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**CAN WE
BE DEMOCRATIC?**

*Theodor Lalér,
Mats Rosengren (eds)*

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Can we be Democratic?

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Mats Rosengren

INTRODUCTION

In the early 1980s, the political philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis spoke of the growing lack of meaningfulness as the greatest threat to the radical democratic project he devoted his entire work to explaining and defending. He saw such impoverishment in all Western liberal democracies and he asked himself: Is political as well as subjective autonomy and democracy even a possibility for us, as individuals as well as collectives? Can we be democratic?¹

Such questions are not asked in a void, nor do they come from nowhere. They are called upon by specific political situations. The threats that Castoriadis foresaw – the return of totalitarian regimes in Europe; the focus on self-interest at the expense of responsibility for the common good; the ability of the gadget society to devour political power and energy through ever new trinkets – have today reached an amplitude greater than anyone reasonably could have imagined in the last decades of the 20th century. The political landscape has changed, as has the political imaginary.

Seen from a western European perspective, in the years before and immediately after the millennial shift, the political field still appeared to be solidly organized around the entrenched oppositions of the Left and the Right, with social democrats, green parties

and Christian democrats upholding some kind of political middle ground.² The economic field was equally governed, since at least 1989, by an almost complete faith in the neoliberal globalist versions of capitalism, wherein incessant growth was seen and lived as an everlasting natural force. However, this was before 2001 and the 9/11-attack on the Twin Towers in NYC. The dichotomous dramaturgy favoured by Western media reporting on the terror attack, as on the subsequent *War on terrorism*, seemed to follow a standard Hollywood manuscript, dividing the world, and all the actors in it, in opposed categories – the Good and the Bad – not allowing for nuances or political debates involving complex deliberated positions or decisions. The exceptional event of 9/11 was thus inscribed in a familiar imaginary pattern, with a clear distribution of roles and prefab models for action, which created an impression of predictability that, as catastrophic and bloody as its consequences turned out to be, had a soothing effect on most opinions. This situation persisted more or less until the Lehman Brothers collapse in 2008, and the global economic chaos it sparked. Then came 2011, when the *Arab Spring* showed that deviations from the standard script were possible, as well as how humanly costly also they could be. As a consequence, the general faith in the clear distribution of roles between the Good and the Bad became blurred and started to dissolve. Following the war in Syria, the increase of refugees seeking asylum in Europe in 2015 and the democratic farce around the Brexit vote and the election of Donald Trump as president of the USA in 2016, the relative predictability afforded by the media dramaturgy models was finally broken. The perhaps stifling, but at least stable political order of left against right became distorted; unprecedented alliances were formed, like the social movement *The Yellow Vests* (*Les Gilets Jaunes*) in France in 2018 and demonstrations against

corona restrictions during 2020/2021, that assembled nationalistic right-wingers, new age followers and activists from the left in the same ranks. Political agency was transformed and displaced – but to whom? And to where?

Today, in 2024, it is common knowledge that the algorithms of Facebook made possible large-scale surveillance of the protesters on Tahrir square in Kairo in 2011 and that the result of the 2016 Brexit referendum most likely would have been different if *Cambridge Analytica's* extensive online manipulations had been hampered.³ In the ongoing wars in Ukraine and Gaza, the possibilities of getting true and reliable information, also for professional journalists and neutral organizations, are almost nil. The foundations of liberal democracies – minimally respect for human rights and rights of minorities; the citizens' fair and free deliberative choices between clear and honestly debating political alternatives; a clear division between political and legal power – are eroding and breaking, *also* as a social imaginary foundation.

So, no wonder that also the semantics of words change – the meaning of the true and the false are not really the same today as compared to 2001. They have added on different and, perhaps, more ominous significations, implying that in our time – when in many quarters deep-fakes and blatant lies are willingly and consciously taken for reality, or at least for 'alternative reality', and reports of real events are rebuked as fake news (A-K Selberg 2023) – the true is not as true as it once were. We now live in a world where words like democracy, freedom of speech, knowledge and human rights have taken on almost contradictory significations to those they were once coined to express. In a most interesting analysis of what she calls the fascism of ambiguity, philosopher Marcia Sá Cavalcante-Schuback, sums up:

The fascism of ambiguity is anti-democratic in an excessively democratic way. Not just because it comes to power through democratic elections and then abolishes democracy like historical fascism and Nazism, but because it can appear even more democratic than democracy itself, precisely because it claims to be able to speak directly and privately to everyone. This new form of fascism no longer speaks to "the people" but to everyone, and when it speaks of "the people" it speaks of a people of everyone, of a people of atomised individuals. The techno-medial-robotic democracy is a democracy of an atomised people, of a mass of isolated units bound together by being kept isolated. Social media is the backbone of this, insofar as it creates links by destroying all links, forms relationships without relationship, ties that destroy ties, and because it brings a people together by dividing and polarising that people. Here we find the essence of the fascism of ambiguity: to bring people together by isolating them, to confiscate the space between people in order to abolish all experience of the intermediate space of openness in which political space emerges. (Sá Cavalcante-Schuback 2019, 91)⁴

I find Cavalcante-Schuback's analysis to be spot-on. It is the very processes behind the changes she points to in the quote, together with the ones I have tried to evoke above, that we desperately need to understand today. Most, if not all, of these changes occur first on an imaginary level, before resulting in changes of behaviour, in transformations of institutions and everyday politics. The impact of social media-technology on the political and social spheres during the last two decades has in fact, as emphasized by Cavalcante-Schuback, altered the scene; what was once (perhaps) the collective entity of the people is now a multitude of atomized individuals and, consequently, the liberal democracies are struggling to legitimize themselves – the demos has been undone (Brown 2015) – and the

global social imaginary of the political, of the people and of democracy has changed in fundamental ways.

Against the backdrop of this perplexing sociohistorical context, this collection of essays will address the multifaceted and evanescent requirements regarding what it takes to be democratic today. Back in the 1990s, Castoriadis claimed that the dominant magma of social meanings leads us – despite all efforts relating to the climate, to global justice etcetera – to believe that the goal of human life is the unbridled expansion of production and consumption, a so-called material well-being. One result of this is that the population, according to Castoriadis, has become thoroughly privatized. In it we rarely find, as he puts it, "a passion for the common good" (Castoriadis 2005, 18). Despite the more than thirty years that has passed since, Castoriadis analysis is still valid, and perhaps even more so today: The great collective movements, that to a large extent shaped the political scene of the 1900-hundreds have changed character. Today, we see an ever-increasing fragmentation of us individual subjects, making each and every one of us individually responsible, even for conditions and structures way beyond our personal reach. The last twenty years or so have seen a transference of social responsibility from states to big corporations and further towards separated individuals taken individually. The ideas of common responsibility, of a common struggle towards future ideals has, it is true, not disappeared but it has been displaced from the collective to the individual, and in many cases transmuted into an almost private struggle for individual success in life.

This should worry the pro-democrats of today, since, as Castoriadis put it, there is "...a close and profound relationship between the structure of individuals and that of the system. Today, individuals conform to the system and the system to the individuals." (Casto-

riadis 2005, 18). Thus, one could argue that we have moved from collective masses to masses of separated individuals. And if there is no more *demos*, then how could there be a democracy?

Our question in this publication, however, does not concern, or does not primarily concern, institutions, voting systems or politics per se, but rather if we, as a collective of inhabitants in the world of today, can and want to be democratic, and what this could mean. To be clear – this question implies that there are a number of, perhaps even an organized set of, values and behavioral codes that are included in the notion of 'being democratic' (for example, the minimal requirements mentioned above) and that should be cherished by anyone asserting to (want to) 'be democratic'. But if it is correct, as Castoriadis claimed, that we in late capitalism live in oligarchies rather than in democracies, and that individuals conform to the system and the system to the individuals then, per definition, it seems hard for us to be democratic, in the strong sense of the word.

Those of us who have looked into the way right-wing political thinkers and constellations have worked, since the 1960s, on the metapolitical level in order to transform the political arena into something more favourable towards right wing xenophobic, racist and nationalist ideas, know that there are ways to alter the political field (Ekeman 2023). We see the effects of this right wing metapolitical work around us every day. But are they democratic ways?

The French anarchist, catholic and social scientist Jacques Ellul, formulated this dilemma in his 1965 book *Propaganda* as follows:

With the help of propaganda, one can disseminate democratic ideas as a *credo* and within the framework of a myth. With propaganda one can lead citizens to the voting booth, where they seemingly elect their representatives. But if democracy corresponds to a certain type of human being,

to a certain individual behavior, then propaganda destroys the point of departure of the life of a democracy, destroys its very foundations. It creates a man who is suited to a totalitarian society, who is not at ease except when integrated in the mass, who rejects critical judgments, choices, and differentiations because he clings to clear certainties. He is a man assimilated into uniform groups and wants it that way (Ellul 1973 [1965], 256.)

