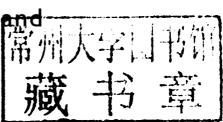# THE POLITICS OF IMAGINATION

EDITED BY CHIARA BOTTICI AND BENOÎT CHALLAND

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Chiara Bottici
and Benoît Challand

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The Politics of Imagination

The Politics of Imagination offers a multidisciplinary perspective on the contemporary relationship between politics and the imagination. What role does our capacity to form images play in politics? And can we define politics as a struggle for people's imagination? As a result of the increasingly central place of the media in our lives, the political role of imagination has undergone a massive quantitative and a qualitative change. As such, there has been a revival of interest in the concept of imagination, as the intimate connections between our capacity to form images and politics becomes more and more evident. Bringing together scholars from different disciplines and theoretical outlooks, *The Politics of Imagination* examines how the power of imagination reverberates in the various ambits of social and political life: in law, history, art, gender, economy, religion and the social sciences. It will be of considerable interest to those with contemporary interests in philosophy, political philosophy, political science, legal theory, gender studies, sociology, nationalism, identity studies, cultural studies and media studies.

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Acknowledgements

This book has a long story. The idea of a collective work on the politics of imagination owes much to the activities of the 'Collettivo EUI', an interdisciplinary group of European scholars and political activists that was active from 1999 until 2005 at the European University Institute in Florence (Italy). In particular, it was during the discussions that accompanied the preparation of the first European Social Forum in Florence in November 2002 that the project took shape. In the first place, we wish therefore to thank all regular members of the Collettivo EUI, who, through their actions as well as their ideas, contributed to plant the seeds of our struggle for imagination. Although the original idea to consider politics as a struggle for people's imagination stemmed from a discussion between the two editors, we feel very much indebted to this political experience. With its multinational and variegated composition, the Collettivo EUI proved to be an ideal place in which to challenge established ways of thinking and thus putting imagination to work.

The project then developed in the following years. In 2007 it was thanks to the generous support of Bo Stråth that we were able to convene a workshop entitled 'Politics as Struggle for People's Imagination' (25–26 January 2007). It is on that occasion that most of the papers gathered in this book were first presented and discussed. Our deepest thanks go to therefore Bo Stråth both for his support and his indefatigable constructive feedback throughout the years. We are also grateful to the European University Institute, in particular the History Department, for hosting the event as well as to all those who participated in the discussions that animated those two days for their comments on earlier drafts of this book.

In the course of the preparation of this book, other people have joined the project, adding their specific competencies to our project so as to give rise to a truly multidisciplinary perspective. We wish to thank them for believing in this project and lending us their invaluable competencies. This has also enabled us to benefit from an intergenerational exchange where the experience gained in different historical moments of reactivation of political imagination (in particular 1968 and the new global movement of the beginning of this millennium) have been compared and put in dialogue with one another.

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Contents

Introduction

Chiara Bottici and Benoît Challand

We often hear people saying that our politicians lack imagination. In the world of global governance, politics seems to have become simple administration within a general neoliberal consensus and with very little variation in the political options actually available. No much space is left for imagination understood as the radical capacity to envisage things differently and construct alternative political projects. Those who argue that 'another world is possible' – to quote the slogan of the new global movements – are easily labelled as unrealistic, if not as fanatical.[1] As a consequence, they are easily expunged from the spectrum of viable political options.

Yet the political world we live in is a world full of images. One only has to think of the role of the media in our political life. If we compare what politics was a few centuries ago and what it has become now, we cannot but perceive a fundamental change. Politics was once the activity that concerned a few people (the rulers), with whom most ordinary people had almost no visual contact in the course of their life. Today, by way of contrast, rulers are constantly in front of us: their images dominate our screens, nourish, solicit and perhaps even saturate our imagination. Democratisation and the mediatisation of politics has brought about a deep revolution in the nature of politics itself, so much so that politics has become inseparable from the herd of images that daily enters the houses of billions of spectators around the globe.

