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Abstract

The aim of this article is to reassess the conceptual link between politics and our capacity to create images. Although a lot has been written on what we can call the ‘politics of imagination’, much less has been done to critically assess the conceptual link between the two in a systematic way. This paper introduces the concept of imaginal, understood simply as what is made of images, to go beyond the current *impasse* of the opposition between theories of imagination as an individual faculty, on the one hand, and theories of the imaginary as a social context, on the other. As such, I also argue that the concept of imaginal is the theoretical tool most adapted to capture the nature of the conceptual link between politics and our capacity to produce images. This analysis is finally applied to contemporary politics and it is shown to be able to bring light to many of its paradoxes, including that of a political world full of images, but deprived of imagination.

Keywords

imaginal, imaginary, imagination, politics, political

We often hear people saying that our politicians lack imagination. In the epoch of global governance, when politics is reduced to mere administration within a general neo-liberal consensus, there seems to be little space for the free development of imagination. Yet, if we consider the spectacularization of politics that appears on our screens every day, we cannot but perceive an excess of imagination. How can we explain the paradox of an eclipse of imagination that goes hand in hand with its hypertrophy? The task of this essay is to show that in order to come to terms with such a paradox we need to rethink the systematic link between politics and our capacity to imagine, and that the best way to do it is not a theory of political imagination or political imaginary, but a theory of imaginal politics.

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In order to do so, I will first start with a discussion of the concept of imagination and point to the shortcomings of an approach to our problem from the point of view of a theory of imagination understood as an individual faculty. The concept of imagination, as it has been developed in the modern philosophical tradition, is imbued with the presuppositions of a problematic philosophy of the subject and the associated unsolvable problem of the reality of imagination. The passage from a theory of political imagination to a theory of political imaginary, that is, from a subject-oriented approach to a context-oriented one, as it is illustrated by a comparison of Arendt and Castoriadis, also generates unsolvable tensions: if we move from the idea of imagination as an individual faculty, the problem is how to explain the impact of the social context, whereas if we start from a theory of the political imaginary, the problem is how to account for the free imagination of individuals (Section I). Hence the need to move toward a theory of the imaginal. The latter will be shown to be the best tool to conceptualize the link between politics and our capacity to imagine (Section II) as well as to capture the meaning of its contemporary transformations (Section III).

I. Imagination and imaginary: From an individual faculty to a social context

If one looks at the genealogy of the concept of imagination, it is not difficult to perceive two quite different semantic areas.¹ The first, which goes back to the Greek term *phantasia*, is associated with the production of images in the most general sense (*phantasmata*). In this view, imagination plays an important role in both cognition and action. Aristotle, for instance, defined *phantasia* as ‘a movement (*kynesis*) produced by a sensation actively operating’ and associated it to the root ‘light’ (*phaos*), by arguing that without light it is impossible to see (*De Anima*, 429a). *Phantasia* is here recognized as an important ingredient for the formation of a unitary image of objects out of an otherwise unrelated set of data (see in particular *De Anima*, 428b: 18–30). It is only thanks to this faculty that a collection of forms, colours, movements, etc., is perceived as a table. Aristotle also recognized that no action is possible without *phantasia* because *phantasia* is at the basis of appetite, which is a form of movement (*De Anima*, 433b 29).²

It is with the modern epoch that the concept of imagination starts to be systematically associated with quite a different semantic area. Far from being a source of light, imagination is now seen as a source of darkness, of perturbation of the methodical work of reason. A split is thus established between knowledge on the one hand, which is guaranteed by the enlightenment of pure reason, and imagination, as the faculty to produce all sorts of illegal marriages and divorces. Francis Bacon defined imagination as the faculty that ‘commonly exceeds the measure of nature, joining at pleasure things which in nature would never have come together, and introducing things which in nature would never have come to pass’ (Bacon 1986, II, 1: 292; 1963, II, 1: 494). If imagination has no role in cognition, it can still offer something to human beings: poetry. Imagination, together with memory and reason, is one of the three faculties of the mind, to which the three main divisions of human learning correspond: poesy, history and philosophy (Bacon 1986, II, 1: 292).

Perhaps in no other author is the critique of imagination as clear as in Pascal. In his fragment on imagination, Pascal describes this faculty as a source of errors and falsity (*maîtresse d'erreur et fausseté*), as a powerful enemy of reason which can control and, at times, even entirely dominate it (see Fragment 44/82, Pascal 1963: 504). If reason never completely surmounts imagination, the contrary is quite the rule. This is ultimately due to the corrupted nature of human beings, who, as a consequence of original sin, are 'full of natural mistakes, which cannot be eliminated without divine grace' (p. 505, trans. mine). Imagination, more than any other human faculty, is the sign of the irremediably corrupted nature of human beings, of the fact that they cannot always follow the two other sources of truth, which are reason and the senses.³

This passage from a positive view of imagination which associates it with the sphere of *light* to a negative one, which sees in it a sign of the *dark* side of human nature, resulted in a striking semantic break. The outcome of the great 17th-century critiques of the concept of imagination is the fact that by the 18th century the term '*phantasia*' had moved to the sphere of the unreal – as is still the case for the corresponding English term 'fantasy'.⁴ Interpreters may dispute the more or less positive connotation of the term 'imagination', but they generally agree to place 'fantasy' in the sphere of the 'unreal' and the newly constituted sphere of aesthetics (Friese 2001: 7197; Vattimo 1999b: 529).

