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978-1-107-02575-2 - Imagined Democracies: Necessary Political Fictions

Yaron Ezrahi

Excerpt

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Introduction

[Men] are enclined [*sic*] to suppose, and feign unto themselves, several kinds of Powers Invisible; and to stand in awe of their own imaginations, and in time of distress to invoke them; as also in time of an expected good success to give them thanks; making the creatures of their own fancy their Gods.

– Hobbes, *Leviathan*

A democratic society cannot fully or at every moment be a democracy. Its precarious existence depends upon mutually reinforcing democratic ideas, political culture, political imaginaries, institutions, and practices. These very elements, which make a system of government democratic, almost never fully coexist in any society. *A democracy, like any other political regime, must be imagined and performed by multiple agencies in order to exist.* Like a symphony, democracy has to be performed reasonably well in order to be realized as a political world. Beethoven's Fifth Symphony cannot be properly rendered in a performance of missing instruments, where the string section lacks leadership, the conductor is tired and not properly focused, the music accompanied by a winter ensemble of coughing listeners in the back rows and by a mobile phone on the left ringing a countermelody.

The performance of democracy usually falls short of its original score. Expected and unexpected interruptions and constraints always ensure a gap between the ideals of a government by, of, and for the people and the ability and desire of the numerous individuals and groups on whom it depends to actually fully enact and institutionalize a democratic political vision. Like the interpretation of a musical work, the interpretation of a written democratic constitution is often contested, and its performance is often dominated by practices that carry it far beyond (or below) the initial vision. The history of modern politics is full of examples of great yet unperformed written democratic constitutions used as a cover for authoritarian politics. Democracy is a particular kind of political order that requires the invention and embodiment of correspondingly particular types of agents (such as citizens and public opinion), procedures, and institutions (such as elections, judicial processes, parliamentary debates, and a free

press). Moreover, these agents, institutions, and procedures must be reasonably co-performed in order for a regime to exist as a democracy.

Similarly, a monarchy cannot fully or always be a monarchy. Like a democracy, it requires numerous individuals and groups to institutionalize and enact its basic political imaginary, to perform monarchic politics, monarchic law, monarchic aesthetics and discourse. In western societies, monarchy depended on rituals such as the anointment of a new king (by dabbing consecrated oil on his head) at the coronation ceremony; on verbal and figurative representations of the image of the king as a human god, often modeled on Christ, a figure linking heaven and earth; on the unique splendor of the monarch's garments and residence; and on nonmaterial elements such as the rationalization of the monarchy by court intellectuals and legal experts. All these factored in the performance of the monarchy as a regime. In contrast to the "reality effects" temporarily produced in the theater to capture audience attention and assist in its suspension of disbelief, in any political order, I argue here, what is perceived by the lay public as political reality is actually created by the largely unconscious public's own recursive performative political imagination.

For many centuries in the West and in other parts of the world, monarchies were maintained by a widely believed imaginary, the collective fiction of the divine right of kings. Monarchies were founded on an imaginary enacted in a host of versions by specific rituals, tropes, and institutions. The divine right of kings was a particularly effective collective imaginary in its combination of the already tested and familiar powers of the religious imagination with the earthly political necessities of government.

In the course of time, the sustainability of the political imaginary of the monarchy and the conditions for its effective performance in Western societies have eroded. The rituals, institutions, and intellectual arguments that sustained it have lost much of their power, while another imaginary – the right of popular sovereignty and its supporting practices – has permeated the minds and attitudes of modern publics. Against the pressure of this anti-hierarchical political imaginary, a few clever monarchs initially attempted adjustments in order to survive, incorporating some democratic melodies within the symphony of the monarchy.

Political actors are constantly anxious to reinforce their audience's willing suspension of disbelief. Frederick the Great, for instance, noting new winds blowing, made rhetorical and symbolic gestures recognizing the value of equality and the public good and, like some other European kings, seemed to accommodate the idea that he had been, at least symbolically, elected by his people. But as the imaginary of popular sovereignty was increasingly performed by social and political groups, legal and political theorists, parliamentary institutions, and other democratic cultural and political agencies, the new show turned the surviving kings into mere anachronistic remnants, symbolic or aesthetic, of a past historical performance.

