
Review

Imagined democracies: Necessary political fictions

Yaron Ezrahi

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Contemporary Democracy is not the deliberative self-governing polity of informed free citizens envisioned by modern Enlightenment thinkers. It is a system of government in which public policy consists of an eclectic patchwork of half-baked programs, where politicians tend to posture rather than act, where the public sphere is more a site of shifting amorphous moods than a clash of ideas. (p. ix)

This bleak diagnosis of the best form of politics our world has to offer is presented as the opening of Yaron Ezrahi's book, *Imagined Democracies*. While the author states that the question guiding the work is 'how we got here,' in fact this 320 page volume – which is no less than a contemporary masterpiece – offers far more than an answer to this question. It reframes the history of politics and political thought from ancient Greece through modernity, the enlightenment and its critics, to contemporary post-modernity, adding perspective and leaving readers with an interpretative mechanism which renders far less of today's political reality new than we might otherwise have suspected. The age of mass-media may have made us painfully conscious of the theatricality of politics, but the arenas of pre-modern politics were arguably no less stages than television or radio today. Political reality, Ezrahi tells us, is ultimately shaped by imaginaries, and always has been. Path-breaking political thought from Plato through Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Vico involved recognizing that imaginaries are key to shaping politics, and no less is demanded of contemporary political theory: for Ezrahi, it is the conscious or unconscious choice of collective imaginaries and their effective promotion from the bottom up that holds the key to reviving democracy today and making it viable into the future. Despite its bleak opening, then, *Imagined Democracies* culminates in an empowering call to act, but first to imagine.

The title of the work, a play on Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, is misleading to the extent that Ezrahi's book is a work of normative political philosophy and social criticism, and even a wake-up call to political theorists concerned with the fate of democracy today. Certainly, Ezrahi also provides a

sociological and at times historical study of the way democracies are created and sustained through imagination and the powerful collective belief in symbols endowed with meaning. But the two most striking features of the work are its wake-up call aspect alongside the deep cultural and philosophical foundations – rather than anthropological or sociological foundations – our author presents for the role of imagination in constituting politics. Ezrahi's end goal for politics – a peaceful, good and free life – is one often neglected by contemporary thinkers, and sets him alongside classical political philosophers. His account is so ambitious and politically engaged as to offer a path for attaining this end.

The work is divided into four parts and 13 chapters. Part One presents Ezrahi's theory of the imagination, including a conceptual framework, the revival and enlisting of Giambattista Vico as a theorist who understood the constructive power of imagination, a scheme of imagination and mechanism for how it works, and the introduction of two transformative imaginaries – nature and history. Part Two presents the complexity and sophistication of our political world, where scientific developments inform and accompany changes in our understandings of self and our expectations of politics; where the distinction between fact and fiction is itself a necessary fiction, enabling social criticism; and where the imagined distinction between arts and sciences which was instrumental for establishing modern liberalism may now need to be exposed and overcome in the service of the very same. Part Three presents theatricality as inherent in politics though ostensibly resisted by democratic orders, and offers a sobering if disturbing account of the violence historically and potentially justified by imaginaries, as well as the potential weakening and empowering of the individual through different imaginary schemes. Part four, the climax of the book, presents the erosion of the concept of objective fact in history and in current affairs, but without succumbing to pessimism. It proposes that the individual should be empowered, rather than weakened, by the recognition of the extent to which his imaginaries participate in shaping reality, and we should collectively proceed to designate and prioritize the imaginaries we want to live by, toward creating the best society.

While Ezrahi's theory may potentially empower the public to shape its world, *Imagined Democracies* is not geared to a general readership. It seeks to effect a paradigm shift in the discipline of political philosophy; for scholarship to recognize the decline of enlightenment imaginaries of objective reality and participation, without this sounding a death-blow to democratic theory which should rather be infused with newly relevant imaginaries. If new imaginaries are to rise bottom-up, however, then the idea that reality is shaped by our choice and promotion of imaginaries will need to be popularized, so that democratic individuals and collectives become able to recognize, scrutinize and adjust the imaginaries on which their societies are based. This seems possible. Certainly this reader found herself reflecting on current affairs as she read, critiquing contemporary society from a new perspective and sometimes critiquing the proposed imaginaries as inadequate to

create the sort of democratic society we should be aiming at. I discuss two examples below which I hope will resonate with thoughtful individuals interested in thinking through some of the challenges to democratic politics today.

My first example is the imaginary of ‘nature,’ which lay at the foundations of classical and modern political philosophy, but is no longer part of political discourse. Ezrahi draws our attention to the replacement of ‘nature’ by a new imaginary, ‘environment.’ ‘Environment’ differs substantially from ‘nature’: rather than pointing to something greater than humanity, environment is relative to humanity. Indeed, the fact that Western politics today generally takes place without ‘nature’ – relegating nature to a religious concern and to discussions where religious concerns are given voice – may be exacting a heavy price. Attempts by the international community to protect the ‘environment’ while preserving state sovereignty constantly encounter difficulty, despite the fact that theorists who initially conceived of modern sovereignty considered it necessarily limited by nature. At the same time, zoo breeding programs which euthanize animals for the sake of engineering our environment and arguably improving its quality, leave liberal individuals uncomfortable but without a frame of reference for pursuing morally sound arguments. Ezrahi is not the first to imply that a shift in imagination – and even a selective return to nature – might assist in contemporary ‘environmental’ discourse (Lane, 2012).

My second example is the question of which imaginaries are needed for the strengthening of Israeli democracy, a question Ezrahi answers thought-provokingly though somewhat inadequately in his final chapter, ‘Which imaginaries should we choose?’ Ezrahi presents the art of imagining democracy as a balancing act, such that societies with an overdose of individualism (such as the United States) should balance this by strengthening imaginaries of the community, and vice versa. Israel is an example of the latter. Ezrahi thus rejects the essentialism of the two leading strands of political philosophy today – liberal individualism and communitarianism – finding the argument over the ontological priority of individual or community incapable of being conclusively settled. Ezrahi asks that we focus on the ultimate end of the good life, and employ imaginaries of individual and community to this end.

But Ezrahi’s description of what would be needed to strengthen Israeli democracy is culturally bare, despite the book’s overall cultural richness. While it may be true that Israeli democracy pays a price for its over-community orientation, I consider there to be culture-specific aspects of Israeli imagination that are more damaging to its democracy than its community-centeredness. One example is the messianic imagination that has permeated Israeli political discourse from its earliest days. Not only is the messianic imagery of the return to Zion not necessary for justifying a Jewish and democratic state, but it blocks the ideal. Surely Israel is not the only society with culture-specific imaginaries blocking its way to democracy. Ezrahi’s work provides the foundations for identifying and thinking through these imaginaries, but it does not itself discuss culture-specific imaginaries that need addressing if democracy is to dominate into the future.



I conclude with a summary of Ezrahi's project from part 2, chapter 5, of his work which I hope might now inspire individuals concerned with democracy to imagine appropriately:

Historians and philosophers have tended to associate politics driven by the popular imagination with the rejection of rationalism, generating the politics of fascism or totalitarian violence ... These ideological and intellectual tendencies have hindered the recognition that, since popular imaginaries shape the political order and direct its politics, the difference between authoritarian and democratic regimes does not lie in a dichotomy between politics based on imagination, deception, and violence, and politics based in rationality, facts, and deliberative processes. The opposition is rather between competing clusters of the popular imagination and their institutional and political consequences. (p. 87)

Reference

Lane, M. (2012) *Eco-Republic: What the Ancients Can Teach us About Ethics, Virtue, and Sustainable Living*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

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