Both views of imagination, the positive and the negative, agree on a fundamental point: imagination is an individual faculty. Disputes may arise as to its evaluation, but most modern philosophers agree in placing imagination next to reason, the intellect and other human individual faculties. Even Romanticism, which attempted to revalue the central role of imagination, by denying the primacy of intellect for the attainment of knowledge, largely shares this premise. Romantic thinkers such as Novalis, Schlegel and Fichte emphasized the productive side of imagination, by arguing that this faculty can help overcome the abstractness and mechanicalism of the intellect.⁵ However, such an attempt appears more as a restoration of what has been criticized by Enlightenment thinking, rather than as a radical questioning of the premises of the Enlightenment itself. As I have argued elsewhere, this is because Romanticism fully remains within and, at times, even hypertrophied the metaphysics of the subject that sustained the Enlightenment. Be it the absolutism of an ego which encompasses the external world in itself or the metaphysics of a national spirit (*Volksgeist*), the modern subject is in all these cases reinterpreted, expanded, hypertrophied, but not radically questioned.⁶

The task of this essay is to stress the need for a further step, which consists in vindicating the power of our capacity to imagine, by at the same time avoiding the traps of a philosophy of the subject. We are not pure subjects who simply contemplate a world that is 'given', but we are not the Romantic subjects that encapsulate the world within our consciousness either. We are something in between the two. The problem is to understand what we are as 'imagining' beings.

As has been observed, a great deal of philosophical work has been done in order to move away from a concept of reason encapsulated in a philosophy of the subject – as it is signalled, terminologically speaking, by the passage from the term 'reason' to that, more context oriented, of 'rationality' (Arnason 1994). While a lot of work has been done on the concept of rationality and its possible contribution to the project of autonomy,

nothing similar has been done on the concept of imagination. In comparison to reason, imagination has remained a marginal topic in recent philosophical debates. However, just as the move from a philosophy of the subject to a new emphasis on context has led from a theory of 'reason' to one of 'rationality', so we have seen a parallel development from a theory of 'imagination' to a theory of the 'imaginary'.

Psychoanalysis and structuralism both contributed to this development – the former with a new emphasis on the complexity of psychic life and the latter with a new attention to the products of imagination. Myths, fables, fairy tales, rituals, totemic practices, all have been analysed as part of the social imaginary – one just has to think of Freud's and Jung's contribution in this direction or, more recently, of the structuralist analyses inspired by Lévi-Strauss.⁷ And this certainly contributed to a deeper understanding of the concept of the imaginary. The most important result is perhaps the move away from a view of the self as a mere sum of separated faculties – a view that prevailed in most modern philosophers, from Bacon to Kant.

The risk, however, in putting too much emphasis on contexts is that of exchanging a problematic metaphysics of the subject for an equally problematic metaphysics of the context. The point is to find a way to keep the balance between the context and the subject, on the one hand, and between the different subjects and different contexts, on the other. Two risks must be avoided. The first is the temptation to recompose the context in a subject, even if this is understood in a more complex way. For instance, this may happen by considering the different products of the social imaginary as mere results of universal features of the human mind, be they universal complexes (Freud) or universal linguistic structures (Lévi-Strauss). The danger here is subsuming the context in a metaphysics of the subject that, even if it is understood in a more complex way (as encompassing both a conscious and an unconscious life), is still a subject conceived of as separated from the reality that he or she is facing.

The second risk is to recompose the subject into the context, or the contexts, in plural. For instance, in many conceptions that have been inspired by Romanticism or by the second Wittgenstein's philosophy of language, the subject is dissolved into single, self-enclosed forms of life. These, as a consequence, are then often seen as reciprocally incommunicable contexts (Von Savigny 1991; Coulter 1999). The basic argument here is that if meanings derive from language-games and if these are basically encapsulated in forms of life that are separated from one another, then no communication is possible among them.⁸ The problem, however, is that such a view reifies contexts, as if they were self-enclosed units, and therefore ultimately exchanges the point of view of a philosophy of the subject for a metaphysic of the context, that is, for a form of solipsism on a larger scale.

The philosophical problems emerging in the passage from a theory of imagination as an individual faculty to that of imaginary as a social context can perhaps be illustrated by comparing the approach of two thinkers who decisively emphasized the nexus between our capacity to imagine and politics, more or less broadly understood: Hannah Arendt and Cornelius Castoriadis. As we will see, this passage proved to be insufficient and it is only by moving one step further, towards a theory of the imaginal, that the insights of both Arendt and Castoriadis can be recovered to come to terms with the contemporary transformations.