Perhaps in no other phenomenon is this as clear as in the current resurgence of religion and the politics of identity on the global scene. If the emergence of new social movements for an alternative globalisation was an attempt to

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1 I use the more correct term 'new global movement' rather than the 'no global movement' to point to the fact that the new social movements that lined up under the slogan 'another world is possible' are actually movements in favour of globalisation and not against it. The reason why corporate media used the label 'no global' is that they took the perspective of neoliberal ideology according to which to criticise the neoliberal dogmas of free trade and deregulations amounts to a critique of globalisation itself. As an accurate analysis of programme and ideas that circulate among them shows, this is far from being the case. On the content of the critique to neoliberalism of the new global movements, see Graeber 2002.

rekindle political imagination, 9/11 has made it explode, so to speak. All of a sudden terrifying new political scenarios counterpoising 'us' and the 'others' have appeared. While the myth of a clash between civilisation unfolded, a new struggle for people's imagination started: terrorists have been imagined everywhere, thus justifying restrictions to fundamental civic liberties and military enterprises. In turn, the exportation of the 'war on terror' abroad, with all the innocent casualties it has brought about, has further fomented negative representations of the 'west' with their corollary of hate and fanaticism. All this has not simply increased the power of images, but is substantial to it as images became weapons in themselves. We live in a globalising society which eliminates geographical distance only to reap it internally in the form of a spectacular clash between 'us' and 'them' (Bottici and Challand 2010).

Paradoxically, in the epoch of the global village created by the diffusion of the media on a global scale, we often lack the most relevant information about others and even about ourselves. To paraphrase Buck-Morss, we constitute a 'media-saturated but still information-starved public' (2003: 3). Global images are selected by the golden rule of the audience. It is only what makes news by capturing people's attention that is circulated. The result is that the spectacle prevails over the content. We are inundated by images that play with the register of emotions and move imagination, but often do not convey the most relevant information. Debord's prophecy of a society of spectacle (Debord 1994) has been fulfilled. The world is no longer just an immense collection of commodities. It has become a collection of spectacles.

Globalisation seems to have even brought this process to a further stage, so that the need emerges to further reconsider some of Debord's assumptions. Today society of spectacle is *global* not just because it has annihilated geographical distance, but also because it is increasingly difficult to counterpoise it to the reality of facts. Virtual images are not only commodities which can be reproduced on an industrial scale.[2] They are ongoing processes of perpetual maintenance. It is not only their authenticity that has got lost. It is the very possibility of determining a status of truth whatsoever that has vanished. We are now so used to such a condition that it does not come as a surprise to hear that soon after 9/11 videotapes went on sale in China showing the horrific highlights sliced together with scenes from Hollywood disaster movies (Buruma and Margalit 2004: 13). The real thing – two flaming skyscrapers collapsing on thousands of people – was not enough: only Hollywood imagination could capture the flavour of such a catastrophe. The status of truth of the images thus assembled did not matter. We needed a global spectacle adapted to the catastrophe and only Hollywood could offer it.

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2 On this point, together with Debord 1994, see also the classic, Benjamin 2002. For a discussion of Benjamin's analysis of the status of images in the age of their technological reproducibility, as well as of its limits, see Bottici's and Buck-Morss' contributions to this volume.

How to account for the paradox of such a world full of images but deprived of imagination? Have images themselves saturated our political imagination? What has politics become after such a revolution? Is it not first and foremost a struggle for people's imagination? The aim of this book is to address those questions by rethinking the nexus of politics and imagination in a multi-disciplinary perspective. In doing so, the contributors to this volume do not start from a pre-given view of both politics (or the political) and imagination, but rather try to explore the different ways to conceptualise both them and their intertwinement.

Yet they all share the idea that we should go beyond the restricted view of imagination as mere fantasy. The idea that imagination is the faculty to represent what does not exist, the unreal, and is therefore only relevant to the ambit of aesthetics, although widespread, is a very limited one. It had its moment around the 18th century, when, as a consequence of the triumph of modern science, imagination was seen as a potential threat for the methodical work of reason and was thus more comfortably placed within the newly constituted ambit of the aesthetic (Friese 2001: 7197; Vattimo 1999: 529). It is still an influential view, not least because it is conveyed by common usage, as in expressions such as 'this is the fruit of your imagination'.

But within the history of western philosophy itself, there is also a broader view going back as far as Aristotle that has recently been recovered from different sides. In this view, imagination is more than mere fantasy: it is the capacity to produce images in the most general sense of the term, independently of the fact of whether what they represent actually exists or not. Imagination in this view also includes the capacity to represent what does not exist but it is not limited to it. It is a much more radical view, in that it includes the production of images of both existing and non-existing objects. To put it in Castoriadis' terms, it is the radical faculty to produce images in the sense of *Bilder*, that is, images without which there would not be any thought at all and which, therefore, precede any thought (Castoriadis 1994).

