. Despite sharing the intention of countering the double dialectic of control and expanding the horizons of democracy beyond its established political institution, these radical democratic perspectives and their corresponding political practices exhibit important contrasts. The French theories of democratic creativity, like those of Castoriadis and Lefort, contended that democracy is a regime and they therefore sought to politicize the social. That is, the political could expose and transform social domination. Whereas the North American pragmatist theories of creative democracy, particularly those of John Dewey and George Herbert Mead, believed that democracy is grounded in an

individual and community's way of life and, consequently, they contended that democratisation is primarily a matter of the socialisation of the political (see Browne 2014b). Singer's interpretations of the contrasts between the French Revolution and the American Revolution clarifies the differences between these strands of radical democratic theory, the historical background to them, and salient alternatives present in the modern democratic imaginary (Singer 1986, Singer 2020, Singer 2006).

Conceptual Configurations and Social-Historical Forms

Singer's critical question of whether the way that I defined hierarchy and disaggregated its constitutive elements is too broad is certainly legitimate. Singer rightly points to the need to discriminate between the different significations of hierarchy and the practices associated with them, such as in the difference between capitalist management and newspaper lists of the best songs of the year. It is no doubt the case that hierarchy is a signification with differing denotations and connotations. The original meaning of hierarchy was associated with the notion of 'rule', in the sense of authority and power, and hierarchy is certainly a medium and outcome of heteronomous social relations.

In these terms, what is significant about hierarchy is that it is, first, structural, and therefore a matter of the creation and configuring of form, hence the importance of its institution to phenomena like that which Max Weber termed the 'routinization of charisma' (Weber 1978). Further, it is necessary to explain how the symbolic ordering of the political imaginary inflects the different levels and layers of hierarchy, including that of aesthetic productions and their evaluations.

Second, one may substitute different constitutive elements to those I proposed, but a sufficiently broad conceptions is necessary to capture historical variations in hierarchy. It is clear that hierarchical orders have been constructed according to different principles and assemblages of the same elements. Mouzakitis's valuable reflection on the deep-seated cultural background and the alternative mobilizing of their dimensions in the historical institutionalizing of hierarchy reinforces this contention.

Like Singer's analysis, Mouzakitis's reflection clarifies aspects of these processes that I need to consider. Further, in my view, recognising this construction of hierarchy around different organising principles is extremely important to grasping hierarchy's contemporary forms, especially because they are regularly veiled. Although this may not justify my conception, the problem of the comparative analysis of the historical constitution of hierarchy motivated it. Arjun Appadurai's description of the modifications implied by extending Dumont's conception to other institutions of hierarchy draws attention to the complications that are involved in such comparisons, even if the valences of Appadurai's characterisations could be disputed:

Dumont's conception of hierarchy leads from India in at least four major topological directions: Africa, in regard to its conception of the parts; ancient Arabia, for its conceptions of religious segmentation and solidarity; ancient Rome, for its conceptions of jural order in the absence of a powerful state;

and the South Pacific (via Ceylon), for its conception of the power of taboo and the ritual implications of specialization (Appadurai 1988, 45).

Third, the authority that hierarchy possesses, or which is derived from it, is regularly self-referential. Hierarchy typically establishes the criteria that serve as its justification and this is important to the imaginary's generating a nexus between a horizon of meaning and the way things are organized. One can recognise in the current Black Lives Matter protests how these connections can break down, even though the injustice of a lack of substantive equal liberty has long preceded the current protests. Paula Diehl's discussion of the differing temporalities of the democratic political imaginary pinpoints a major consideration that has shaped the tensions of democratic politics and generates critical resistance to hierarchy (Diehl 2020).

Fourth, the conceptions of hierarchy that my paper discussed, like those of Dumont and Tocqueville, accentuate the holistic characteristics of premodern hierarchy. Dumont and Tocqueville, each in their own way, counterpoise the individualising tendencies of modernity to it (Dumont 1986; Tocqueville 2003). In my opinion, what is significant is not individualism *per se* but the disincorporation of the individual from the group and the processes Singer details of the institution and diffusion of the imaginary of equality associated with the Tocqueville's notion of the 'democratic revolution', that is, the seeing of others as "our *semblables*".

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 (Singer 2020, 8).