Such is the democratic conundrum of today, as I see it – how are we to be democratic when there is no *demos*, no collective political agents but (almost) only privatized individuals acting from within their own exclusive and excluding view of the world.

It is my belief that the texts presented here offer ways of dealing with this conundrum, that fruitfully and perhaps contradictorily may provoke and push the political imaginaries of our time.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 The workshop at which these texts were first presented and discussed was held at Uppsala university, Sweden, December 14 2024, as part of the activities of the research program Democracy and Higher Education (DoHu). The editors want to thank the scholars responsible for the program, and especially professor Christina Kullberg, for support and good collaboration.
- 2 The following two or so pages attempt a general assessment of the political landscape of today that expands on earlier kindred analysis (Rosengren 2023) and is to a large extent similar to the introductory pages in a forthcoming publication (Rosengren 2024).
- 3 The activities of Cambridge Analytica before and after the Brexit referendum are interestingly presented in Karim Amer's and Jehane Noujaim's 2019 documentary *The Great Hack*.
- 4 Cavalcante-Schuback's text was written as a response to the 2019 election of Jair Bolsonaro; my translation from Swedish.

TEXT PRESENTATIONS

DEMOCRACY AND POPULISM. The Challenge

This concise text attempts to sketch a provisional answer to the question: How exactly could we energize the socio-political processes prioritizing the consolidation and radicalization of a democratic horizon today? Beyond purely normative answers, some of the precise conditions that seem required in order for a minimal democratic outcome to even become thinkable in more practical (political and strategic) terms are briefly addressed. The democratic promise as well as the risks of a progressive populist orientation are examined within such a context. Some of the obstacles (individualization, identitarian backlash) to its concrete materialization are also highlighted.

HOW TO BE DEMOCRATIC.

Place, Resonance, and Democratic Habitus

This text queries how individuals are shaped into citizens that can sustain democratic societies: what kind of being must a human being be to be able to take part in a democratic society and uphold its institutions? This is also a concrete, political question – only through concrete materiality, objectivity and permanence of things can the

prerequisite for a shared world, shared in meaning, arise, a world where a human being is able to act. The text argues that we need to attend to more general questions in philosophical anthropology, about the habitat and the habits of citizens, about our experience of the world in its social as well as material and existential aspects, as well as how agency, passivity, recognition, and resonance are negotiated in the particular configuration of our current societies. It is a matter of our relationship to the world and the relationship of the world to us.

CAN WE BE DEMOCRATIC?

Dealing with the Transformations of the Political Imaginary

This text highlights the problem of not being able to explain the alterations of the political and social form while it is happening, a question that does not concern political science only, but philosophy and, more importantly, social science as a whole. Extant paradigms, concepts, categories and models appear insufficient to explain the mutations we are facing today. Movements like Trumpism and Bolsonarism highlight antidemocratic tendencies that can be cast as fascist or protofascist and are simultaneously combined into a so called 'alternative' approach to reality and facts. Addressing deep transformations of the political imaginary as they occur is a risky venture, for which there are almost no guidelines.

Fortunately, history offers us access to a transformation of this kind that has been studied in great detail: the French Revolution, which serves as the text's touchstone.

WHO CAN BE DEMOCRATIC? The People in the Age of Populism

According to this text, the most important task today is possibly not to give a definite answer to the question 'Can we be democratic?', but rather to keep asking it, as if only to keep the space of questioning the foundations of our societies open. More specifically, the text focuses on the implicit actor in the question – the “we” – that is supposed *to be* democratic by assessing two different, yet overlapping, ways of constructing “a people”. In doing so, the text seeks to briefly describe some of the conditions that constitute present democratic politics and to address two objections raised against populism as a possible, yet not necessarily, emancipatory strategy in forming a democratic people.

Yannis Stavrakakis

DEMOCRACY AND POPULISM

The Challenge

“Is political as well as subjective autonomy and democracy even a possibility for us, as individuals as well as collectives? Can we be democratic?” Such questions are no doubt important, but let us begin by bracketing their formulation in order to see whether they are indeed productively formulated.

1.

Obviously, the answer cannot be a simple and categorical “YES” or “NO” corresponding to some sort of definitive subjective or collective essence. Both democratic and anti-democratic tendencies, tendencies towards equality and antithetical oligarchic tendencies, are culturally inscribed within the unfolding of human sociality.

On the one hand, as Rancière has cogently formulated it, even hierarchical claims to power and authority “cannot ultimately be legitimated except via the power of equals. [...] From the moment obedience has to refer to a principle of legitimacy, [...] commanding must presuppose [to some extent] the equality of the one who commands and the one who is commanded”. From that point of view, unequal societies can only be relatively stabilized due to the parallel

operation of egalitarian principles and forms of life (Rancière 2009, 47–48). On the other, of course, antithetical dynamics are also to be observed in social and political life, something already captured in Michels’ *Iron law of oligarchy* from his study of political parties. That is to say, even in democratically organized structures, leadership dynamics often involve a tendency towards oligarchic rule (Michels 2001). Simply put, the dynamics of equality and inequality, democratization and oligarchic hierarchy, are revealed as diachronically inter-implicated in an undecidable and irreducible choreography (see, for a more extensive treatment, Stavrakakis 2024, especially the introduction).

From that point of view, the question is how exactly we could energize the socio-political processes prioritizing the consolidation and radicalization of a democratic horizon. This question is not (purely) normative in itself and cannot receive any (sustainable) rationalist answer because, marked by a multitude of unconscious processes and discursive overdeterminations, socio-political reality escapes the constraints of any such rationale (see, in this respect, Stavrakakis 1999 & 2007). It is also not enough to just declare our optimism or pessimism because the current horizon involves paradoxical hybrids of “cruel optimism” (Berlant 2011) that increasingly become hard to dislodge. Let us then adopt a pessimistic optimist or optimistic pessimist attitude, for the time-being, and leave any explicitly normative considerations for later. At this point, it seems more productive to inquire into the precise conditions that seem required in order for a minimal democratic outcome to even become thinkable in more practical (political and strategic) terms.

2.

To start considering such conditions, we need to enter a terrain of *impurity* that moves from a consistent theorization of democracy itself – for example, as a socio-political form organized around an “empty place” and resisting the logic of direct and permanent incarnation (Lefort) – to a consideration of its conditions of possibility. Now, such conditions have to do, in the first instance, with the existence of subjects (citizens) able to accept them and enjoy life – having cultivated the ability to mourn direct incarnation and embrace partial enjoyment (Stavrakakis 2007) – within such a framework and are also willing to fight for for the latter (both against adversaries that endorse *direct incarnation*¹ and against their own tendencies to engage in such practices, no matter whether they nominally consider themselves “liberal”, “socialist”, etc.).

Yet, even when such subjects exist within society, they cannot achieve much as mere “individuals”. Even in order to get motivated to go to the polling station in order to participate in an election – and much more is obviously needed to actively participate in party or movement politics and/or enact democracy in their everyday lives on various levels – they need some sort of inspiration that must valorize – and, in turn, animate – particular types of collective processes. Collective identifications/attachments are needed that will allow desire to unfold and get shaped in democratic terms. Here is where impurity enters the game. Why?

Simply because, for this to happen (mobilization and participation of whatever degree), some sort of collective subjectivity needs to be formed, adopted and activated in practice. Typically, within modern democracies that have constitutionally registered “popular sovereignty” as their guiding regulative ideal, such collective identifications usually presuppose an attachment to “the people”

– not as a pre-existing social locus or a mere ideal but as a *process* (Ochoa Espejo 2017), as a forward-looking (but already actively performed and historically enacted) collectivity *to come*, to utilize a Derridean trope.

These are then the terms of our predicament. On the one hand, without enacting such collective identifications and without triggering associated collective processes, democracy often degenerates into post-democracy (Crouch 2004) and into various forms of democratic backsliding. On the other, collective processes that rely on attachments are never risk-free – as is the case with other meaningful and affectively invested social relationships, from love to sport, etc. For example, within the fluid and impure (symbolically mediated) terrain of social interaction and political antagonism, references to “the people” can be hijacked by the far right to advance exclusionary politics premised on direct incarnation.

3.

On the one hand, then, democracy becomes impossible without the formation (and continuous re-establishment) of collective subjectivity, of “a people” emerging to demand and help enact democracy in practice. This is why what is often called (or denounced as) “populism” keeps emerging as the necessary strategic counterpart of normative valorizations of democracy, at the level of (impure) human sociality and everyday political life. If we desire democracy, we may also need populism, with the latter thus emerging as the mechanism to energize the collective processes required to demand, establish and sustain a democratic framework.

From that point of view, populism must then be registered as a mechanism through which the periodic re-activation of (a suffering

and thus progressively delegitimized) “democracy” is usually articulated, collectively invested and demanded! It is through populism that “the people” emerges as a nodal point, a prioritized political signification, that allows the formation of potent political agents able to resist and often control oligarchic tendencies always present in society (Stavrakakis 2017). Without populism, without passing from an empty normativity to animated forms of subjectivity and (symbolic/affective) socio-political engagement, a strategic deficit emerges for supporters of democracy, who are left unable to energize the collective (inter-subjective) processes needed for its survival, let alone for its enrichment.