No other author has stressed the radical character of imagination more systematically than Castoriadis. In his view, imagination is radical, in the double sense that without it there could be no reality as such and that it can always potentially question its objects by disclosing possible alternatives (Castoriadis 1987, 1994). It is a view that thus recovers the fundamental Kantian insight that imagination is the transcendental faculty of synthesis *par excellence* in that it is able to unify the manifold into a single image, but it is also a view that goes beyond Kant. Not only because Kant retreats from this discovery that he makes in the first edition of his *Critique of Pure Reason* and later then relegates imagination to a more intermediary role between intuition and intellect (Arnason 1994; Rundell 1994). Castoriadis goes further than Kant in that, in contrast to him, he does not conceive of imagination merely as an individual faculty. Picking up the thread of psychoanalysis, which has shown that the individual is created through a process of socialisation to the

imaginary significations of every society, Castoriadis argued that we are immersed in the social imaginary in which we have grown up. By emphasising the importance of the social context in shaping the free imagination of individuals, Castoriadis overcomes the limits of the Kantian approach and the philosophy of the subject that it presupposes.

Although the different contributors to this volume do not share a common view of imagination, they all accept the assumption that we should go beyond the first and restricted meaning described here. In preparing this collection, we have asked the contributors to discuss the role of imagination understood as the capacity to produce image plays in politics and thus also the possibility to define the latter in terms of the former. In their contributions, some of them tackled the issue from the point of view of imagination as primarily an individual faculty, while others preferred to take the perspective of the social imaginary understood as the social and psychological context that determines the production of images. Others have explored the potentiality of the concept of imaginal, which emphasises the production of images rather than that of the faculty that produced them. The latter is a concept that has recently been recovered from the Muslim Sufi philosophical tradition (Corbin 1979) and developed particularly in the French debate as a third possibility between theories of imagination as an individual faculty and the alternative theories of the imaginary (Fleury 2006). In sum, imagination, imaginary, imaginal are three different perspectives to explore the same issue, namely the role that our capacity to produce images plays in politics.

The reason why such an enterprise is crucial today is twofold. On the one hand, as already suggested, our capacity to form images is playing an increasing (albeit ambivalent) role in contemporary politics. As a consequence of the key position it has acquired in the new economy and the media industry, its incorporation in both the processes of production and consumption of commodities and visual culture, imagination is given unprecedented chances to influence social life and political landscapes and hence also politics. On the other hand, we are still ill equipped in facing this new challenge. In the first place, on a philosophical level, the amount of work done on the concept of imagination is still minimal if compared with the work done on that of reason. For instance there are very few philosophical works dealing with what we could call 'public imagination', whereas studies on 'public reason' abound. There are thus reasons to suspect that particularly today, in the conditions of a global society of spectacle, a more vigorous engagement with the problem of the conditions for 'public imagination' would be particularly welcomed.

Not enough work has been done to systematically explore the nexus of politics and imagination and, even less so, on the theoretical possibility to define politics itself as a struggle for people's imagination. Among the philosophers who recovered the Kantian view of imagination and explored its political role, one should in the first place remember Hannah Arendt. In her *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, she tried to show the crucial role that imagination plays in

politics, in particular for its capacity to strip ourselves of our particularities and thus put ourselves in the others' shoes (Arendt 1982). Yet, her project remained unfinished due to her death and we are left with a few suggestions in this direction rather than a fully fledged theory. Furthermore, her reliance on Kant makes us suspect that she was not fully aware of the ambivalence of imagination, the fact that, as Slavoj Žižek argued, imagination is not only the faculty of synthesis, of putting things together, but also that of madness, of tearing apart pieces of the whole (Žižek 1999: 28–38).