This feature of modern democratic imaginary poses a challenge, in principle, to the hierarchy of inherited position and social status. It makes possible the democratising and equalising tendencies that have seen the extension of citizenship rights and some alteration in the gender dynamics of relations in the family. At the same time, it seems to me that Charles Taylor's substantial thesis that the modern social imaginary is that of 'a moral order of mutual benefit' mistakes a specific variant of the modern imaginary for the principal form of it (Browne 2006, 2009; Browne and Lynch 2018). The institution of hierarchy has been challenged but it has not been superseded.

Values, Aesthetics, Power

Despite the fracturing of aspects of premodern holism in modernity, a major way in which hierarchy or hierarchies are institutionalised and reproduced is precisely through the interconnections that are forged between the configuration of institutions and values, positions (like class, status, citizenship rights) and social power. Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus, capital and field seems to entirely centre upon this consideration and something like *The Guardian* newspaper's list of 50 best songs of the year should be seen in terms of the habitus of the readership, with its corresponding 'aesthetic', the entire (hierarchical) field of newspapers, and so on (Bourdieu 1988). Before making an aside about Bourdieu's sociology, it is worth noting that the interconnections between values, positions and social power can be based on institutionalised forms of rational mediation and the creation of imaginary. The

temporality of institutionalisation means that the former comes to veil its origins and continuing dependence on the latter.

One of the limitations of Bourdieu's work is that it is overly driven by the idea of the struggle for advancement in hierarchically organised fields. Bourdieu gives insufficient weight to forms of the contestation of hierarchy, treating these as inevitable strategies to advance or overturn hierarchy in favour of another hierarchy. In effect, Bourdieu rejects the orientation that enables the entire questioning of the notion of hierarchy, while drawing upon it in his critical sociology. In fact, a critique of the hierarchical conception of the authority of 'Bourdiesian' critical sociological explanation compared to the practical knowledge of lay actors was one of the major motivations behind Boltanski and Thévenot's formulation of the alternate sociology of critical practices (Boltanski and Thévenot 2016; Browne 2014a).

Be that as it may, the problem of how to justify values and aesthetic productions and judgements—and therefore the superiority of one piece of music over another—under conditions of the problematising of hierarchy is a significant and warranted question. One does not want to end up in the dead end of postmodernism and it is simply expedient to rank things involving preferences and tastes, for example, it is expeditious for tourists (and locals) to access lists of the best cafés, museums, parks and similar in a city. Nonetheless, how can one determine axiological and aesthetic superiority in a way that does not valorise the heteronomy associated with forms of hierarchy?

The significations of hierarchy are possibly more intrinsically associated with connotations of heteronomy than equivalent kinds of categories. After all, the category of hierarchy does imply some relation of superiority and inferiority. It might be, for instance, easier to recognise a clear separation between the category of 'class' in mathematics and class as social structure than it is in the case of hierarchy and hierarchies, since the experience of one form of hierarchy regularly translates into another. It is the work of the imaginary, more than simply experience itself, that makes this happen.

I will limit myself to a few very remarks on this large question of values. In my opinion, the imaginary of equality is central to the values opposed to the injustices of heteronomy and hierarchy. In this respect, the significations of equality and autonomy should be regarded as intertwined and as presupposing each other. Singer is absolutely right about the degree to which the imaginary of equality is counterfactual. My discussion sought to highlight the depth of the ontological and semantic security that, however unjust, instituted hierarchy has provided. At the same time, the imaginary of equality is present, though usually in a delimited way, in the representation of justice.

For example, in their pragmatic study of justifications informing valuing or 'economies of worth', Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) contend that the political philosophical grammars subjects enact to resolve disputes involve both a principle of *equality*—what is to be treated as equivalent—and a principle of *difference* that supplies a means of ranking and distribution. It could be argued that by treating values in a pragmatist anti-foundationalist manner, Boltanski and Thévenot incorporate the modern imaginary's challenge to hierarchy and that

their approach discloses the contradictions of the modern political construction of hierarchy (Browne 2014a). In their model, every 'polity' involves some image of a higher common good that it institutionalises, such as, for example, the higher common good of a polity modelled on domestic hierarchy might be that of order and in one modelled on industrialism it might be abundance (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006).