4.

Obviously, in order to minimize the risks involved in such processes and avoid the ever-present lure of direct incarnation, this “populist moment” – without which democracy seems to evaporate – needs to moderate, sooner or later, its representative claim in order to embrace the limitations and the negativity implicit in the social world. Democratic (inclusionary) populism is thus revealed as the bearer of a *weak* universality and of a *divided* collectivity, as a *vanishing mediator* that resists transforming (or merely misrecognizing) populist “equivalence” – what forms contingent and transient (populist) collective subjectivities potentially allowing democratic popular empowerment – into an (ultimately impossible and potentially dangerous) “identity” premised on unmediated fantasies of direct incarnation often entailing totalitarian/authoritarian temptation(s). A difficult balancing act, but one on which the future of democracy and its permanent renewal may have to rely (see, for a more detailed elaboration, Stavrakakis 2024).

5.

If we prove unable to register the importance of this impure choreography for the survival of democracy, we risk surrendering to (a) the galloping forces of individualization, and (b) the identitarian backlash they trigger, which (in their mutual interaction) short-circuit democracy in our societies.

The former trend (called by Terzic “idiocracy” in his book under the same title)² refers to the powerful individualization and enforced de-politicization mechanisms of today through which we all seem attached to the fantasies of “singularization, narcissism, and infantilization of a media-savvy society driven by a post-Fordist mode of production” (Terzic 2022, 8). As a result of such embodied attachments: “We end up running around like idiots, narrow-minded, self-centered, but also chronically self-fulfilled and frenetically ‘happy’. How to analyze today what’s so deeply embedded in our global way of life?” (Terzic 2022, 8).

Of course – and fortunately –, such a process cannot encompass the totality of human social experience; neither can it exhaust political life as a whole. Democratic and populist sensibilities are still active and periodically emerge here and there globally. Novel and unexpected types of progressive equivalence could also emerge within this context. What seems to be certain, though, is that it makes more difficult the emergence and salience of collective political projects as we have known them historically. By staging a democratic form of popular collective alliance, apart from potentially incarnating something important for the survival and radicalization of democracy, progressive populism also involves a meaningful embrace of the remaining traces of explicitly collective social life and the deepening of our *common* collective horizon(s) (also see, Stavrakakis 2024, especially the conclusion, from where I am drawing here).

The latter (identitarian backlash) deviates markedly from the historical canon of predominantly democratic populism(s) and often distorts its democratic potential (partly as a reaction to the socio-cultural hegemony of individualization and the problematic political forms it often takes). The case of the US offers a good illustration. On the one hand, anybody remotely familiar with the North American populist legacy going back to the 19th century (see, for an introductory presentation, Postel 2024) will be likely to accept that populism can be a useful corrective to liberal democracies: “Liberal democracies have many flaws and reform movements can help to reduce corruption, strengthen participation, and deepen accountability” (Norris and Inglehart 2019, 22). Yet, it is also important to note that the articulation with authoritarian orientations creates serious risks that cannot be underestimated: “We view Trump as a leader who uses populist rhetoric to legitimize his style of governance, while promoting authoritarian values that threaten the liberal norms underpinning American democracy” (Norris and Inglehart 2019, 3).

In an age when such authoritarian values are increasingly being *normalized* and *mainstreamed* within the public sphere and our political systems (often in a paradoxical embrace with the economic dimensions of the individualization processes they ostensibly reject), especially within Europe, the (democratic) populist challenge acquires increased significance. It may also present, in many contexts, a way out of our present post-democratic malaise; a way towards enacting a more democratic form of life, offering an (impure) opportunity for a multitude of (partial) emancipation(s), both subjective and collective.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Meaning the purely fantasmatic and unmediated/unreflexive attachment to our political ideals and the way they get incarnated in historically present types of agency and/or institutional design without leaving any space for doubt, uncertainty and (democratic) contestation.

- 2 In the ancient Greek setting, the term *idiotes* referred to a private person – to someone "who only took care of his personal affairs and was therefore unsuited to the business of state" (Terzic 2022, 25).

Ola Sigurdson

HOW TO BE DEMOCRATIC

Place, Resonance, and Democratic Habitus

How are individuals shaped who can become the citizens that will sustain democratic societies? This question could also be turned around: how are societies shaped that can form the citizens who will sustain democratic societies? This is almost a classic transcendental question: what kind of being must a human being be to be able to take part in a democratic society and uphold its institutions? But of course, it is also a concrete, political question.

First, let me take issue with the term “democratic”. The slogan from the 1960s and 1970s, “the personal is political” seems to have been replaced in our times with another slogan, “the personal must be democratic”. Today, in everyday discourse, “democracy” works as a kind of floating signifier, or so it seems. Democracy can be a system of government, a certain political procedure, as well as a set of values. In a Swedish context, “democracy” is often used as a kind of “hypergood” in Charles Taylor’s sense, i.e., it provides “the standpoint from which” other goods “must be weighed, judged, decided about” (Taylor 1989, 63). However, I see several problems with having “democracy” as a kind of hypergood or hegemonic value. Let me mention one of them: if democracy is a hypergood, it means that all things human beings do should ideally conform to this value. But what if, as for

instance the legal scholar Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde (2020, 167), together with many others, suggests, that democracy, as a system of government, “is sustained by conditions it cannot itself guarantee”? Then making democracy into a highest value tend to make these premises invisible. Even if democratic societies in some sense sustain democratic citizens, is this really a sufficient condition? Does not making democracy into a hypergood occlude questions such as what is democracy good for and how do we become democratic? This is not just a question of its intellectual or moral sources, in a cognitive sense, but of the kind of institutions and practices that sustain the functioning of democracy, even in a very concrete way: how to vote, how to count votes, how to hold a political rally, and so on. I suggest that we use the term democracy for a system of government that respects the equal value of all its citizens. The important question then becomes: how to sustain such a system of government in practice?

Hannah Arendt once suggested that the foundations of politics is to be found in the attempt to resolve the dilemma of how those who are different should be able to live together and interact with each other. In her classic 1958 book on human action, *The Human Condition*, Arendt uses the image of a table to illustrate how this public, common space works. The table, she believes, is an image of life together because it is between those who sit around it:

To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time (Arendt 1958, 52).

The important word here is “between”; it is by virtue of its middle position that the table can both unite and separate those sitting

around the table. Other things in the room also work in the same way. Living together in a world means sharing things with each other, things that both unite and separate. The public space has a physical, material form for Arendt. She does not go into the specific configuration of this image, but presents it abstractly as a kind of necessary structure. Without one, if human beings lived only in nature without any given habitat, our existence would lack order, it would be homeless. Only through concrete materiality, objectivity and permanence of things can the prerequisite for a shared world, shared in meaning, arise, a world where a human being is able to act. These conditions for human life, which Arendt returns to throughout *The Human Condition*, are of course self-produced to a certain extent, but none the less become prerequisites for human existence. The common life that Arendt imagines is thus not only socially constituted through different relationships between “I”, “you” and “them”, but rests on both a material and symbolic base that in some sense precedes the social interactions. The outside world necessary for common life, without which there would be no sense of reality, consists not only of other people but also of things, social institutions, and their meaning.

In this common world, we live together in the same way as we sit around a table, united but separate. The common life is thus anchored in and dependent on a material outside world. One of the crucial distinctions for Arendt in *The Human Condition* is between private life and common life, the former constituting the sphere of necessity and the latter the sphere of freedom. Private life also has a material basis, but since the private constitutes the separate, it is not home and hearth that become the prime examples of the material conditions of the common world. Life together is supported by public buildings, streets and squares that possess a permanence and

stability that transcends a single generation. Common life certainly presupposes private life, where place and property are intimately connected, but unlike in private life, common buildings, streets, and squares are not the property of any particular person. We jointly own such property in a sense that does not coincide with legal ownership.

A mere private life would be a life of estrangement. The purely private life is, if not an inhuman life, then at least a life deprived of something essential that belongs to humanity, namely:

the reality that comes from being seen and heard by others, to be deprived of an "objective" relationship with them that comes from being related to and separated from them through the intermediary of a common world of things, to be deprived of the possibility of achieving something more permanent than life itself (Arendt 1958, 58).

In other words, it is via the detour through things that we can have an "objective" relationship with each other and share a world.

This common world is mediated through the shared world of things. But it is not sufficient that this world is shared, it also needs to have some shared significance to us, it must constitute a place. In her *The Origins of Totalitarianism* from 1951 as well as in *The Human Condition*, Arendt diagnoses modern society with a deep homelessness. For Arendt, "homelessness" is not necessarily about not having anywhere to live, but above all about not having a given abode, no "immediate earthly shelter" (Arendt 1958, 358; cf. Arendt 1973, 352). Arendt describes this condition as being a stranger to the world, even an intra-worldly estrangement from the world. The alienation in question is thus primarily the loss of a world shared with others. Not just of a location, but of a place – or rather, places in the plural – that carries an existential significance for us.

