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This is the final peer-reviewed author's accepted manuscript (postprint) of the following publication:

Published Version:
Nasi, F. (2025). The crisis of the democratic imaginary: How anti-democratic imaginaries foster democratic malaise. COMMUNICATION AND DEMOCRACY, 59(1), 205-225 [10.1080/27671127.2024.2434035].

Availability:
This version is available at: https://hdl.handle.net/11585/1007359 since: 2026-01-13

Published:

DOI: http://doi.org/10.1080/27671127.2024.2434035

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10 November 2026

The Crisis of the Democratic Imaginary: How Anti-Democratic Imaginaries Foster Democratic Malaise

ABSTRACT. Scholars have dealt extensively with the crisis of liberal democracy, yet there has been a notable absence in exploring the role that imaginaries might play in intensifying this crisis. This paper suggests they are a crucial, overlooked element for understanding democratic malaise. To start, I argue that the imaginary, with its productive, collective, normative, and pluralistic nature, proves to be a more helpful concept than other potentially similar ones. It helps to explain how liberal democracy can be appreciated as an ideal while being vehemently contested in its institutional and tangible manifestations (e.g., politicians, parties, policymaking), shedding light on both communicative and political issues. This contention arises because three anti-democratic imaginaries challenge democracy: the technocratic imaginary, the neoliberal imaginary, and the anti-political imaginary. The democratic imaginary crisis consists in the fact that, although its ideal foundations remain solid, anti-democratic imaginaries hinder democracy's effective functioning by laying the ground for anti-democratic discourses and making political action increasingly complex from an individual, collective, and institutional perspective. In short, some contemporary imaginaries are harmful to liberal democracies. To reverse the crisis of democracy, acting on common sense and addressing imaginary issues is therefore essential.

Keywords: imaginaries, democracy, neoliberalism, technocracy, anti-politics.

Data shows the robust support for democracy as a regime in major democratic states.[1] In the G7 countries, over 95% of the population deems democracy important, with 54.2% stating it is crucial. 88.8% of the population regards a democratic political system as very or fairly good, with a similar percentage expressing the importance of choosing a leader through fair and free elections.[2] Despite these numbers, it has become widely accepted that liberal democracies are undergoing a deep-seated crisis and a loss of legitimacy.[3] The crisis of democracy is not a novel issue, and many relevant scholars have extensively discussed the topic.

For example, almost 50 years ago, Crozier, Huntington, and Watanuki argued that democracies faced a crisis of weakening institutional capacity.[4] Their influential report asserted that unfitted bureaucracies were progressively unable to respond to escalating democratic demands. Taking a broader view, Crouch maintained that, owing to globalization and the erosion of collective identities, we entered an age of post-democracy.[5] In this phase, formal democratic institutions persist, but they lose their essence and cannot change reality. Others looked at the crisis of democracy from the perspective of attitudes, seeing how an increasing part of the population is losing faith in democratic institutions.[6]

Among the many elements contributing to the present difficulties democracies are facing, scholars emphasized the role of populist parties, the rise of an ultra-individualistic culture, citizens' rising expectations, polarization, inadequacy of traditional élites and parties, and the influence of authoritarian countries.[7] These elements depict a democracy that simply does not work. People should be interested in politics, yet they abstain from voting and remain uninformed.[8] Political parties should represent the people but are increasingly delegitimized.[9] The public sphere, intended to be a sphere of plural and deliberative dialogue, instead has devolved into a marketplace of likes and engagement.[10] Simultaneously, though, people still value democracy for its principles and values. Is there an explanation for this paradox? How and why can democracy be highly appreciated as a set of values while being vehemently contested in its institutional and tangible manifestations?

To shed light on the gap between democratic practice and ideals, I argue we should use the notion of the imaginary. Charles Taylor understands modern social imaginaries as "the ways people imagine their social existence and their social surroundings."[11] Far from being abstract and detached from physical reality, imaginaries shape people's beliefs, discourses, actions, and everyday routines. That is particularly true in a time characterized by complexity and social acceleration, where symbolic politics and fast thinking constitute a necessary mental heuristic for making sense of the world.[12]