In terms of aesthetics, different approaches have been adopted to this dilemma. Leaving aside its straightforward denial as a conundrum and the simple acceptance of aesthetic hierarchy, two approaches are worth noting that make use of different attributes of the imaginary. One might be described as the embracing of critique in politicised art and the 'equal valuing' of diverse cultural forms of expression. The other is associated with strands of aesthetic modernism. Besides the valourising of artistic productions by subordinated cultures and groups, whether they be those of ethnicities, nations, tribes, gender, and similar, the first approach tends to emphasize the alternate imaginary of the subordinates in a hierarchy and they sometimes seek to distill from this imaginary different principles to those of hierarchy. For example, 'NIRIN', the title of the 22nd Biennale of Sydney, is depicted on the exhibition book catalogue's cover in the following terms:

NIRIN represents something like a spider's web that connects people and ideas. It is through which things stay attached. It is not about a hierarchy of ideas, but rather about being together. There is no centre or periphery, it's like being in a digital cloud where everything is together (Rosana Paulino).

This first approach to the problem of aesthetic hierarchy involves an enormous diversity of cultural and artistic production. One tendency, such as in the case of post-colonial contexts, is a concern with the complicated mixed imaginary of the subordinate, especially how it emerges out of its simultaneous engagement with the dominant and the endeavour to achieve autonomy and justice. The other approach of aesthetic modernism to hierarchy might be described as a matter of the revolutionising of form and the abolition of those (premodern, and then modern) hierarchies intrinsic to instituted cultural and aesthetic forms that impede immanent progress. This approach can be illustrated by the case that was so important to Theodor Adorno's critical social theory. That is, the overturning of musical hierarchy associated with Arnold Schönberg's move to twelve-tone composition. The novelist Milan Kundera captures this in an elegant, though somewhat hostile, description:

This is what my father told me when I was five: a key signature is a king's court in miniature. It is ruled by a king (the first step) and his own two right-hand men (steps five and four). They have four other dignitaries at their command, each of whom has his own special relation to the king and his right-hand men. The sort houses five additional tones as well. Which are known as chromatic. They have important parts to play in other keys, but here they are simply guests. . . What follows is all my own. One day a great man determined that after a thousand years the language of music had worn itself out and could no more than rehash the same message. Abolishing the hierarchy of tones by revolutionary decree, he made them all equal and subjected them to a strict discipline: none was allowed to occur more often than any other piece, and therefore none could lay claim to its former feudal privileges. All courts were permanently abolished, and in their place arose a

single empire, founded on equality and called the twelve-tone system (Kundera 1982, 178).¹

It might appear that the dilemmas of aesthetic hierarchy are quite a long way from the political imaginary and that there is still, potentially, the further question of whether there is a relationship between the hierarchy of everyday things like a list of best songs and a hierarchy of political domination. It is no news that under some political regimes the latter does inflect and determine the former, but this might actually suggest that a list of best songs is relatively inconsequential for the political imaginary. Lefort's analysis of totalitarianism, rather, bears out the significance of everyday experiences and cultural forms to the political imaginary. He considered that the totalitarian "project of mastery, of normalization, of uniformization is carried furthest at the point where the most secret, the most spontaneous, the most ungraspable element of social life is to be found, in tastes and in ideas (Lefort, 1986)." Totalitarianism is a product, Lefort argued, of a political imaginary that seeks to

¹ In two separate email conversations with my colleagues Phillip Mar and Eduardo de la Fuente about the Milan Kundera text, 12 tone and its relation to hierarchy, I received illuminating, informative and suggestive comments that are worth reproducing here in edited form. Phillip Mar suggested that the relation of 12 tone to hierarchy poses the question: "Did it abolish hierarchy or create new ones through the tone rows? It did significantly liberate tonality, but then there is inevitably a return to tonality, because no human is raised without acquiring a tonal habitus, as tonality is deeply embedded in emotionality and attachment—lullabies, nursery rhymes, anthems etc. Of course, Schoenberg himself is deeply embedded in Romanticism. Further along the scale, so to speak, there were serialists like Boulez who thought 12 tone music didn't go far enough, that it should encompass all dimensions of music and not just tonality. Boulez took serialism as far as it went in the desire for a system of total control of musical events. But then—as conductor and impresario—Boulez is also trying to canonically integrate the various strands of modern music, including tonal forms. Given that, it would take a lot to articulate the new hierarchies generated by 12 tone music and serialism. There was a new hierarchy of forms and capacities to utilise these forms, given that 12 tone and subsequent forms requires such extensive training to appreciate in Bourdieusian terms."