Again, part of the problem is due to the little attention that philosophers devoted to the concept of imagination/imaginary in their emphasis on that of reason/rationality. It is perhaps emblematic that one of the potentially most powerful philosophical theories of political imagination remained unwritten. The project of Hannah Arendt in the last years of her life was that of a theory of judgement based on the concept of imagination, but she died before she could fully develop her theory. Instead of a fully-fledged theory, that could have represented the ripest fruit of the heritage of phenomenology, we are left with a few fragments of a possible theory.⁹ By recovering Kant's intuitions, in particular as they are developed in the first edition of his *Critique of Pure Reason*,¹⁰ Arendt emphasized the power of imagination for both cognition and action. Imagination is the faculty that mediates between universal and particular by providing both schemata for cognition and exemplars for action (Arendt 1982: 72 ff; 79–85). As Kant has already argued, in order to explain how it is possible that a series of sense data can be recognized as a unitary object – say, a table – we need to possess a mental image of what a table must be like. Arendt argues:

This can be conceived of as a Platonic idea or Kantian schema; that is, one has before the eyes of one's mind a schematic or merely *formal table* shape to which every table somehow must conform. Or one proceeds, conversely, from the many tables one has seen in one's life, strips them of all secondary qualities, and the remainder is a table-in-general, containing the minimum properties common to all tables: the *abstract table*. One more possibility is left, and this enters into judgements that are not cognitions: one may encounter or think of some table that one judges to be the best possible table and take this table as the example of how tables actually should be: the *exemplary table* ('example' comes from *eximere*, 'to single out some particular'). This exemplar is and remains a particular that in its very particularity reveals the generality that otherwise could not be defined. Courage is like Achilles, etc. (Arendt 1982: 76–7)¹¹

Examples are thus fundamental not just in cognition but also for action. This is because, as she openly puts it by recovering a Kantian expression, 'examples are the go-cart of judgements'. They are what sustain us when we formulate judgements. 'The example is the particular that contains in itself, or is supposed to contain, a concept or a general rule' (Arendt 1982: 84). How is one able to judge an act as courageous? If one were an ancient Greek, Arendt argues, he would have in the depths of his mind the example of Achilles. Imagination is central here because it makes present to our mind what is not in front of us. If we say of somebody that he is good, we probably have in the back of our mind an example such as Saint Francis or Jesus of Nazareth or some other archetypical example of goodness (Arendt 1982: 84).

However, imagination, as Arendt argues elsewhere, is also central to human life from another point of view. As the faculty to make present what is potentially absent, it is at the very basis of the possibility of action. As she points out at the beginning of 'Lying in Politics', a characteristic of human action is that it always begins something new in the world – and this does not mean that it starts *ex nihilo*, but simply that it adds something. This capacity to begin something new depends, in its turn, on our capacity to mentally remove ourselves from where we physically are located and imagine that things might

well be different from what they actually are (Arendt 1972: 5). This capacity to change facts, or to act, therefore fundamentally depends on imagination. But, as Arendt observes, from the same faculty also depends the capacity, so often met in politics, to deny factual truth (Arendt 1972: 5). Hence the ambivalence of imagination, the fact that it can be a means for emancipation and thus critique of what is given, but also for the subjection to it. Otherwise put, imagination can be both a source of autonomy and heteronomy.

Yet, the philosopher who most systematically emphasized the need to rethink the concept of imagination in connection to the project of autonomy is not Arendt, but Cornelius Castoriadis. Furthermore, he also contributed to the passage from a theory of imagination (as it still seems to be the one that Arendt would have developed) to one of the imaginary. Castoriadis' reasoning was quite straightforward: all acts, both individual and collective, without which no society could survive – labour, consumption, love, war, etc. – are impossible outside of a symbolic network, even though they are not always directly symbols themselves (Castoriadis 1987: 117). Any society continually defines and redefines its needs, and no society can ever survive outside of the imaginary significations that constitute it and are constituted by it. The institution of a society presupposes the institution of imaginary significations that must, in principle, be able to provide meaning to whatever presents itself: any irruption of raw chaos can be treated as a sign of something and thus interpreted away. Even events that collide with the given imaginary significations can be subject of a symbolic processing: transgression of social rules become 'illnesses', alien societies can become 'strangers', 'savages' or even 'impious' (Castoriadis 1991).

At the same time, a major threat remains to the instituted society: its own creativity. The merit of Castoriadis' concept of radical social imaginary is to point out that the *instituting* social imaginary is always at the same time *instituted*. No society could ever exist if the individuals created by the society itself had not created it. Society can exist concretely only through the fragmentary and complementary incarnation and incorporation of its institution and its imaginary significations in the living, talking and acting individuals of that society. Athenian society is nothing but the Athenians, Castoriadis observes; without them, it is only remnants of a transformed landscape, the debris of marble and vases, indecipherable inscriptions, and worn statues fished out of the Mediterranean. But the Athenians are Athenians only by means of the *nomos* of the *polis*. It is in this relationship between an instituted society on the one hand – which infinitely transcends the totality of the individuals that 'compose' it, but can actually exist only by being 'realized' in the individuals that it produces – and these individuals, on the other, that we experience an unprecedented type of relationship which cannot be thought of under the categories of the whole and its parts, the set and its elements and, even less, the universal and the particular (Castoriadis 1991: 145).