Like all forms of government, monarchic and democratic regimes must be extensively performed in self-sustenance, while the conditions of their

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respective performances have always been unstable and only partially favorable. Moreover, a regime that is for the most part democratic may, at moments such as wartime, be performed as an authoritarian regime, and an authoritarian regime may have its democratic moments. Awareness of the fluidity and complexity of the performance of any particular type of regime should lead to a more persuasive account of the ways regimes are enacted and transformed. One question I would like to pose is how to account for the historical transformations behind shifts from the performance of monarchic reigns to the performance of democratic regimes in the West. Are we currently witnessing the kind of changes that could undermine the fundamental conditions that provide the basis for continued enactments of democratic regimes?

Contemplating the monarchic past from within a polity like ours, governed by the imaginary of popular sovereignty and its rich institutional and rhetorical articulations, we can, as outsiders, recognize the fictive and performative foundations of the preceding monarchic political world. But as inhabitants of the democratic order regulated by the imaginary of self-government by the people, it is more difficult for us to recognize the fictive-performative foundations of our own political world. By fictive I do not mean, of course, inconsequential.

I will argue that some political fictions become more real than others, insofar as they function as causes of political behavior and institutions. In the following chapters I define these causative fictions as *imaginaries*. *Political imaginaries*, for our purpose, refers to fictions, metaphors, ideas, images, or conceptions that acquire the power to regulate and shape political behavior and institutions in a particular society. The power of some such political fictions to become politically productive by generating performative scripts that orient behavior and pattern institutions is grounded, among other things, in their apparent congruence with aspects of political and social experience and expectations, their compatibility with norms that appear to legitimate their power, and their (unphilosophical) tolerance for inconsistencies. Although initially political fictions commonly suggest empirically baseless fabrications, some gain sufficient credibility and adherence to attain the status of performative imaginaries that produce behavior that, in turn, affirms them. We shall see that the degree of correspondence between publicly accessible political facts and the hegemonic political imaginaries needed to sustain a particular political world is surprisingly small. Both the technological availability of new mass media and the cultural processes that have undermined conventional modern imaginaries of reality and agency have opened the possibility of a new vocabulary of performative political imaginaries and the deployment of current ones, like democracy, in regions that have persistently resisted political modernism.

Moreover, in our western democratic world, the right of popular sovereignty is upheld by a host of rituals and imaginings to which the actual realities of power and representation only partly correspond. I shall pay much attention in this book to how the yawning gaps between normative imaginaries of politics and its practice have fed the recurrent accusations of theatricality and posturing against politicians. I argue that, to the extent that politics consists of the

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enactment of imaginaries that legitimate power and authority, theatricality in politics is more often constitutive of politically necessary fictions than a misrepresentation of given agencies and realities. Let us consider, for instance, the question of the boundaries and the composition of the people as a democratic agent, and what could constitute its legitimate representation. How is “the people” construed as the agent of popular sovereignty in contemporary society in comparison to earlier versions of democracy such as Toquevillian America? To what extent may public policies of democratic governments be said to be public beyond the gloss of political rhetoric and gestures through which they are screened? What could constitute reliable and workable definitions of the public interest as a guideline or criterion for the evaluation of decisions and actions in contemporary demographically, religiously, culturally, and normatively heterogeneous societies?

Later I explore these and other related questions under the assumption that the difference between monarchic and democratic states, as well as between them and other regime types, lies neither in a difference between a government ruled by fictions and a government upheld by facts, nor between a political order founded on false beliefs and another on true ones validated by empirical reality. I argue that the difference between a monarchy and a democracy, as well as other regimes, is not so much a difference between fictive or real political grounds as one between alternative reality-producing fictions, between types of regulative political imaginaries.