In a separate discussion, Eduardo de la Fuente remarked that: "The Kundera comment would have made sense to Central European intellectuals of a certain age. But, is tonal music really feudal? Historically, its emergence seems to coincide with the bourgeoisie as a class and the bourgeois subject as a psychic-sensory construct (the aesthetic and epistemological equivalent to the subject of realism in literature and perspective in painting). Adorno might also differentiate between twelve tone music and atonal music to some extent. While he sees Schoenberg's move to dodecaphony as a natural evolution, it is hard to escape the impression Adorno identifies with the works of heroic atonal period just before WW1; and sees them as the most progressive contributions of the Second Viennese School. Serialism and aleatoric music, on the other hand, are linked to the administered society. Attali is more reductionist. Tonality belongs to the imaginary space of representation which emerges with liberal capitalism; atonality reflects its crisis and serialism reflects the "society of repetition" where fordism and mass production push capitalism towards depersonalization. The only way out is something Attali called "improvisation", but Attali is pretty slippery on what that actually entails. As a corollary to my comment about the Central European (Schoenberg-Adorno-Kundera) narrative, I would add that in other places other musical/sonic hierarchies possibly mattered more than the relationship between tonal and chromatic sounds. For those outside the Central European tradition, it was sometimes the hierarchy between music and noise or between "classical" and "folk" musical idioms; for others, it was hierarchies between regular/predictable and complex/syncopated rhythmic patterns."

My thanks to Phillip Mar and Eduardo de la Fuente for their discussions and permissions to quote from our email conversations.

make society equivalent with itself. It contrasts with the democracy's separation between knowledge, power and law. Yet, totalitarian projects are, according to Lefort, a reversal of the movement towards democracy, rather than a straightforward continuation of premodern hierarchy (Lefort 1986). Lefort considered that democracy entails an acceptance of a 'loss of the markers of certainty'.

This contention gives some insight into how the political imaginary of hierarchy derives from an orientation to the world, and that its symbolic staging and representation, in turn, institutionalises. This doubling is the source of the political imaginary of hierarchy's self-referential character. It is one of the reasons why Castoriadis considered that the project of individual and collective autonomy is always a struggle against deep-seated tendencies of the instituted imaginary. The institution of hierarchy historically seemed to embody an interconnection between being and meaning; its significations answer the basic desire of subjects for a coincidence between how they understand things and how they are (Castoriadis 1987, 1997).

Metamorphoses and Reconstitution

The background problem of my paper is not just the historical sources of the imaginary of hierarchy but also that of the critical diagnosis of the present. Singer's description of these changes and assessment of the discourse of efficiency converges with my analyses (Singer 2020, see Browne 2017a, 2020). One of the things that needs to be considered in more detail is precisely how in the name of efficiency, and its associated assumptions, the transformation of the formerly predominant modes of managerial and bureaucratic hierarchy has resulted in the creation of new modes of control and hierarchy. In my opinion, the initial period of undermining hierarchy in some segments of the division of labour during the contemporary phase of capitalist modernity has given way to more concealed and pervasive forms of control and heteronomy.

The various recent discourses that contended that hierarchies were being superseded, or overturned in favour of another regime of hierarchical values, whether it be that of postmodernism in relation to culture, systems theory in relation to organisations, network theory in relation to management and technology, individualisation theory in relation to the family, and so on, all now seem rather one-sided and unable to effectively account for the dialectical reversals of their interpretations and projections. These reversals may not reinstate earlier hierarchies, but they reconfigure them and, as Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) suggest, displace the contradictions that contributed to their being contested.

Of course, some of the old hierarchies never disappeared entirely, including categorical ones, and they represent part of the political imaginary appealed to by authoritarianism. Hierarchies are now regularly subject to considerable mediation and displacements of their tensions with the modern democratic imaginary and its institutional articulations. One of the results of this mediation has been the creation of new gradations and commensurate modes of contestation, notably, that of half-positions that are neither fully part of community nor entirely outside of it. The prototypical half-positions are those of citizens without work or workers without the full rights of citizenship (see Browne 2017, Browne 2015; Browne and Mar 2010).

The erosion of those social rights and the ‘social protections’ that were achieved through struggles for social autonomy has not just generated greater precarity and insecurity. It has produced and renewed various forms of dependency and hierarchies. These contemporary social relations are simultaneously visible and concealed through mechanisms of ideological control and the degradation of meaning. While these empirical changes are now relatively well-known, the seeming incapacity of contemporary capitalist societies to effectively address them has resulted in attempts to re-imagine the political. It remains an open question whether this imagining can be done, at this juncture, against, or beyond, the political imaginary of hierarchy.

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