The loss of common places, of a shared world of things, also means the loss of a *sensus communis*, a "common sense" (Arendt 1958, 395–402). "Common sense" here means "a shared reason" based on sense impressions and exchanges of meaning between people who share a world from several different perspectives: "the atrophy of the space of appearance" therefore has as its consequence "the withering of the common sense" which is the organ through which we orientate ourselves in the world (Arendt 1958, 209). This is why homelessness, alienation from earth and world, also results in a loss of a genuine common sense, meaning a sense shared with others. Instead, we are driven back to our own self-reflection which has no other content than our own streams of consciousness and where our own thought itself must form the foundation for the reliability of our own existence. When our human reason is reduced to logical propositions and our experiences of the world are relegated to the merely subjective, then the very notion of a "shared reason" becomes obsolete. A human being becomes an individual, alone, confined to him or herself; a private person in the real sense, after the Latin *privus* which means "deprived". Loneliness, the rootless and therefore also strictly private human being, is the breeding ground for totalitarian movements, according to Arendt. "To be uprooted means to have no place in the world that is recognized and guaranteed by others," because it is such a place that makes opinions meaningful and actions effective (Arendt 1973, 475).

Such an uprooted world lacks what Hartmut Rosa (2020a) would call "resonance". Experiencing the relationship with the world as a form of resonance means, in short, experiencing the world as in some way alive, in the sense that it responds in a way that is not merely an echo of myself; in other words, there is an unpredictability about the world that makes it inaccessible to my attempts to

manipulate it according to my own will. To experience the world as mute, however, is to experience it only as an echo of my own voice or a resource for the manipulations of my own will without any inherent meaning. Rosa demonstrates the contextual nature of the resonance relationship, which is related to the body, space, cultural and social situation, weather, age, religion, and worldview. Our late modern era is dominated by alienated relations to the world but is also characterized by a longing for resonance in a way that, paradoxically, threatens the existence of resonance when attempts to evoke it thus become attempts to control it. This might be one possible explanation of the allure of a radical-right discourse on rootedness and re-connection with the soil and blood of one's "motherland".

I take it that one of the lasting contributions by Rosa's sociology of resonance is its insistence on the *Unverfügbarkeit der Welt*, the "uncontrollability of the world" (Rosa 2020b). If the world we live in is a resonant world, what would it mean to experience it as such? It would mean that human being-in-the-world cannot solely or even primarily be defined as human agency. To experience resonance is to experience a relation to and with the world that we cannot control, and thus to experience it passively. To experience resonance in the world is to be like the swimmer who strives against the waves but is yet borne by the water. So much of what we do in daily life exhibits an intertwining of independence and dependency, including the political. Being a human being, then, is to embody both activity and passivity, in what we can call the mediopassive.¹ To sustain democracy, we need to elaborate on the relations of resonance to and with the world, for only they can uphold practices that combine the virtues of passion and humility, needed for a politics that allows us, who, as Arendt suggest, are different to live together.

How are the societies shaped who can form the citizens who will

sustain democratic societies? To answer that question, I think we need to attend to more general questions in philosophical anthropology, about the habitat and the habits of citizens, about our experience of the world in its social as well as material and existential aspects, as well as how agency, passivity, recognition, and resonance are negotiated in the particular configuration of our current societies. It is, as Rosa would put it, a matter of *Weltbeziehung*, of our relationship to the world and the relationship of the world to us.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 On mediopassivity, see the forthcoming dissertation by Miriam Sünder.

Paula Diehl

CAN WE BE DEMOCRATIC?

Dealing with the Transformations of the Political Imaginary

RETHINKING DEMOCRACY

Polycrisis, climate change, neo-fascist tendencies and digitalization are a few contemporary factors of deep cultural, social and political transformations; ideologies seem to be losing their structure, becoming more flexible and hybrid, and, moreover, are increasingly the object of deconstruction in political communication. Keywords such as “alternative facts” (Trump’s former advisor Kellyanne Conway) and “turning point” (German Chancellor Olaf Scholz) suggest that such transformations affect not only the political order but, more broadly, the political imaginary as a whole. It looks as if we are going through deep changes of social and political form; alterations of the way the political is imagined and constituted.

These transformations are *a fortiori* concerning because they affect the core of the political: How is society organized? How is power structured? And, crucially for democracy, how can citizens participate in political decisions and be represented? Yet the problem of not being able to explain the alterations of the political and social form while it is happening does not concern political science only, but philosophy and, more importantly, social science as a whole. Their paradigms, concepts, categories and models appear insufficient to

explain the mutations we are facing today. Movements like Trumpism and Bolsonarism highlight antidemocratic tendencies that can be cast as fascist or protofascist and are simultaneously combined into a so called ‘alternative’ approach to reality and facts. They also push traditional social science concepts to their limits in a way that can only be understood by taking imagination into account. Therefore, inspiration from philosophy, cultural and media studies, and also history, are valuable for building a framework to help overcome disciplinary limitations. I am convinced that for understanding the mutations of social-political forms as such, and the transformations of today’s democracy in particular, a new political science approach, that connects the tools of political theory to the thinking of the political imaginary, is needed.

In the last decade, political science went through a phase of profound self-questioning, following failures to predict voting results – the “Brexit” referendum in the UK was the most striking example – or find theoretical frameworks to deal with the mutation of politics and political processes, as in the cases of Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro. At the same time, empirical reality is challenging not only to political science frameworks but also social-political and everyday knowledge as described by Peter Berger & Thomas Luckmann (1991). This is particularly true of recent discussions on the future of democracy and on understanding politics and political processes today (Levintsky & Ziblatt 2018; Ruciman 2018; Mounk 2019). Yet the problems discussed in this context have deeper roots. And I would dare to say that political science in general is only scratching the surface.

Thus, in order to understand the transformations of democracy, I suggest a return to the crucial question of democracy (and of the political) that Hannah Arendt posed back in 1958: How do we want

to live? According to Arendt, the political is only possible if this question is posed and addressed by the very members of a society. Epistemologically, Arendt’s starting point is connected to the capacity of imagining a common society and a collective future. Following Arendt, we can say that as long as this question is formulated, the political is alive. I propose relocating Arendt’s question concerning the political to the context of the political imaginary in order to address the question posed by this volume: “Can we be democratic?” Indeed, my first argument is that we can only be democratic if we can pose the question “How do we want to live?” Are we still able to pose this question? This short text proposes a first reflection on the transformations of the political imaginary and how they can be captured for a better understanding of society’s capacity to be democratic.

In methodological terms, I think that examining symbolism, and especially pictures, is a promising way to grasp the transformations of the political imaginary. The political imaginary is currently symbolically changed in such a way that the new formation can no longer rely on the old framework for its enactment and self-constitution. Actors experiencing these transformations have the disadvantage of not seeing the future developments but only the fluidity of their possibilities. Translated into magma terminology (see below, the paragraph *The Imaginary, Magma and Its Transformations*), new relations between magma components as well as between them and the ensemble emerge and these new relations are about to restructure the symbolic representation of society. In an attempt to concretize this approach, I will in the following explore some of the methodological possibilities offered by the examination of pictures in the case of the French revolution.

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION AND THE BIRTH OF DEMOCRACY

Addressing deep transformations of the political imaginary as they occur is a risky venture, for which there are almost no guidelines. Fortunately, history offers us a transformation of this kind that has been studied in great detail: the French Revolution. Consequently, I will, for this brief analysis, profit and take inspiration from historical, philosophical and political-theoretical examinations of the French Revolution and of the “birth of modern democracy” (Lefort 1988) that arose from it.

In one of his short stories in *Comedies of the private life*,¹ Brazilian writer Luís Fernando Veríssimo describes a fictional scene of an upper-class party of psychoanalysts. Their discussions over wine and petit fours revolve around the best way to interpret their patients’ dreams. In a lively intellectual competition, one of them puts forward an argument: “Everybody dreams about the French Revolution”. In this humoristic short story, Veríssimo suggests that the revolution left modern society with both a trauma and a dream. Moreover, this trauma and this dream permeate collective and individual lives and are reactivated subjectively by the experience of injustice and inequality for the poor and discriminated. Notice that the preposition used in Portuguese with the verb “to dream” is “with”, which can refer both to dreaming *of something in a more or less neutral way* and dreaming *about something that one desires*. Veríssimo addresses the trauma of the symbolic reversion of power described by Claude Lefort but also the frustration caused by the unrealized promises of emancipation in modern democracy² – examined by Pierre Rosanvallon in several books – and he associates both with the experiences of deep inequalities in Brazil. His interpretation of the French Revolution in imaginary terms is quite close to Lefort’s approach to the birth of modern democracy, in that it places the

symbolic events of the revolution at the core of the democratic imagination. Lefort shows how these historical events caused a “mutation of the symbolic order” (Lefort 1986, 106). Veríssimo seems to suggest that the experience of the revolution shaped the social imaginary (to use Castoriadis’s term) in profound ways.