In politics, that which is collectively imagined produces real political facts, although, as I have indicated, only some of these facts are likely to correspond to the imaginary.¹ Alexis de Tocqueville observed in his *Democracy in America* (1835) that, whereas many of the political institutions and cultural forms of America are the products of a powerful hegemonic collective imaginary of equality, there are signs suggestive of a link between the American imaginary of equality and trends leading to despotic centralization of power. I shall devote much attention in this book to this ironic paradox, whereby values seemingly compatible with particular political imaginaries may contradict the values to which the political facts, produced by these very imaginaries, correspond.

The structure of the political order is always in a process of becoming, of dialectical and ambiguous relations to the imaginaries that sustain it and to the actual or potential imaginaries that subvert it. Given that this book focuses on the traits and shifts of the democratic political imagination, including its most recent turns, we, from within this political world, must negotiate our tendency to ignore the origin of what we experience as the facts of our common political reality by naturalizing products of our own collective political imagination. In order to better perform this task, we must first examine more closely

¹ For instructive discussions of such discrepancies see Edward L. Rubin, *Beyond Camelot: Rethinking Politics and Law For the Modern State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005) and Stephen P. Turner, *Liberal Democracy 3.0: Civil Society in an Age of Experts* (London: SAGE Publications, 2003).

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how the collective imagination works in politics and account for the power of some political imaginaries to become institutionalized and sustainable despite a flimsy correspondence to our experience while others remain unnaturalized or even unnaturalizable fictions.

In politics, as in life, we cannot think, reason, speak, or act, or even begin to experience the world without engaging the faculty of imagination. We imagine when we think, when we look, when we remember, and when we feel. By means of the imagination we transform and fix in our mind past experiences, shape our present ones, structure and focus our future orientations, postulate the theoretical entities we use to conceptualize, enjoy art, escape to utopias, or enter new worlds of meaning. The common equation of the imaginary with the merely fictive and illusory stems from latent ideological commitments deeply embedded in modern western culture that divide human experience between the real and the unreal.

The faculty of imagination does not recognize such boundaries.² Reflecting on reality and the imagination, Wallace Stevens says that “reality is life and life is society and the imagination and reality; that is to say, the imagination and society are inseparable.”³ The very division between the imaginary and the real is in itself a product of the creative, transcendent imagination as an all-encompassing human meta-faculty. The still widely held separation in our culture between reason and imagination, including the Cartesian or Kantian versions of the autonomy of rational reasoning and the subordination of the imagination to reason, are in themselves products of the imagination understood as a composing, decomposing, and recomposing faculty.

The devaluation of the imagination in relation to reason was often accompanied, especially during early modernity, by a description of the imagination as a mere material faculty activated by emanations from the body. By contrast, echoing the Platonic hierarchy between reason and imagination, reason was conceived as part of the immaterial mind and thus enjoyed a higher status. Both Descartes and Kant can be regarded, from our perspective, as the principal myth makers of the Enlightenment, similar to Augustine and Dante in relation to Christianity and to Wordsworth, Schelling, and Fichte in the creation of Romanticism.

The imagination may be divided into separate spheres, which correspond to different modes of imagining and to distinct types of imaginaries. Art and science can be regarded as such distinct spheres of the imagination. Art openly, even self-reflexively, performs as a natural domain of the imagination, free therefore to employ illusions beyond the span of common experience. Science constantly aims to conceal or erase the participatory creative and patterning

² See the insightful reflections on this point in David Ames Curtis (ed.), *The Castoriadis Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), pp. 196–217 and 319–37.

³ Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), p. 28.

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role of the imagination in the shaping of its foundations, its theories, and its very conceptions of phenomena, objects, and other facts.

Imagining, then, is a faculty that participates in the shaping of a multitude of interacting forms of human experience, including the experience of the real. The faculty of imagination is inescapably engaged in cognitive acts of perception and representation, as well as in acts of invention and speculation. The trend to “physiologize” important aspects of the mind and its operations has increasingly narrowed the perceived gaps between sensing, feeling, imagining, cognition, and reasoning. This more materialistic orientation toward the mapping of the links between human faculties and the brain has undermined the conventional dichotomy between the human body and what was once regarded as the divine, disembodied faculty of the human mind. Moreover, it has effectively dispensed with the belief that our senses can reliably record external facts without mediation.