However, Castoriadis seems to contradict this view when he speaks of an 'absolute scission' between the two poles of the instituted/instituting social imaginary: the social-historical on the one hand, and what he calls the 'psyche' or 'psychical monad' on the other (see, for instance, Castoriadis 1987: 204ff). The psyche is said to be monadic because it is 'pure representational/affective/intentional flux', indeterminate and, in principle, unmasterable. Drawing inspiration from the theory but also his own experience

as a psychoanalyst, Castoriadis argues that it is only through an always-incomplete violent and forceful process of socialization that a social individual can be produced. This happens through a process of schooling that starts with the very first encounter with language (in the first place, the language of the mother). Through socialization, the psyche is forced to give up its initial objects and to invest in (*cathect*) socially instituted objects, rules and the world. It is through the internalization of the worlds and the imaginary significations created by society that an 'individual', properly speaking, is created out of a 'screaming monster' (Castoriadis 1991: 148).

As has been observed, Castoriadis' thesis about the monadic isolation and the fundamental 'heterogeneity' between the psyche and society seems to lead to a highly problematic, and thus untenable, metaphysical opposition (Habermas 1987: 327). Once we find ourselves within the monadic isolation of the unconscious, it becomes difficult even to explain how communication is possible in the first place (Whitebook 1989).¹² However, as we will see in the next paragraph, one can recover Castoriadis' insights into the role of the instituting and instituted social imaginary without relying on such metaphysical assumptions. In particular, even within a view of the self inspired by psychoanalysis there is no need to conceive of the psyche in terms of monadic isolation. Rather, it could be argued that our basic instinct when we enter the world is to *relate* to the other – in particular to the figure of the mother to look for nourishment. We are not monadic selves that become dependent on each other through a violent socialization. On the contrary: we are from the very beginning *dependent* beings, notwithstanding our monadic drives.¹³

To sum up, the merit of Castoriadis' theory is twofold. In the first place, he distances himself from the view of imagination as representation of what is absent, which still prevails in Arendt. It is not by chance that Castoriadis characterizes his view of imagination as 'radical'. The term 'radical' must be understood in both the political and the philosophical sense. The political meaning points to the need of rethinking imagination in relation to the project of autonomy, which, as we will see, is a crucial concern for Castoriadis. On the more general philosophical level, the term radical has the function of stressing that, as Aristotle maintained, together with an imitative and reproductive or combinatory '*phantasia*', there is also what can be called a primary imagination. This consists in the faculty of producing images in the largest possible sense (that of 'forms', '*Bilder*'), that is, images without which there would not be any thought at all, and which, therefore, precede any thought. Imagination does not imply therefore in the first place the non-existence of the objects of imagination, even though we can also have images that do not correspond to anything in the external world. Imagination is before the distinction between 'real' and 'fictitious'. In other words, it is because radical imagination exists that 'reality' exists for us – and, therefore, one can add, it exists *tout court* (Castoriadis 1994: 321–2).¹⁴

In the second place, the merit of Castoriadis is that of problematizing the view of imagination as an individual faculty, as he does by systematically focusing on the concept of social imaginary. The latter points out that there is not a subject, on the one hand, and the reality, on the other. As we have already noted, the passage from the concept of *imagination* to that of *imaginary* reflects a change from a *subject*-oriented approach to a *context*-oriented one (Arnason 1994). Castoriadis' concept of the social

imaginary also has the function of underlining the idea that the definition of 'reality' itself depends on the instituting and instituted social imaginary, and not vice versa (Castoriadis 1991: 147). The fact that the word 'reality' has been conceived in so many different ways shows that all societies have somehow constituted their 'reality'.¹⁵ To sum up, whilst Arendt remained linked to both the idea of imagination as an individual faculty and that of imagination as a faculty to represent what is absent, Castoriadis problematizes both ideas by arguing that no individual faculty exists outside of a social context and that the latter comes before the very distinction between what is real and unreal.

Otherwise put, the definition of the 'real' is the result of the dialectics between the instituted and the instituting side of the social imaginary. Behind this idea there is a complex view of the relationship between the individuals, who can only exist within imaginary significations, and a social imaginary, which can only exist in and through individuals themselves. Yet, this complexity, which, as Castoriadis himself points out, cannot be reduced to simple relationships such as that between whole and part, the general and the particular, stands at odds with Castoriadis' own idea of a complete heterogeneity between the monadic psyche and society. Again the problem is that of how to conceive of the relationship between the subjects and the contexts.

As we have seen, the concept of imagination stands within a philosophy of the subject, whereas that of imaginary signals a new distance from such a view. The danger, however, is to fall in an equally problematic metaphysics of the contexts. There seems to be no way out of this difficulty: if one starts with 'imagination' conceived of as an individual faculty, then the problem is how to conceive of the relationship between individual imagination and the social context. If we begin with the concept of the social imaginary, then the problem is how to reconcile it with the free imagination of individuals. The problem seems unsolvable and Castoriadis' metaphysical opposition between society and the monadic psyche is the sign that there is no easy way out from it.