Claude Lefort’s democratic theory and Cornelius Castoriadis’s philosophy of the social imaginary devoted great attention to the French Revolution. For both, the French Revolution was more radical than all other revolutions of the 18th century, since it contested not just the political institutions but the society of the *ancien régime* in its totality (Castoriadis 1990: 156). I think these authors offer some guidance for grasping the transfiguration of the political imaginary while it is taking place and can help to better understand today’s transformations of democracy. Both were attentive readers of Alexis de Tocqueville and took great inspiration from his reflections on the French Revolution and modern democracy. Like us today, Tocqueville was experiencing such a transfiguration at the same time as he was trying to make sense of it. His thoughts on the French Revolution are still topical and impressive. And I guess he dreamed about it. In *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, he writes:

... till it destroyed civil as well as political institutions, manners, customs, laws, and even the mother tongue ; till, having dashed in pieces the machine of government, it shook the foundations of society, and seemed anxious to assail even God himself; till it overflowed the frontier, and, by dint of methods unknown before, by new systems of tactics, by murderous maxims, and “armed opinions” (to use the language of Pitt), overthrew the landmarks of empires, broke crowns, and crushed subjects, while, strange to say, it won them over to its side: it was not till then that a change came over men’s minds. (Tocqueville: 1856, 16)³

Tocqueville understood the upheavals that brought down the *ancien régime* like no other, and he showed how the possibility of a democratic order became conceivable and plausible. Tocqueville had experienced the trauma of the revolution in his own family (see Krulic 2016: 49) but he knew that democracy had become inevitable and recognized its potential for freedom. As a *passer entre deux mondes* (Krulic 2016), Tocqueville belonged to the generation tasked with accomplishing the revolution. And he knew that. Particularly in his later writings, Tocqueville captured the point of indecision of the revolution, in which there is not yet any precise idea of what the revolution will do or cause. Tocqueville's description captures the moment when different possibilities were still open and nothing had been completed, depicting a frozen state that the author tries to preserve like a cinematic scene. One does not know yet in which direction it will develop. Bit by bit, he writes, the head of the monster of the revolution becomes visible, but the transformations it causes are not immediately apparent, even if they shake up the foundations of society. However, Tocqueville's conservative view does not obscure his analysis. Despite his shock, he observes the emergence of a novel, unprecedented power. Moreover, he recognizes that the construction of reality – to use Berger and Luckmann's concept (1991) – has been fundamentally shaken. Such changes affect political and social institutions and, more importantly, they transform the way institutions of society are perceived and shaped. Tocqueville's frozen scene describes the transformation in the moment when it occurs. The revolution had already destroyed feudal institutions, its customs, ideas, and perceptions of the world, but the new institutions of society had not yet been formed. The old had collapsed while a new form of the social-political had not yet been crystallized. In such transitional episodes, the imaginary

becomes fluid, opening up more possibilities for radical phantasies and imagination to manifest.

THE IMAGINARY, MAGMA AND ITS TRANSFORMATIONS

In his seminal book *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (1987), Cornelius Castoriadis uses the term magma to capture such fluidity and to characterize the imaginary. The imaginary can be described as “the idea that there exists a more or less subconscious set of meanings, symbols, values, narratives, and representations of the world that influence the way in which people experience their political world” (Bottici 2010, 686). For Castoriadis (1987), the imaginary is a dimension of the social and individual life that makes constructions of reality possible, since it encompasses the imaginative and creative capacities of human beings. It includes a repertoire of images, discourses, symbols and emotions, but also imagination- and perception-patterns shared by a collectivity. There are two dimensions of the imaginary. For social science, history and cultural studies, the first dimension is easy to analyze; it is what Castoriadis called the instituted imaginary. The instituted imaginary is already materialized in the symbolical and becomes visible to us through social and political institutions, symbols, discourses and institutionalized practices. The second dimension is more complicated: It is the instituting imaginary, which Castoriadis called radical because it has the power to institute society and is not controllable. The radical imaginary is not materialized in a way that can be analyzed. It escapes categorizations and remains virtual and potential without yet being realized. For the question of the transformation of the political imaginary, both dimensions are key.

For Castoriadis,

...the construction of its own world by each and every society is, in essence, the creation of a world of meanings, its social imaginary significations, which organize the (presocial, 'biologically given') natural world, instaurate a social world proper to each society (with its articulations, rules, purposes etc.), establish the ways in which socialized and humanized individuals are to be fabricated, and institute the motives, values, and hierarchies of social (human) life. (Castoriadis 1991, 37).

This is the work of the imaginary. Yet the imaginary is neither static nor fixed, but changes its form, since it is a social-historical concept *par excellence*, and changes the social-political. Accordingly, the imaginary is like a magma of meanings and meaning makers that can change shape when heated and becomes fluid.

Magma can be understood as a transitional term between metaphor and concept. Although its vagueness (Brunkhorst 1986) causes theoretical problems, the term has the advantage of capturing the potential dynamics of the imaginary and can portray the formation and dissolution processes of society. Thinking of the imaginary in terms of magma can help us understand its transformational processes. Castoriadis, however, conceives the magma less as a concept and more as a metaphor. And he adds complexity to it by combining a volcanological image (Rosengren 2014) with a mathematical concept of the ensemble (Diehl 2022). Castoriadis addresses the question of the identity of the social-political by showing the new shape of society and highlighting the importance of the alteration of the relations between the components of the magma for establishing a new form of the social-political. On the one hand, the magma's components would be rearranged anew, determining the

fundamental differences between societies. On the other hand, there is place for creation and the introduction of new elements into the magma. Castoriadis emphasizes that creation is not "production", i.e. "the bringing forth of an exemplar of a preexisting *eidos*", but "the *ab ovo* positing of such an *eidos*" (Castoriadis 1991, 34). In the same line, he thinks of destruction of existing forms in the same ontological way (Castoriadis 1991, 35). On the one hand, the new imaginary significations can emerge from the new combinations of the magma's components and its ensembles, generating new structures. Notice that imaginary significations are, for Castoriadis, the major organizational units of an imaginary; they structure beliefs and knowledge and generate institutions. In the course of the transformation of the imaginary, such imaginary significations change radically, losing their structuring power or simply disappearing and just making room for new ones. This is possible because the imaginary, in its radical capacity, is not a state of the social-political, but offers multiple possibilities for the "mode of being" of human life. Such "modes of being" allow innumerable but not infinite combinations of the magma components (Castoriadis 1987, 208). This means that one can conceive the transformations of the political imaginary within a determined scope of possibilities. When the magma gets hot, its shape changes, it flows and the relations between the components are transformed. When it cools again, the magma takes on a semi-solid form, new structures consolidate, giving birth to a new social-political. Yet a complete solidification of the magma never occurs. There are always warm layers in the magma that are still viscous or even fluid and are therefore still transforming themselves, even if this occurs slowly. Furthermore, there is a possibility that the magma could become hot and start moving fast again, metamorphosing as in a volcanic eruption, de-

stroying the old and forming the new. This way of apprehending the transformation processes of the social-political comes close to Tocqueville's frozen scene of the French Revolution. After becoming fluid and radically changing its shape, the magma is still flowing, albeit slowly, and opening and closing new possibilities of being. During this process, no one can define the new structures of the social-political, but one can try to preserve the most significant moments of these transformations in a frozen scene, as Tocqueville did. On the other hand, in this process new imaginary significations can emerge *ab ovo*, as Castoriadis mentioned, just generating new structures that reshape the social-political. In such situation, the transformation involves not only new combinations of the magma elements, but new imaginary significations also emerge that give shape to the political imaginary.

Contrary to Castoriadis's intention, I propose to use the concept of the imaginary and the magma metaphor as a social science tool. I think it offers an additional explanatory dimension for fundamental transformations of the social-political. When the magma becomes fluid, it is not only the political organization or institutions that change. It is not a mere transformation of the political system, as political scientists used to claim but a change of the way society represents and institutes itself, how it provides itself with a form and a meaning, to echo Claude Lefort. This is the paradigmatic situation of a deep transformation of the political imaginary, when the relationship between the ensemble and the components, and between the individual components of the magma, is transformed. More importantly, this mode of being consolidates and institutes itself through the symbolic labor of representation.