The contribution of this paper is twofold. First, I argue that the notion of the imaginary helps us elucidate the problem of democratic malaise.[13] For addressing the gap between democratic practices and ideals, imaginaries constitute a better theoretical lens than similar concepts such as narratives, folk theories, ideologies, or political doctrines. Second, I show how some of the main imaginaries that characterize present times damage democracies in terms of practice and ideals. What I call the “crisis of the democratic imaginary” stems from the coexistence in the same democratic imaginary of popular sovereignty and three “anti-democratic imaginaries”: the technocratic imaginary, the neoliberal imaginary, and the anti-political imaginary.[14] These imaginaries, while not explicitly attacking elections or the rule of law, *de facto* challenge democracies by eroding its basis—people as the source of political agency. They do this by creating a cumulative repertoire that constrains discursive choices in an anti-democratic direction, and by contesting the possibilities of political action for individuals, collectives, and institutions, respectively.

To prove my point, the paper will be structured as follows. The first section delves into the concept of social imaginary, demonstrating its relevance and tangible impact on the political sphere through the works of Castoriadis, Ezrahi, and Asen. In particular, I borrow Charles Taylor's description of social imaginaries as described in his book *Modern Social Imaginaries.*[15] Imaginaries are productive, collective, normative, and plural, and they shape the public sphere by providing a cumulative repertoire for discourses and actions. Based on these features, I also compare imaginaries to similar concepts, such as narratives, folk theories, ideologies, and political doctrines. In the third section, I explore popular sovereignty and human political agency as the foundations of the democratic imaginary. The fourth section turns attention to the technocratic imaginary, which depoliticizes subjects by implying that decisions should be based on objective criteria rather than human values. The fifth section explores the neoliberal imaginary, drawing on Wendy Brown's work.[16] I suggest that the neoliberal imaginary "undoes the demos" by promoting an individualistic way of life that increases the costs of collective actions. The sixth section addresses the anti-political imaginary, which delegitimizes political institutions such as parties, elected officials, parliaments, and governments by asserting that politics is inherently corrupt.

Four Features of Social Imaginaries (and Why They Matter)

Cornelius Castoriadis was one of the earliest scholars to acknowledge the importance of the imaginary in the last century. In his main work, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, he claimed that social imaginaries are not simply a reflection of pre-existing social structures but creative and productive forces that shape reality.[17] Therefore, imaginaries are first of all productive. They are not just ideas or doctrines, but they are embodied in social practices and institutions. That allows imaginaries to enable the practices of a society. For example, the social imaginary of democracy is embodied in the practices and institutions of voting, political parties, and the rule of law, because the very imaginary of democracy allows those institutions to exist and to work. There would be no free elections in democratic states if people did not believe that they are something good and fair through which everybody can express their vote.

In the same way, there would be no nation if the citizens of a country did not share a common sense of belonging. Nations exist factually and have a material impact on reality, but they are imagined entities. As Anderson claims in *Imagined Communities*, members of a nation will never know all their fellow members, yet they have a mental image of their

communion.[18] The idea of the nation is a socially constructed concept, and the sense of belonging to a nation relies on shared symbols, narratives, myths, language, and media.

Second, imaginaries are collective which implies two issues. First, imaginaries are shared among many people, allowing common understanding and common practices. For historian Harari, cooperating through imaginaries is the primary ability that allowed humans to rule over Earth.[19] He claims that *Homo sapiens* is the only species in the world capable of cooperating flexibly on a large scale, and this cooperation is ultimately based on our faith in imagined orders. *H. sapiens* dominate the world because only they can weave an intersubjective network of meaning: laws, forces, entities, and places that exist purely in their shared imagination.

Furthermore, imaginaries are an assemblage of many elements. They emerge in a complex network of interests, symbols, previous imaginaries and doctrines, socio-economic contingency, and individual agency. From a communication perspective, they are made of both linguistic and visual modes.[20] As Taylor emphasizes, the focus of imaginaries is "the way *ordinary* people imagine their social surroundings."[21] The "ordinary" elements imply that imaginaries are also made of novels, fiction, legends, images, and elements from popular culture that contribute to solidifying a common idea of belonging. From this perspective, imaginaries can be compared to common sense: they are those widely shared and unquestioned beliefs that makes coexistence possible.