II. The imaginal and the political

A first direction of research to find a way out of the philosophical *impasse* described above is to begin with a radical questioning of the very starting points: 'imagination' as an individual faculty and 'imaginary' as a social product. If we conceive of human beings as the always problematic result of a tension between the two poles, as beings equally dependent and independent, social and monadic, as I think we should, then we need a new concept. After a passage from 'imagination' to 'imaginary', we need to take a further step and focus on what we can call the 'imaginal'. If imagination is an individual faculty and the imaginary a social context, 'imaginal' is simply what is made out of images, an adjective denoting something that can be the product of both an individual faculty and a social context. Otherwise put, 'imaginal' is simply the quality of a product that stands in between the two.

The term 'imaginal' has been introduced into the current philosophical debate (mainly in France) by Henri Corbin, who derived it from Islamic philosophy. Here, the Latin term *mundus imaginabilis*, from the Arab '*alam al-mithal*', denotes all that is in between the world of pure intellectual intuitions and that of mere sense perceptions

(Corbin 1979). Corbin, like others after him, uses the concept for specific purposes (to recover the intuition of Islamic philosophy), but for us it is sufficient to note that the concept of imaginal points to the fact that between pure intellect and the forms of sensibility, to use a Kantian expression, there is something else, which also has a cognitive function and cannot simply be relegated to the ambit of the unreal and the fictitious.

The main purpose of Corbin, and of others who have followed him,¹⁶ has been to distinguish between 'imaginal' (*imaginal*), as that which is simply made of images, from 'imaginary' (*imaginaire*), which in French, the language in which Corbin writes, means what is purely fictitious, unreal. The same distinction holds in the English language, where 'imaginal', according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, denotes primarily what pertains to imagination or to mental images, whereas 'imaginary' primarily means what exists only in fancy and has no real existence, and therefore is opposed to 'real', 'actual' (Simpson and Wiener 1989, Vol. II: 668).

To conclude on this point, the concept of imaginal points to the fact that the content of our images is not necessarily unreal, although this may also be the case (and here, as we will see, lies the ambivalence of the imaginal). 'Imaginal' is in the first place opposed to 'imaginary' as an adjective denoting a quality of images. But 'imaginal' is also distinguished from 'imaginary' as a substantive, because what is simply made of images can be both the product of a social imaginary and of an individual faculty.

What is the relationship between the imaginal and the political?¹⁷ As I will now show, it is in the perspective of a theory of the imaginal that we can also recover some of the insights provided by Arendt and Castoriadis as to the systematic link between politics and our capacity to imagine. If we understand politics, in its broadest meaning, as whatever pertains to the *polis*, to the decisions concerning the fate of a community, the link is quite clear. In this sense, politics coincides with the public, and therefore also includes all that concerns the social and the political.¹⁸ Politics thus understood depends on the imaginal because it is only by imagining the public that it exists. This holds for large communities such as modern states, but also for small ones. If the former are patently 'imaginal beings' because it is evident that only by imagining them can one perceive a sense of belonging with complete strangers, the same holds for the latter: even in small communities, based on face-to-face relationships, you need to imagine a community in order to make it exist out of a simple collection of individuals. Communities exist because we imagine they exist. What you see gather together in Athens' *agora* is a set of bodies, not (yet) a *polis*. I say *imaginal* beings, and not *imagined* beings, to point out that they are not only the result of an action on the side of the individuals, but always also what shapes the imagination of individuals.¹⁹

To sum up, the political is imaginal because it depends on the possibility to imagine commonalities, but also, as we will now see by turning to Arendt, because it depends on the possibility to free oneself of one's own particularities. In her political reading of Kant's notion of taste, Arendt stressed precisely this point. Our capacity to form images is what mediates between the particular and the universal in judgement and therefore is what enables us to take the point of view of others. As she wrote by commenting on Kant's *Critique of Judgement*,

an enlarged mentality is the condition *sine qua non* of right judgement; one's community sense makes it possible to enlarge one's mentality. Negatively speaking, this means that one is able to abstract from private conditions and circumstances, which, as far as judgement is concerned, limit and inhibit its exercise. Private conditions condition us; imagination and reflection enable us to liberate ourselves from them and to attain that relative impartiality that is the specific virtue of judgement. (Arendt 1982: 73)

Thus, the imaginal is what enables us to perceive the being-in-common but also, at the same time, what makes it exist. If we cannot take the point of view of others, to put ourselves in their shoes, to assume an enlarged mentality, then no political *lato sensu* can exist. However, the imaginal is also central to politics, if we understand it in the more restricted sense of an activity characterized by the potential recourse to legitimate coercion.²⁰ Political power is a specific form of power, where power in general is the capacity to make somebody do what he or she would not otherwise do. In this sense, political power differs from other forms of power precisely because it can have recourse to legitimate physical coercion. But to be perceived as *legitimate*, political power needs to make sense within the imaginary significations of a society. If it fails to do so, it ceases to be political power and becomes mere violence, physical force. This is ultimately the reason why it rests on the imaginal.

As Castoriadis also notes, political power (he calls it at times also 'explicit power') is essential to every society. This is so because the fundamental ground-power exercised by the instituting dimension of a society can never completely succeed in its attempt to forge compliant subjects. The instituted dimension of the social-historical will always re-emerge, because no society can ever completely subsume individuals in itself. This is the reason why, in Castoriadis' view, there has always been a dimension of the social institution in charge of this essential function: to re-establish order, to ensure the life and operation of society against whatever endangers them (Castoriadis 1991: 154).