MAKING SENSE OF THE POLITICAL IMAGINARY'S TRANSFORMATION

The French Revolution was so important for the democratic imaginary because of its radicality and the symbolism of this rupture. Pictures, symbols, symbolic events and practices are not only materializations of the instituted imaginary but also performative media for its transformation. In phases of deep mutations of the social-political, the structure in which they operate becomes fluid and their transformational performativity increases. Therefore, pictures, symbols, symbolic events and practices become crucial for understanding the transformations of the political imaginary. Against this background, it is not surprising that historians and philosophers took a closer look at the revolutionary symbolism to better understand modern democracy. The symbolism of the French Revolution made the possibilities of the new visible. Tocqueville argues that the revolution wanted to abolish not only the old government but also the old form of society and, in doing so, it had to destroy old traditions, customs, practices and ideas. He devoted particular attention to the "moeurs", i.e. the customs and mental states of the people and their vicissitudes during the revolution. And I would add that the mental states of the people generated, and were affected by, symbolism. I think that Tocqueville's observation of the destruction caused by the revolution, and the emergence of the new foundations it created, manifested itself first in pictures and symbolic practices before being institutionalized. This kind of transformational process can be cast in terms of liquefaction and crystallization moments of magma and examined through the symbolism it generates.

Following Lefort, I consider such symbolic creations as the *mises en scène* of society, by which society represents itself (Lefort 1988). It is a deeply performative activity that gives meaning and shape to the

social-political. As a symbolic and performative activity, such a representation must be understood in relation to the imaginary, posing the question of the relationship between the shape and components of the imaginary on the one hand and their transformation on the other. In *L'imaginaire comme tel* (2007), Castoriadis shows that 'representing' and 'doing' (*faire*) are inseparable (cf. Castoriadis 2007, 147).⁴ And yes, it is only through the symbolic that the imaginary can materialize in social institutions. For Castoriadis, the mode of being of a society is shaped through symbolic materialization and, for Lefort, this shape takes place through representation as *mise en scène*, *mise en forme* and *mise en sens* (Lefort 1988). That said, we keep in mind that such form is never fixed, but is still affected by possible liquifying of the magma.

So, I maintain that examining symbolism, and especially pictures, is a promising way to grasp the transformations of the political imaginary, particularly when the magma becomes so fluid that the relations between its elements are dissolved and not yet reconstituted. During such deep transformations, the settings in which the political imaginary symbolically manifest are changed in such a way that the new formation can no longer rely on the old framework for its enactment and self-constitution. The liquefaction of magma renders the old categories and patterns of perception useless, but new ones are not yet available. Actors experiencing these transformations, like Tocqueville, have the disadvantage of not seeing the future developments but only the fluidity of their possibilities. Here the magma metaphor can indeed provide guidance in reflecting this fluidity. It allows to think new relations between the components of the magma and between them and the ensemble in order to detect the emergence of new relations and structures of the symbolic representation in Lefort's sense of society.

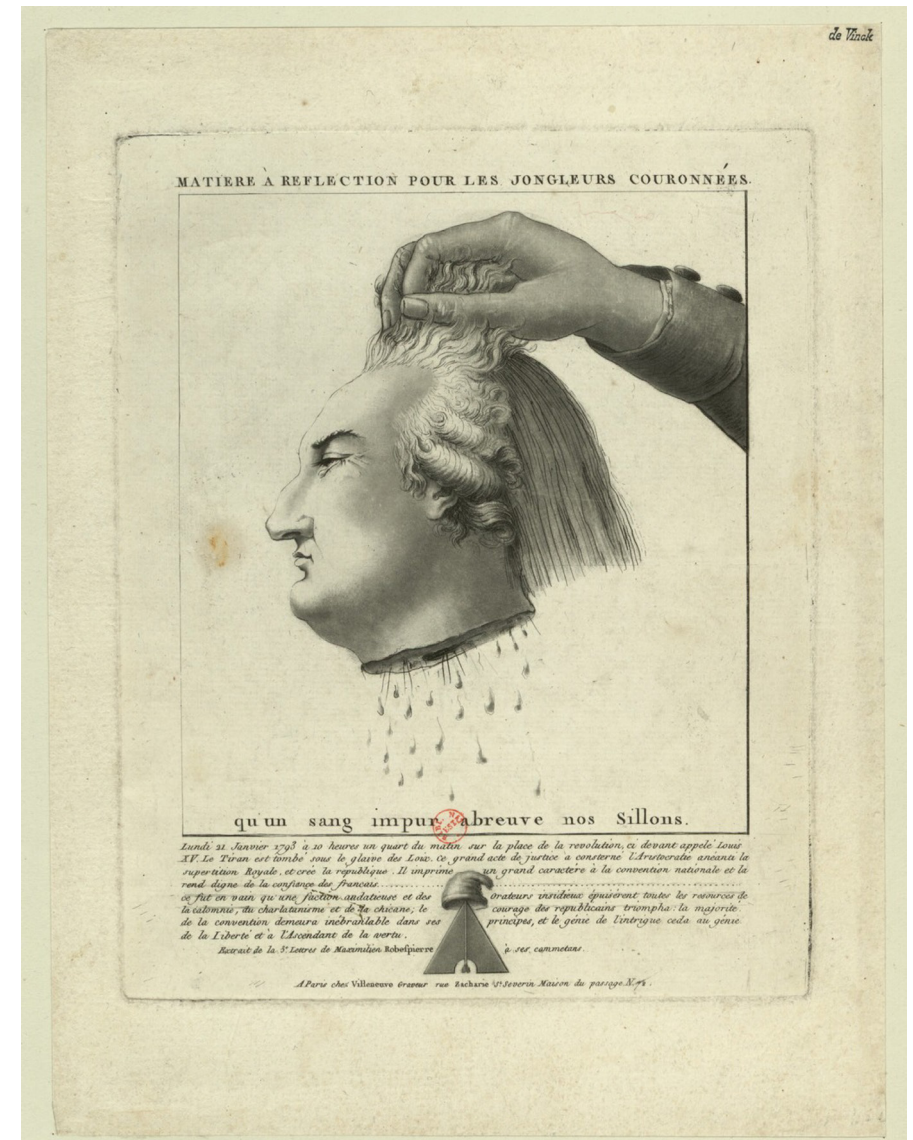
WHAT PICTURES REVEAL

The French Revolution shows how the new shape of the political imaginary was anchored in symbolic events as in the performativity of pictures and mental images. My guess is that pictorial manifestations can, after all, provide clues to the transformations experienced by the political imaginary during its occurrence. Pictures as well as narratives contain an excess of imagination which cannot be grasped only or at all by categories of thought. That is the reason why their examination can help detect the virtual and not yet realized possibilities of the imaginary. According to Alice Pechriggl, "collectively shared phantasms and imaginary significations" are located in a "synesthetic cross-over area of the imaginary" and they can materialize in symbols and pictures (Pechriggl 2011). Such symbolic materialization can be fixed as a new form and allows, at the same time, a new liquefaction of meaning. Seen in this light, pictorial images, i. e. images with a material template, are to be examined as expressions of the imaginary. Moreover, images have a performative power, since they can inspire imaginations. As I have highlighted in my earlier research on SS body images, pictorial and mental images can reactivate, change familiar or generate new patterns of perception and ideas about the foreign body and one's own (Diehl 2005, 30f.; 86f.). This performative power can be found in images in general. Such an iconic power does not only refer to traditional, learned perception in the sociological sense, but also reaches the imagination, that is, the ability to produce mental images. To use the words of Chiara Botticci: It is "the capacity to produce images in the most general sense of the term, independently of whether or not what they represent actually exists; in this view, imagination includes the capacity to represent what does not exist, but it is also not limited to this. It is a much more radical view in that it includes the production of

images of both existing and non-existing objects” (Botticci 2014, 4). To be more precise, pictorial images are media for transforming and generating new mental images.

The symbolic event of the beheading of Louis XVI in 1793 was the paradigmatic example of this process during the French Revolution. It marked the passage from the embodied power of monarchy to the disembodied power in democracy structured by the principle of popular sovereignty (Lefort 1988). The *mise en scène* of the event and the pictures that immediately circulated after that continue to shape the democratic-republican memory in France. Symbolically, the body of the king must be destroyed in order to found the new institution of the social-political, in which society was to be newly organized and power newly legitimated. When the king’s head was severed by the guillotine, revolutionaries shouted “Le roi est mort, vive la république!” [The king is dead; long live the republic!] Such a symbolic event was crucial for article 25 of the Constitution of June 24, 1793 that made popular sovereignty the major principle of the Republic: “La souveraineté réside dans le peuple; elle est une et indivisible, imprescriptible et inalienable”.⁵ [Sovereignty resides in the people; it is one and indivisible, imprescriptible and inalienable.]