Third, imaginaries imply normativity. In his more extensive definition of social imaginaries, Taylor suggested they are "the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations."[22] In simpler terms, imaginaries prescribe specific actions to be worthy, exemplary, or just. Take, for instance, the Western social imaginary of human rights: it not only outlines individuals' rights but also insists that society must protect and uphold these rights. Ezrahi talked about the performativity of political imaginaries, suggesting that they can "generate performative scripts that orient political behaviour and the making/unmaking of institutions."[23] An imaginary comprises descriptive elements (that outline a specific worldview) and performative scripts, the normative recommendations emerging from that worldview. In the human rights example, for instance, the performative script of that imaginary is to protect and defend human rights. These scripts matter because

they establish a tangible link with reality, actively shaping the world by indicating how it should unfold through symbolic means.

Finally, imaginaries are plural. It is true that some imaginaries may become more widespread than others. For Taylor, three imaginaries hallmarked the birth of modernity, laying the ground for a new moral order: collective governance through popular sovereignty, the market economy, and public opinion. However, that does not imply they are the only imaginaries of contemporary society. As Taylor clarifies, imaginaries are that "common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy."[24] Therefore, they could encompass almost anything, making them broad and undefined. For example, Taylor demonstrates how a certain democratic imaginary (in terms of expectations regarding others' behavior and what is considered "normal" and fair) is essential for the functioning of general elections, even though he does not assign a specific name to this imaginary.[25]

Because of this indeterminacy, imaginaries are inherently plural. That means that there are both different imaginaries within societies and different elements or imaginaries within the same imaginary. Jasanoff and more recent scholarship emphasized how imaginaries are contested and multiple, objects of debate, made of different and sometimes contradictory claims.[26] For instance, the contemporary imaginary of democracy still holds election as a crucial moment in societal life. However, citizens distrust elected officials. Plural imaginaries allow us to see how in the same macro-imaginary (democracy) different and contrasting ideas like these can emerge. That is not paradoxical, but the very nature of the imaginary.

How do these productive, collective, normative, and plural imaginaries function in communicative terms? According to Asen, "the collective imagination forms a constellation of shared assumptions, values, perceptions, and beliefs regarding explicitly identified topics of discussion."[27] Imaginaries are then closely tied to the issue of representation, since they provide the essential elements upon which the representation of various subjects can be constructed in discourse, thereby creating processes of inclusion and exclusion. More specifically, imaginaries play a crucial role in the dynamics between publics and counter-publics in two main ways. First, they allow for the discrediting of counter-public agents and the concentration of historical animosities into negative images. Asen illustrates this with the example of negative portrayals of welfare recipients.[28] Second, imaginaries create a

cumulative repertoire that constrains the choices of future participants, shaping subsequent rhetorical situations.[29] For instance, to depict politicians as a corrupt elite or black people as poor, these ideas must already exist in that imaginary-based cumulative repertoire, along with specific buzzwords and symbols, such as the term "establishment" for politicians.[30]

Alternatively, a specific repertoire must be created for that discourse to be effective. In this way, social imaginaries both limit and enable the possibilities for thinking and producing discourse in the public sphere. A concrete example of this appears in the work of Goodnight who claims that "a social imaginary provides a vocabulary of identifications and meanings that can be extended, contested, and reshaped to renew older practices or inaugurate different activities."[31] In his article, he shows how the US government relied on and created a "network imaginary," fusing a web of associated possibilities among state and nonstate actors, for defending its decision to invade Iraq. After outlining the essential traits of imaginaries, it is time to clarify why this specific notion, as opposed to similar ones, could serve as a highly effective heuristic tool for understanding democratic malaise.

Why Imaginaries, and Not Other Concepts?

Epistemologically speaking, imaginaries are a good middle ground between abstraction and concreteness. They allow for the simultaneous explanation of macro processes and the indication of concrete practices stemming from them. Thus, it gets easier to pinpoint the gap between the ideal of democracy and its practical implementations. That would not be the case for ideologies and political doctrines (which remain more on the idea level) nor for narratives and folk theories, which, in contrast, lack the capacity for abstraction. It is no coincidence that the concept of the imaginary has been widely used in Political Science and Sociology to explore issues related to democracy, such as citizenship, environmental movements, the food system, leftist groups and left populism, austerity policies, the making of constitutions, gender regimes, nuclear energy, higher education and how particular imaginaries can lay the ground for specific kind of democracy, such as for the case of Lutheranism in Nordic societies for social democracy.[32] Imaginaries have also been used in Communication Studies to explain the potential rise of a cosmopolitan and European public sphere, the evolution of studies in rhetoric, dynamics between public and counter-publics, how certain discourses can be legitimized and sustained, how new, non-Western voices can

be included in the mainstream public sphere, and how specific imaginaries can be challenged by certain rhetoric.[33]