In the field of visual perception, for instance, the complexity of the interactions between world, eye, brain, and expectations makes it unreasonable “to talk of some kind of preliminary retinal perception that is truer because closer to the actual world that casts its images on the back of the eyeball.” There is no such thing as “an untutored eye.”⁴ It has become widely recognized that by means of the brain, the imagination participates in the transformation of our inherently muddled sensory experience of the world into patterned forms, consolidated objects, and organized pictures, and that what we experience as objectively external is significantly shaped by both our organs and our culture.

I have already suggested that an important aspect of the imagination’s unique power resides in its capacity to move back and forth, often indiscernibly, between the realms prior operations of the collective imagination had previously demarcated as the culturally antithetical spheres of fantasy and reality. It is precisely the omnipresence and the multiplicity of roles played by the imagination in the shaping of our consciousness, conduct, culture, and institutions that largely account for its elusiveness. Born into a universe already furnished by institutionalized products of the collective imagination inherited from past generations, we are seldom aware of the role played by this remarkably creative human faculty in the formation of the objects and agents that populate our world and inhabit our experiences of time and space.

One of the most intriguing and potent qualities of the imagination lies in its ability to cover its own steps, to erase its own traces, and often to cause us to experience the created as a given. We are, therefore, very surprised and often also disconcerted on discovering footprints of the imagination on what we had long experienced as hard facts. This sense of disturbance indicates the importance humans ascribe to the distinction between fact and fiction in the mapping and distributing of cognitive and emotional resources.

⁴ William C. Wees, *Light Moving in Time: Studies in the Visual Aesthetics of Avant-Garde Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), pp. 63–5.

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One of the main purposes of this book is to describe and analyze the often hidden political uses of this capacity of the imagination to conceal its role in the shaping of our experience and in furnishing conceptions of political reality. Moreover, the imagination is probably the most neglected form of power in the field of modern political science and, in particular, in political theory. One of my main concerns is with the question of how the restoration of the imagination to its rightful place in our understanding of politics could and should affect political theory, political arguments, and, most importantly, our interpretations of political practice. It is because the political imagination is indispensable to the creation of the political order while also inherently dangerous to its very stability that it constantly problematizes the political. I believe that a theoretical perspective that can apprehend the nature of political imaginaries and their role in politics is likely, among other things, to support illuminating partly revisionist readings of the ideological clashes between socialism and liberalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as well as subsequent conflicts between liberal individualism and communitarianism.

The imagination does not, of course, create our worlds *ex nihilo*. Its creativity lies not merely in inventing, but also in reconfiguring and restructuring the fabrics of our experience and thought, and in its capacity to modify earlier modes of imagining. It combines the separate, separates the previously fused, commensurates the formerly incommensurable, fixes that which moves, and unsettles that which was long conceived of as stationary. When we encounter terms such as *God*, *nation*, *state*, *the world*, and *the individual*, we are seldom aware of the ways in which the imaginative faculty has participated in their birth, sustenance, or decline. This assertion is unlikely to seem reasonable to those for whom the word *imagination* means mere fantasy, in contradistinction to reality. Obviously the state or the individual, as well as other working imaginaries, are not illusions in the strict sense of the word.

In this book I use the term *imagination* in a wider or richer sense. I try to show that the narrow equation of the imaginary with the illusionary or the fictive is associated with the Enlightenment's ideological tendency to separate science from religion, reason from the human body and emotions, and politics from the arts. It is precisely this dichotomy between facts and fictions that, while serving the diverse projects of modernity, has also obscured the unique potential of the imaginary to be both fact and fiction.⁵ It is precisely this dualism, this coexistence of the real and the illusionary in the imaginary, that has empowered the imagination to become, in many respects, the hidden shaper of politics. Hence, although I usually use terms like *reality*, *facts*, and *objectivity* without quotation marks, the argument of this book basically questions the givenness of their signified referents.