The beheading of the king on January 21, 1793 was performatively represented in horrifying pictures. Among countless depictions of the scene of the guillotine, there exists one of the most violent visual motifs of the French Revolution; the picture made by Louise-Jules-Frédérique Villeneuve (Diehl 2023, 141). This engraving was made immediately after the beheading of Louis XVI and published in several copies (exact date unknown) (Duprat 1992, 52). Louis’s head is held aloft. From the head, severed from the body, drips blood. In addition, the picture bears the inscription “Matière de réflexion pour les jongleurs couronnés” [“Grounds for reflection for the



Unknown, attributed to Villeneuve, “Matière à réflexion pour les jongleurs couronnés”, 1793. Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

crowned jugglers”] as a threat to aristocracy and to those who do not follow the principles of the revolution. Underneath is a quote from the Marseillaise, giving the act of violence the significance of a founding myth for the new republic: “que le sang impur abreuve nos sillons” [“Let the impure blood water our furrows”]. Lefort interprets the beheading of the king as a radical symbolic rupture and a new beginning. Democracy is accordingly understood as ushering in a new form of representation that can no longer tolerate political embodiment by any individual (Lefort 1988, 17).⁶

This picture is so significant because it reveals both the trauma and the dreams of a completely new society, where representation is not anchored in embodiment anymore. What the picture did was to fix the meaning of popular sovereignty as the principle of the Republic by dismembering the king’s body.⁷ Claude Lefort sees in this event the birth of democracy. It is a mutation of the symbolic order, in which a new position of power and thus new principles of organization, indeed a new configuration of the political, emerge (Lefort 1988). Tocqueville’s reflection of this event did not escape Lefort’s attention. Tocqueville identified popular sovereignty as the creative principle for most English colonies in America as well and it became the “democratic dogma”. Furthermore, for him, the democracy that emerged from it was irreversible. Was the new shape of the political imaginary already accomplished?

“To speak, then, of society’s presentation and representation”, Brian Singer writes, “is to refer to the formation of that relation of society to itself by which it becomes visible from within” (Singer 1986, 5). The question here is how to grasp this relation. Historical material by no means stands as isolated symbolic expressions, but needs to be interpreted by taking into account the new configuration of the political imaginary. The point here is to explore the

arrangement in which these symbolic expressions occur, indeed, the configuration in which they are embedded. In the case of Ville-neuve’s beheaded king, the picture not only celebrates the end of monarchy, but also reveals the phantasies and fear, the trauma and desires generated by the revolution and recalled by Veríssimo in his humoristic story about the democratic imaginary. Moreover, for many historians, such iconography manifested and engendered the nostalgia of embodiment present in modern democracy, which continues to be activated by protofascist movements today. Exploring such material may provide some clues to understand fundamental transformations of the political imaginary in the past and today.

CONCLUSION

Observing the transformations of the political imaginary when the magma becomes fluid, and the old relations between its elements are dissolved but not yet reconstituted, can be a difficult task. In this transformative process, the settings in which the political imaginary symbolically manifests are changed in such a way that the new formation can no longer rely on the old framework for its enactment and self-constitution. Actors experiencing these transformations, like Tocqueville, have the disadvantage of not seeing the future developments, having access only the fluidity of their possibilities. Translated into magma terminology, new relations between magma components, as well as between them and the magma as a whole, emerge and these new relations are about to restructure the symbolic representation of society.

Certainly, the risk of navigating only on the level of the instituted imaginary and losing sight of the possible bubbling of the magma is great. And I agree with Castoriadis that the structuralist

approach can only capture the level of the symbolic and disregards the radical imagination. It is precisely the radical dimension of the imaginary that can provide information about the transfigurations of the political at the moment of its transformation. My guess is that perhaps symbolic expressions can, after all, provide clues to the transformations that give rise to them. Pictures and narratives in particular contain an excess of imagination which cannot only be grasped exclusively by categories of thought. Pictures and narratives thus make possible to detect the virtual and not yet realized possibilities of the imaginary.

Moreover, when the magma liquefies, the space for the stronger performative effect of images grows and, at the same time, pictorial images become core media of the as yet unfixed imaginary significations. Revolution, as Annie Duprat writes, is a moment when

...all customary practices were abolished in favour of a new order that was built by sudden jolts, trial and error, failures, unexpected advances and setbacks. It is a moment of political chaos, of scrambled communications and of the creation of new cultural references; the Revolution is therefore noisy, and even if one can effectively participate in it, it is the multitude that ensures the success of the new messages and cultural practices. (Duprat 1992, 31).

That is the reason why, looking at new forms and uses of images and tropes as performative elements of the shaping of the imaginary, such as the alt-right's use of memes,⁸ and the new relationship between pictures and reality in digital communication, will be crucial for understanding the transformation of the political imaginary today.

At this point, I would like to conclude by risking putting forward a thesis that I cannot present in extenso: It seems to me that sym-

bolic expressions such as images, pictures, symbols and symbolic practices in some sense both performatively propose and anticipate the changes that reshape the political imaginary. They propose, because in a situation of magma liquefaction, no fixed structures have yet been formed and the contestation over the new configuration of the political is in full swing. This is the moment of chaos, as Duprat describes it. The symbolic expressions are therefore performative elements in the assertion of the new, without necessarily reflecting the crystallization of the magma. There are also symbolic expressions that fade away because they indicate possibilities that are not realized in the future.

Such symbolic expressions also play a part in anticipating the new because, at least in historical terms, they manifested the structures of political representation that were about to be established and made them recognizable. Only in retrospect can the analysis of symbolic forms of expression show how the structures of political representation change. If one pursues these questions as a participant in such processes, as Tocqueville did, one must try to collect the indicators of the transformation of the political imaginary and of the future configuration of the social-political, without knowing whether they will ultimately prevail. In terms of understanding the transformations of democracy today, symbolic material can provide clues to the question of whether we are still democratic, and whether we can be democratic after the deep changes of the political imaginary. This is not yet a methodology, but at least it is a beginning.

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ENDNOTES

1 *Comédias da vida privada* (original title) is an allusion to the famous French book series *Histoire de la vie privée* by Philippe Ariès, who dedicated his work to the history of mentality and imagination.

- 2 Such unfulfilled promises can be addressed in terms of temporality. Accordingly, although the political imaginary is able to generate a normative horizon, the instituted society does not necessarily produce social norms that can fully embrace this horizon, creating contradictions between both. Moreover, these contradictions are embedded different temporalities (Diehl 2019).
- 3 Notice that the original text in French was even more emphatic concerning the mentality effects of this turmoil: "À mesure que toutes ces choses éclatent, le point de vue change" (... *as all these things break out, the point of view changes*). 1866, p. 4–5.
- 4 "Représenter, c'est encore faire et il n'y a pas de faire non simultanément représenté» (Castoriadis 2007, 150).
- 5 Article 25 of *Constitution du 24 juin 1793*, available at: <https://www.conseil-constitutionnel.fr/les-constitutions-dans-l-histoire/constitution-du-24-juin-1793> (Last visited April 28, 2024)
- 6 See Diehl 2023, 141.
- 7 In another work, I have addressed the consequences of this symbolic event and the pictures-images production for the imagination of the people, see Diehl 2023.
- 8 Karl Ekeman: *In Want of a Sovereign. Metapolitics and the Populist Formation of the Alt-Right*. PhD dissertation defended at Uppsala University on December 15, 2023.

Theodor Lalér

WHO CAN BE DEMOCRATIC?

The People in the Age of Populism

As we have seen, Castoriadis’ question “Can we be democratic?” still finds a deep resonance for us today. Perhaps, none more so than when democracy – as a system of rule – seems to be on the retreat. The most important task today is possibly not to give it a definite answer, but rather to keep – in the spirit of *ostinato rigore* – asking it. As if only to keep the space of questioning the foundations of our societies – upon which each of us forms and gets formed into political, and presumably democratic, beings – open. Now, what I would like to concentrate on here, is not the predicate of the question, but its subject: the implicit actor – the “we” – that are supposed *to be* democratic. Who, exactly, is this subject?

First, however, we must ask ourselves whether the being of the democratic individual is a measurable thing. According to surveys such as V-dem institute’s one can, for sure, get the impression that we can “measure” the being of democracy in the world (Nord et al. 2024). Of course, in one sense we can: by following its procedure of defining democracy through Robert Dahl’s set of attributes¹ and then assess to what extent it applies to the countries examined (Dahl 1971, 3). Yet, in a parallel universe where almost all countries would get a high score in their survey, I still doubt Castoriadis would be truly

satisfied. Why? Because it is obvious that you can have democracy – in a very hollow and procedural sense – without a genuine thrust for the common good. Indeed, what the last couple of decades have revealed to us, if anything, is that in the name of the “people” the oligarchic neoliberal apparatus – that dismantles continuously more aspects of the common – can thrive (Brown 2019, 23–53). How, then, are we to understand and define the “we” in Castoriadis’ question? More specifically: who is it that can be the placeholder of the democratic subject? The short answer has to be: the people.

As an effect of the modern breakthrough of democracy “the people” as a self-legislating force made its entrance and instituted a governing practice that intrinsically had a reciprocal direction in the sense that it coalesced a governing both “for the people” and “by the people” (Payne, Strandberg, and Stagnell 2023, 1; Lefort 1988). Yet, we know that the political movements in many Western democracies, most notably during the last decade, that have mobilized a notion of a “people” have not created more democracy for the majority. The “basket of deplorables” that Trump’s campaign staged against the “Washington elite” have not seen any major levelling effects of the vast economic inequalities. On the contrary, the inequalities between the rich and the poor has only increased and still does under Biden despite, or perhaps thanks to, the flourishing American post-pandemic economy (Petrou 2023).² Hence, there is no logical connection, it seems, between the “people” and the democratization of “the common”. What is “common” – i. e., society – is perhaps more appropriately construed as a political battleground upon which different political forces will strive to achieve hegemonic influence. If this is the case, then one should not be too afraid to engage in such a battle, nor to construct strategic alliances in order to achieve democratic hegemony.