Whether such a power is necessary in principle, as Castoriadis argues, or not, it is indubitable that, as far as it exists, it needs to rely on the imaginal. To put it in Castoriadis' words,

beneath the monopoly of legitimate violence lies the monopoly of the valid signification. The throne of the Lord of signification stands above the throne of the Lord of violence. The voice of the arms can only begin to be heard amid the crash of the collapsing edifice of institutions. And for violence to manifest itself effectively, the word – the injunctions of the existing power – has to keep its magic over the 'group of armed men' (Engels). The fourth company of the Pavlovsky regiment, guards to His Majesty the Czar, and the Semenovskiy regiment, were the strongest pillars of the throne, until those days of February 26 and 27, 1917, when they fraternized with the crowd and turned their guns against their officers. The mightiest army in the world will not protect you if it is not loyal to you – and the ultimate foundation of its loyalty is its imaginary belief in your imaginary legitimacy. (Castoriadis 1991: 155–6)

There can be innumerable sources of legitimacy. If we take, for instance, Weber's typology of the bases of legitimacy (tradition, faith, enactment), we see that all of them rely in one way or another on the imaginal (Weber 1978, vol. I: 36–8, 212 ff.). In the case

of charismatic power, people obey commands because they have a faith in the sacred or heroic image of the person exercising it. The imaginal is also crucial in traditional power: no tradition can be respected without imagining it at the same time. What is a tradition in the end if not an imaginal being? Finally, the imaginal is also crucial for bureaucratic power. In order to believe in the legality of institutions, you need to possess a certain image of what law must be like, an exemplary law, to use Arendt's expression. It comes as no surprise if we discover then that even law has always had its politics of images (Douzinas and Nead 1999).

If the imaginal is essential to the political it is so with all the ambivalences that had been noted about imagination already a long time ago. The imaginal is radical because it can make present what is absent in the double sense of creating something new, but also of denying facts. The creation of images is central to our capacity for action, to begin something new in the world, but also to our ability to lie. In both cases, we deny what is given: in the first case, by creating something new, in the second by concealing it. Hence the necessity to rethink the imaginal in connection with the project of autonomy. It is in the radical capacity to question one's own images that lies the possibility of critique. Nobody pointed this out better than Castoriadis. Also guided by his own reading of the history of the Athenian *polis*, he pushed the argument as far as to postulate a distinction between the concept of the political and that of politics. While 'political' denotes politics as commonly understood (what Castoriadis also called 'explicit power'), politics, such as it was created by the Greeks, amounts to the explicit putting into question of the established institution of society (Castoriadis 1991: 159). Not by chance, then, he attributed to the Greeks the discovery of both politics and philosophy: Greek thought amounts to the putting into question of the most important dimension of the institution of society, the representations and norms of the tribe and the very notion of truth.

Whether the Greeks invented both philosophy and politics in Castoriadis' sense is at least disputable.²¹ But even if they did so, we should rather call it democratic politics. The fact that Castoriadis talks about 'true politics' or 'politics properly conceived' (Castoriadis 1991: 160), that he needs to add those two little words, 'true' and 'properly', is the sign that he is trying to persuade us of something that goes against common understanding. In contrast to Castoriadis, I think one should be allowed to violate the maxim *nomina non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem*, if one needs to. But in this case, there is a name for what Castoriadis means with 'true politics', and this is democracy. We can therefore stick to our previous (and more common) definition of politics.

III. Contemporary transformations

Let us now see how the nexus of the political and the imaginal changes within contemporary conditions. On the one hand, contemporary politics is overwhelmed by the imaginal. It depends on images not only because images mediate our being in the world and are therefore crucial for any sort of communication – political communication being no exception. There seems to be something more, a sort of hypertrophy of the imaginal, in the first place due to the massive diffusion of the media. If one thinks of what politics used to be before streams of images started to enter our homes through television, it is

clear that there is a huge change in the nature of politics itself. Our political experience has become inconceivable outside of the continual flows of images that appear on our screens. Images are no longer only what mediate our doing politics but have become an end in themselves, that risk doing politics in our place. One only has to think of the so-called mass marketing of politics and what democracy has become in an age of manufactured images on an industrial scale (Newman 1999). As Meyer observed, independent of the real impact of the media on people's mind, the fact is that politicians behave as if the images transmitted by the media were the reality itself. No policy, no decision is taken without first, and foremost, considering how this will affect their image in the media (Meyer 2002).

On the other hand, politics seems to lack imagination in the sense of the capacity to question what is given. In an epoch when politics is reduced to governance, to simple administration within a general neo-liberal consensus, there is no space to imagine things differently.²² This apparent paradox is in fact the result of a hypertrophy of the more *passive* side of the imaginal, which has happened at the expense of the more *active* side of it. We are so image-saturated that it becomes increasingly more difficult to create new images. This is the consequence of a change in both the *quantity* and the *quality* of the images produced in a global epoch. With regard to the first, we cannot but notice a decisive increase in the quantity of images that enter our life. In particular, the quantity of images produced by the media has reached such a proportion as to determine also a qualitative leap: images have become an end in themselves.