In the following chapters of the book I attempt to persuade the reader of the analytical advantages of the concept of the performative political imagination

⁵ I discuss the enormous significance of this dualism further in Chapters 1, 2, and 3.

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over more conventional terms like *myths*, *ideas*, and *political knowledge* in linking the normative, cognitive, and emotional components of politics.

This book focuses specifically on the democratic political imagination, on imaginings or fictions (such as “We the People,” self-government, rational politics, and freedom) on which modern democratic political worlds have been based and which they have tried to embody, and their recent transformations. Therefore, I concentrate initially on the principal features of the modern democratic political imagination and later on the changes that seem to be altering them profoundly. As we shall see, these changes are bound to raise a host of questions: Can democracy as a form of political life survive the seemingly recent radical transformations of political practice that contradict the democratic political imagination? Is the particular configuration of moral, political, and institutional orders we recognize as approximating the principles of democracy sustainable despite the erosion of the collective political imaginaries that have come to be implicit in our commonsense political notions of agency, accountability, political causality, freedom, public opinion, and the public sphere? In this book I make some preliminary moves toward the elaboration of fuller responses to this and related questions.

Following these introductory comments on the creative powers of the political imagination, the book is divided into four parts and thirteen chapters. The first part (Chapters 1 through 4) contains four interrelated discussions of the intellectual resources and the theoretical perspectives that shed light on my approach to the analysis of politics in terms of collective imaginaries. Chapter 1 discusses the contest over the rightful cultural place of the imagination. Chapter 2 examines the great contribution of the Italian thinker Giambattista Vico (1668–1744) to the understanding of the role of the people’s creative imagination in the making of political regimes and his legacy for contemporary political thought. Chapter 3 offers an analytical classification of modes of imagining and an exploration of their interrelations and the role they play in shaping the fabric of politics. Chapter 4 examines the examples of “naturalization” and “historicization” of political matters as two of the principal strategies employed by the political imagination. Part Two is divided into three chapters (5 through 7), which trace the relations between the modernization of the political imagination and the emergence of new democratic political imaginaries. Chapter 5 focuses on the historical impact of science on common sense, which stands for the socio-epistemological *Agora* of democratic publics. Chapter 6 discusses the impact of modernized imaginaries of politics on attributions of causality and responsibility in democratic politics. And Chapter 7 focuses on the arts and the sciences as the respective domains of the undisguised and the disguised imagination. It examines the special role of the transparent artistic imagination in affirming by contrast the existence beyond the professed sphere of artful illusions of the sphere of real – often scientifically certified – facts as the domain for the performance of modern democratic politics. Part Three (Chapters 8 through 11) examines the specific imaginings of political causality and political agency in the democratic universe. This part

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focuses on one of the principal themes of the book – the fear of theatricality and deception in democratic politics – and the repeated attempts to overcome it by recruiting science and epistemological materialism to support claims of transparency and accountability. Chapter 8 concentrates on the specific historical attempts to evolve observable materialistic political imaginings of causes and events as part of the democratic commitment to resist theatricality and institute transparency. Chapter 9 examines early and modern versions of the individual as a political agent. Chapter 10 discusses the place of the individual in liberal and illiberal incorporations, and Chapter 11 discusses the key role of the arts in cultivating and ontologizing the interior self and its political implications. Part Four and the book's final two chapters explore the postmodern turn in the democratic political imagination. Chapter 12 analyzes the role of the electronic mass media in the ultimate failure of the democratic resistance to political theatricality and the profound implications of this failure for contemporary imaginaries of political reality and agency. Chapter 13 concludes the book with discussion of the possible ethical bases of political choices in the universe of postmodern politics. In this last chapter I raise the following questions: If politics is driven by fact-producing imaginaries (which consist of metaphoric and both cognitive and emotional elements) rather than by arguments, which of these imaginaries is more likely to enhance nonviolent human life and promote the democratic experience of freedom and equality? And what is the role of the political imaginary in future political theory?

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