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As many scholars have shown, the forms of political struggle that characterized the twentieth century have been weakened (Borriello and Jäger 2023). The conflicts between different societal interests of the “Left” and “Right” that characterized the politics of the post-war era have been displaced –, so has its heir: the technocratic and consensus-based configuration of (post-) politics that characterized much of the period from the 1990s and up until the financial crisis of 2008.³ How, then, do we describe our present political configuration? This is of course more ambiguous since what is happening is still in the making. As Paula Diehl says in her text in this volume, it is as if the magmatic eruptions of the last decade have made our imaginary fluid again. However, there have been many attempts to describe what took us from post-politics to today. Nancy Fraser (2017) has, with regard to the American context, for instance, examined the events of the last decade in Gramscian terms: as a hegemonic shift from a “progressive neoliberalism” to “authoritarian neoliberalism.” The former signifies the hegemonic bloc that combines a progressive politics of recognition with a neoliberal economic program:

on the one hand, mainstream liberal currents of the new social movements (feminism, antiracism, multiculturalism, environmentalism, and LGBTQ rights); on the other hand, the most dynamic, high-end “symbolic” and financial sectors of the U.S. economy (Wall Street, Silicon Valley, and Hollywood) (Fraser 2017).

It came as no surprise that the policies of this “odd couple” draconically transferred wealth upward in the system – to the “1 %” – at the price of hollowing out the conditions of the working- and middle-class living (Fraser 2017).

With an ongoing dissolution of civil society (e.g., the vanishing of mass parties, decrease in memberships in unions, alliances, churches, etc.), the political movements that have emerged as a reaction to the neoliberal political hegemony have as an effect turned into “bodies without organs”. In that sense, heavily different movements such as Black Life’s Matters and Trump supporters were actually not so unlike, on an organizational level at least – they were “clenched and muscular, but with no real internal metabolism, subject to constant constipation and impotence.” (Borriello and Jäger 2023, 139).

These developments have created a double challenge for democratic politics today. On the one hand, it has transformed the conditions of politics from a predominantly party-driven and mass-organizational procedure into a more individuated and digitally-based practice that has to rely much more on precarious and occasional political ties. As an effect of these tendencies we have also, perhaps paradoxically, witnessed a desire for more regressive values and an increased dependence upon “hyper-leaders” (Gerbaudo 2019). Since at least the election of Donald Trump, we have thus seen a new hegemonic bloc coming into existence in the West consisting of a set of regressive and authoritarian values, yet still in bed with a neoliberal economy.

Any political articulation able to counter the almost all-encompassing neoliberal order – whether in its “progressive” or “authoritarian” disguise – has therefore to create a hegemonic block that is able to negate the disastrous effects of global economy. “For that to happen”, in the American context, Nancy Fraser (2017) argues “working-class supporters of Trump and of Sanders would have to come to understand themselves as allies—differently situated victims of a single ‘rigged economy,’ which they could jointly seek to transform.” Fraser names this possible counter-hegemonic bloc “progressive populism”. In order to manage the many crises (eco-

logical, economic and social) that our societies are facing today, this articulation has to be, for Fraser, “*anti*-neoliberal or perhaps anti-capitalist”. What is more, it has to manage what Stavrakakis describes in his text in this volume as “the democratic challenge”. In that sense, it has to be populist proper.

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The break with ancient sources of legitimacy that the democratic invention instituted in the symbolic order of politics – i.e., the “dissolution of the markers of certainty” and the opening up of the place of power into an “empty place” (Lefort 1988) have, however, to be seen as less than total (Marchart 2008, 93). The lure of the total sovereign is ever so much active today – more than two hundred years after the mutation at the symbolic level of society. The emptiness, or the gap, that the execution of the king exposed did as an effect also trigger an impulse and a desire to recreate the Unity that the king – and his two bodies – had signified. The democratic invention came then, for Lefort, with a price: it also unleashed a totalitarian temptation of creating the People-as-One. The crucial question then, is whether populism – as a political practice of uniting heterogeneous elements into a collective identity – can harbor what Payne et al. call a “non-identical” and “heterogeneous” people, or if such a rhetorical-political articulation is utterly destined to turn into a totalitarian homogeneous construction (2023, 13).

In fact, objections towards the populist political practice have been leveled from a liberal-political camp that sees populism as an anti-democratic force that threatens to harm individual plurality (Müller 2016), and that reactivates the Tocquevillian specter of the “tyranny of the majority” (Urbinati 2019). In this reading,

populism as a political phenomenon negates the liberal notion of politics which has the task of protecting the guarantor of its *politeia*: the liberal subject. This approach, however, must be dismissed without further ado as it does not conform to a radical democratic imaginary but rather inverts the democratic axiom of governing “for the people” into governing “for the individual”. Another objection against populist politics comes from a leftist location. Slavoj Žižek’s (2006) problem with what he calls “the populist temptation” is most certainly not that it negates a politics made to sustain a liberal political subject, but that it harbors a fascist impulse in the sense that it has to “substantialize” both a notion of a people as well as its other – the enemy of the people. Seen in that way, populist politics can never properly fulfill the emancipatory task of conquering the capitalist society since it displaces the “real” antagonism of capitalist exploitation by staging politics as an antagonism between a people and the elite. The answer to this objection must be delicate, yet determined to face this potential risk that is always inscribed in any attempt to mobilize a people: sometimes it fails, sometimes it doesn’t. But there is a difference between a fascist articulation and a radical democratic one which comes down to the capacity to include or not the negativity inherent in all political antagonism in its articulation. Let me explain.

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When Laclau and Mouffe launched their perhaps counterintuitive idea that “society does not exist” (2001, 95–96) they did not give voice to some sort of banal social constructivism or anti-foundationalist thought. Instead, it was an objection to a positivist understanding of society as a “coherent whole” which was presumably possible

to capture through a set of well-defined sociological categories. Instead, what they were trying to point out was that the very being of the social will always be lacking and that politics is the attempt to manage this lack. However, and most importantly for the question that concerns us here, different political forces will work through this lack in various ways. Indeed, we might have to ask ourselves, as Biglieri and Cadahia do (2021), if the supposedly fascist current within populist mobilization that Žižek points to is not, in fact, a mix-up on his side of two different political logics that indeed contaminate each other on an ontic level, but that nonetheless can be distinguished from one another on an ontological level. One of them would try to expel the experience of lack through positivization, or victimization, of a section of the population as the “enemy of the people”. This political fantasy thus operationalizes the totalitarian temptation opened up by the democratic invention and could thus correctly be defined as a fascist logic; it is only by eliminating this heterogeneous element, that this fascist fantasy imagines that the society as a homogeneous totality can be instituted.

The alternative would instead manage this lack not by eradicating the differences between all heterogeneous parts of society, but rather by articulating a *shared identity*, through a relation of equivalence. In a post-sassurean theory of political identities, every separate political identity is in essence marked by its *difference* from one another. The alternative relation will then rest on and find its condition of possibility exactly in the ineradicable negativity between all of its included elements. The equivalential relation is therefore premised on an egalitarian logic. As Mouffe describes it “a relation of equivalence is not one in which all differences collapse into identity but in which differences are still active” (Mouffe 2018, 63). So, the popular identity – the “we” – of populism, creates a shared identity not by

eradicating the differences that make up the equivalential chain. On the contrary, it is only *through* recognizing those differences as part of their – always precarious and flawed – unity that we can glimpse the potentiality of creating a proper democratic people. In that sense, we should not understand the “democratic being” in Castoriadis question as something static,⁴ but rather as signifying the process by which an equivalential chain operates: on the one hand, by constructing its antagonistic frontier against the “people at the top” and, on the other, extending the inherent egalitarian equivalential chain to those “people at the bottom.”

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Attributes such as the quality of elections, individual rights, as well as freedoms of expression, the media, and association (see Dahl 1971).
- 2 To a high extent this trend is also applicable to the Swedish economy.
- 3 A set of reservations is probably required here. Of course, there are no radical breaks between these "forms" of politics I list above. The post-political era is, for instance, in many ways still an accurate term to describe our political systems and the way in which the private sphere and the political sphere have been separated in the sense that the latter is mostly occupied by "technocrats" and the former have become all the more "de-politicized" so that frustrations previously experienced as societal problems is now perceived as challenges the individual has to face alone. Yet, we should also be perceptive to the mutations of political engagement. As Rosanvallon has argued, political engagement has in the last decades been characterized by a certain "juridification" in the sense that political issues are more often acted out in the judicial domain (Rosanvallon 2010, 30).
- 4 If seen in that way it does, however, raise another urgent question: how can a democratic people institutionalize itself as democratic?

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