Many authors, for instance, have noticed the ritual function of elections. In virtue of their mere repetition, elections reinforce a certain model of society by providing it with visible continuity. But today the quantity of images that accompanies elections in most western countries has become such that the spectacle completely prevails over the content. Images are too many and they need to be selected in some way. It is the golden rule of the audience that does the job: only those images that can capture people's attention are selected. Hence, the prevalence of the register of the spectacle. However, the battle that is conducted on the stage of our screens on the occasion of elections hides the fact that no real battle is taking place, because the real clash is not among the official candidates (who most often have very similar programmes), but outside of the screens. The real fight is between the political options that are admitted and those that are left out. The decisive distance is not that between candidates, but between those who get a role in the spectacle and those who are left out of it.²³

In the second place, there has also been an intrinsic *qualitative* change in the nature of images, a change that is likely to deeply affect the link between the political and the imaginal. Behind the virtual revolution there is indeed a deep change in the nature of images: not only have images become commodities, which are therefore subjected to the laws and treatment of all other commodities, but they are now also malleable in a way that has never been the case. Images are not only *reproducible* in series, but they are also *modifiable* up to a point where they can be completely falsified. In other words, images have completely lost their link with the 'here' and 'now'.

A way to illustrate this point is to start from Benjamin's remarks on the work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility. Benjamin begins with the observation that, as a consequence of their reproducibility (mainly due to photography and cinema), works of

art have lost their 'aura'. The aura is defined as 'a strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be' (Benjamin 2002: 104–5). Artistic images have lost their being '*hic et nunc*', here and now. A piece of music can be repeated in different spaces and times in a substantially identical form so that we can say that this is precisely that concert, played by X and Y in the moment Z, and not another one. Similarly, a photograph can be reproduced *ad infinitum* without it being possible to distinguish between the original and the copies.

With the advent of virtual images we have reached a further level. Photography and cinema, it can be argued, still had a connection with the *hic et nunc*. A picture needed to be taken before being reproduced just as a film needed to be shot in the first place. Even if they could both be cut and assembled in different ways at different times, they still had their original here and now, the moment they were taken, turned, created. All this is overcome by virtuality. There is no *hic et nunc* in a virtual image, and therefore also no authenticity to be preserved, and no original to orient us. Virtual images are not objects that can be created at once, but ongoing processes. There is no original creation, but only a process of perpetual maintenance.

One of the problems connected with this transformation is the fact that images still tend to present themselves as carriers of a *hic et nunc*. Many of the pathologies of the imaginal of our time are linked to the fact that there is no easy way to determine the content of reality of images. Still, there is also a potential for new form of democratization in all this. Everybody can potentially modify a virtual image. If a film needed expensive equipment to be made, now a mobile phone seems to suffice.

Perhaps it is too early to fully grasp the implication of such a transformation. There are, however, signs which seem to point to a very different direction from the one taken at the time of Benjamin. Commenting on the possible positive consequences of the transformation he witnessed, Benjamin observed that the technology of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the sphere of tradition: by replicating the work many times over, it substitutes a mass existence for a unique existence. In his view, the result of this process should be the shattering of every form of tradition. Benjamin's reasoning is quite clear: if tradition depends on the authenticity of things and if mass reproduction destroys authenticity, then it must also destroy tradition.

He thought that this is most evident in film. The social impact of film, particularly in its most positive form, has a 'destructive, cathartic side', namely 'the liquidation of the value of tradition in the cultural heritage' (Benjamin 2002: 104). By commenting on the possible site for such a liquidation, he observed:

This phenomenon is most apparent in the great historical films. It is assimilating ever more advanced positions in its spread. When Abel Gance fervently proclaimed in 1927, 'Shakespeare, Rembrandt, Beethoven will make films. . . . All legends, all mythologies, and all myths, all founders of religions, indeed, all religions . . . attend their celluloid resurrections, and the heroes are pressing at the gates', he was inviting the reader, no doubt unawares, to witness a comprehensive liquidation. (Benjamin 2002: 104)

The sarcastic tone of the passage shows how certain Benjamin was about his prediction. He wrote this passage between late December 1935 and the beginning of February 1936.

Almost a century later, we can say that he was completely mistaken, or that at least the technological developments that have followed have rendered his analysis antiquated. Indeed, not only have we had geniuses such as Beethoven and Rembrandt making films, but, moreover, we are witnessing a resurrection of all sorts of myths and religions in and through the imaginal. We live in an epoch when myths, such as nationalist myths or even that of a clash between civilizations, proliferate in the media (Bottici 2007). Similarly, we are observing a new politicization of religion that goes hand in hand with its mediatization (Bottici 2009). Both myth and religion have, so to speak, been resurrected. The only difference is that they are *virtual*, not *celluloid* resurrections.