Together with the ambivalence of imagination, it is also its social nature that Arendt tends to overcome. Theories inspired by psychoanalysis have pointed out that there is not an autonomous, pre-given subject, since this is the result of a long process of socialisation that begins very early, with the first encounters with language. In their connubial of psychoanalysis and Marxism towards a critique of ideology, different authors of the Frankfurt School have pointed to the political role of imagination by emphasising the role that society as a whole exercises in the creation of compliant subjects. Yet, most of them remained linked to the Freudian view of imagination as fantasy. As Castoriadis pointed out, although fundamental insights can be derived from Freud's psychoanalysis as to the nature of imagination, it is a fact that he almost never uses the term imagination (*Einbildungskraft*) preferring to it the somehow misleading term 'fantasy' (*Phantasie*) (Castoriadis 1997: 292). As a consequence, in his system, imagination, as the capacity to produce images in the most general sense of the term, is occulted by fantasy understood as the representation of what is not immediately present. And this conflation still permeates many of the authors who have been directly inspired by his work.

This is, for instance, the case of Herbert Marcuse's revaluation of imagination. He thought that in late capitalistic societies, which create compliant one-dimensional human beings through the manipulation of their needs, it is only the aesthetic imagination that conserves the freedom to call the things with their proper name (Marcuse 1991: Chapter 10). Not by chance, then, Marcuse, who remains strongly linked to the Freudian vocabulary, uses imagination and fantasy interchangeably as if they were one and the same thing (Marcuse 1974: 141). Imagination is here mainly the faculty to represent what does not exist and is therefore also systematically associated with utopia (Marcuse 1974: 141–158). But Castoriadis' notion of imagination as the faculty to produce images in the most general sense of the term comes before both the concept of ideology and that of utopia. Without the production of images, there could be no ideology in the sense of false consciousness – but also no utopias. Both the preservation of the status quo through ideology and its subversion through utopias presuppose a world that is given in images and therefore imagination as the radical faculty described by Castoriadis.

On the French side, it is particularly Jacques Lacan that developed the insights of Freud and psychoanalysis. With his emphasis on language and

the importance of society in the socialisation of individuals, Lacan went far beyond the idea of imagination as an individual faculty, as it is signalled by the new role that the concept of imaginary plays in his theory. In Lacan's view, the imaginary domain, together with the real and the symbolic, constitutes one of the three fundamental orders of structure. The imaginary is the domain that has its roots in the mirror phase when the infant recognises himself in the specular image in front of him, but also perceives the discrepancy between his fragmented body (over which he has no command) and the unitary image in which he indentifies himself. But such an identification with the specular image is not only a child experience: the ego itself is formed through the identification with such a specular image so that the imaginary, together with the real and the symbolic, comes to be constitutive of the human psyche as such. While in the imaginary the subject is permanently caught by his own image, the symbolic order presents itself to the subject as the big Other, the Law, which is counterposed to the real – the latter being then a sort of limit concept for what cannot be symbolised and is therefore outside language.[3]

In both Lacan and Žižek, who is the author who has most systematically recovered and developed Lacan's psychoanalysis in contemporary debate, the imaginary is by definition the place of alienation.[4] Although this does not mean that the imaginary is simply illusory (Lacan 1999, vol. 1: 348), it remains by definition the locus of alienation and is therefore counterposed to the real. In this perspective, the imaginary is therefore once again limited to the ambit of the unreal, although with a much more refined understanding of the real and the imaginary respectively. But if the imaginary is by definition the place of alienation and the unreal, it becomes difficult to account for the free imagination of individuals let alone for the possibility that the imaginary is itself constitutive of the real.

In the contemporary world of virtual reality, it can be problematic to counterpose the real and the imaginary, because the latter may well have become what is most real. Hence the need to take also a third perspective, that of the imaginal, which looks at the role of images themselves rather than the faculty that constitutes them. As mentioned earlier, Cynthia Fleury has recently introduced the concept in the French debate, but in her usage the concept only points to the fact that between the world of sensibility and that of the intellect there is a third possibility, that of the imaginal. Although her perspective is helpful to point out that there is a *tertium* between imagination and the imaginary, she does not fully explore the consequences of such a view,[5] its political implications in particular, which are at the centre of interest of our analysis.

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3 See, for instance, Lacan 1999, both volumes I and II. The distinction between the three orders, imaginary, real and symbolic returns in different places of the text. For a mapping of these, see Lacan 1999, vol. 1: 541.
4 See, for instance, Žižek 1999 and 2006.
5 On this point, see Bottici's contribution to this volume.