To conclude, a theory of the imaginal can help us overcoming the *impasse* of the opposition between theories of imagination as an individual faculty and theories of the imaginary as a social context. As such, it is also the tool most adapted to capture the nature of the conceptual link between politics and our capacity to produce images. This, in turn, can also throw light on the paradox from which we started, that of a political world full of images, but deprived of imagination: it is because we are image-saturated that we lack the capacity to create radically alternative images of our present, and future, political life.

Notes

1. On the genealogy of the concept of imagination, see Cocking (1991), Engell (1981) Ferraris (1996), Fleury (2006), Friese (2001), Maguire (2006), Robinson and Rundell (1994), Vattimo (1999b).
2. On *phantasia* in Greek philosophy, see Cocking (1991), Ferraris (1996) and Watson (1988).
3. Maguire criticizes this reading by saying that Pascal has a more nuanced view of imagination (Maguire 2006: 17–59). Still, it can hardly be denied that what emerges in this fragment is a rather negative view of imagination. Among the supporters of the reading of Pascal as a critic of imagination, see Robinson and Rundell (1994: 120) and Cocking (1994: 265).
4. For a detailed reconstruction of this semantic break see Cocking (1991), Ferraris (1996), Friese (2001), Vattimo (1999b).
5. On this point, see Cocking (1991), Engell (1981). Novalis, for instance, sees in imagination a power that can liberate from the senses and understanding: while the latter are somehow mechanical, imagination is a source of freedom. As he openly put it, ‘imagination is this wonderful sense that can replace all senses for us – and that stand that much already under the power of our will. The outward-oriented senses appear to be entirely governed by mechanical laws – imagination, in contrast, is evidently not tied to the presence and touch of external stimuli’ (Novalis 1977, II: 650; trans. mine). Art, as the domain created by the freedom of imagination, can therefore bring together what has been separated by Enlightenment.
6. I have dwelled at length on this critique of Romanticism in Bottici (2007: 62–80).
7. See, for instance, Freud (1950), Kerényi and Jung (1963), Lévi-Strauss (1990).
8. In fact, as I have argued elsewhere, Wittgenstein is very ambiguous on the concept of forms of life (Bottici 2007: 94–7).
9. On the French side, Husserl’s phenomenological intuitions on the role of imagination have been developed by Sartre. In both his writings on the topic, however, Sartre remained linked to the concept of imagination as a faculty to represent what does not exist, which, as we will see, is a very limited view of imagination (Sartre 1936, 1940).

10. On Kant's treatment of the concept of imagination, see Arnason (1994), Engell (1981), Rundell (1994b).
11. On the importance of the notion of 'example' see Ferrara (2008). Ferrara, however, criticizes Arendt's analogy between examples and cognitive schemata.
12. In fact, Habermas is in no better situation. Castoriadis starts with the monadic isolation and then the problem becomes to establish how communication is possible; Habermas starts with the fact of communication, but then the problem is how this relates to the unconscious. On this point see Whitebook (1989).
13. There is no space here to develop this point further. I only observe that the view of human beings as dependent beings derives from Gehlen's concept of *Mangelwesen*: we are dependent beings because we are *deficient* beings, always incomplete and insufficient to ourselves (Gehlen 1988).
14. The reason why imagination came to be associated with the idea of fictitiousness is that it can create *ex nihilo* – not *in nihilo* or *cum nihilo*. The western ensemble logic, which is based on the identity assumption *ex nihilo nihil*, could not, as a consequence, but conceive of imagination as essentially non-existence. To this identity and set logic, which could never account for the fact that when 'x = x' it is always 'x = non X', Castoriadis counterpoises the logic of magmas. The concept of magma points to the fact that significations are not 'determinate beings' but webs of reference (*faisceaux de renvois*). These are certainly always determinable but they never are completely determinate (Castoriadis 1987: 221).
15. Suffice it here to think that during the Middle Ages the word *realitas* meant 'perfection', so that the most real being was God and the less real our sense perceptions that are never perfect, whereas with the modern epoch the term came to assume the opposite meaning. I have reconstructed this passage in more detail in Chapters II and III of Bottici (2007).
16. The term has been recovered by Hillman in the context of his project of a renewed Jungian psychology and therefore with a slightly different meaning (Hillman 1972), and more recently by Fleury (2006), who remains closer to Corbin's texts.
17. I am using here 'political' as simply the adjective of 'politics'. I will clarify how this relates to Castoriadis' own usage later on in the text.
18. For a reconstruction of this concept of politics, which derives from the ancient Greek term *politikos*, see, for instance, Bobbio (1990: 800).
19. The reference here is obviously to Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1991).
20. For this definition see, for instance, Weber (1978, I, § 17, IV §1, 2).
21. For instance, I have argued elsewhere that the very idea of a Greek 'invention' of philosophy is rather problematic (Bottici 2007: 20–43).
22. The term governance was coined in the 1980s to denote the politics of the World Bank in a juridical context that denied the World Bank the right to exercise functions of government. Since then, 'governance' has become synonymous with a way of doing politics which does not imply government and therefore quite often amounts to mere technique (Bottici 2006).
23. The reason why surveys on the role of the media in elections often fail to catch their real impact is that they often simply assess the extent to which media have influenced preferences for one or another official candidate. In fact the power of the media comes well before, in making certain political options possible or not.

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