Compared to imaginaries, narratives and folk theories are more specific and less encompassing. While they share the same capacity for normativity, they have a narrower scope. For Bruner, narratives are particular and characterized by specific elements, like the relationships among canonicity and breach, characters, a goal, and obstacles.[34] Folk theories are "intuitive, informal theories that individuals develop to explain the outcomes, effects, or consequences."[35] They are explanations of specific social phenomena rather than broad mental descriptions. Referring to a single neoliberal, technocratic, or anti-political narrative or folk theory would not make sense. Imaginaries are made of more than a single narrative, composing a symbolic/ideal dimension to which people can refer through a process of "accrual" of different elements.[36] For instance, the narrative of the tech genius building his start-up in his garage is a good story contributing to the technocratic imaginary. In a similar vein, the folk theory that elections are always rigged or bought by powerful elites sustains the anti-political imaginary.

Taylor explicitly distinguished between imaginaries and ideologies. He claimed that "the gain involved in identifying these social imaginaries is that they are never just ideology. They also have a constitutive function, that of making possible the practices that they make sense of and thus enable."[37] In other words, ideologies or political doctrines have a productive effect in influencing political action, but they are not constitutive of these very practices. It is important to note that scholars do not all share the same definition of ideology. Althusser, for instance, defines ideology as an "imaginary relation to real relations."[38] Following his definition, the concept of ideology is quite similar to that of the imaginary. However, other scholars interpret this complex concept differently, particularly when comparing it to imaginaries. For Carlo Galli, ideologies are "polemical projects emerging from society and guided by some specific actor, aimed at creating a fair and objective order" which is not the case for imaginaries.[39] On the contrary, an imaginary "can never be adequately expressed in the form of explicit doctrines because of its unlimited and indefinite nature."[40]

Scholars who distinguished between the two concepts see ideologies and doctrines as too structured, not allowing the same epistemological flexibility of imaginaries. For Asen, "imagining resists the systematization connoted in doctrines."[41] This rigidity impedes considerations of plurality and contradictions, both in the ways imaginaries are formed in a

complex hybrid media system and in the truth they postulate.[42] For example, in the upcoming sections, I contend that the democratic imaginary is a complex amalgamation of contrasting ideas. These include the perspective that human agency forms the bedrock of politics, in direct contrast to the technocratic argument advocating for the exclusive reliance on objective, technical criteria to govern society. These are contradictions that ideologies or doctrines could difficultly consider, but they do coexist in the same imaginary. It would be hard to claim that a unified "democratic ideology" exists, as it simultaneously embraces the importance of popular sovereignty and conflicting technocratic and neoliberal ideas, while that could be the case for the democratic imaginary. Following these last intuitions, I propose an examination of how specific imaginaries could threaten democracy. Anti-democratic imaginaries challenge, ideally and practically, their imaginary foundation—autonomous human agency as the basis of democratic politics.

Challenging the Foundations of the Democratic Imaginary

The fact that individuals are the ultimate source of the political domain is something we now take for granted, but it has not always been the case. Ezrahi suggests that during the transition from monarchies to liberal democratic states, Western countries experienced a watershed transformation in the imaginary political foundations of society.[43] This transition entailed a fundamental reorientation of the legitimacy of power, shifting it from the divine right of monarchs to the principle of popular sovereignty. Popular sovereignty rests on the belief that every person can contribute to the political sphere and impact the world.[44] This idea gradually became the primary imaginative foundation of contemporary democracy.[45] Although this principle has never been fully respected or implemented, Ezrahi considers it the essential fiction on which the entire democratic structure is built, as it has enabled the majority of people to perceive the political sphere differently.

Without this idea, some individuals would have never started looking at themselves and their forms of collective life (movements, parties, unions, institutions) as integral to the political realm, transforming politics into a product of human action. Politics became something external to the subject on which humans could exert some influence. It was not a privileged realm for an aristocratic elite or the mere continuation of religious power on Earth but a domain of affairs potentially open to everyone. This idea is still very pervasive today. Criticisms of democracy often focus on its institutional aspects but rarely challenge the principle of popular sovereignty, as data regarding the great appreciation for elections and

the abstract idea of democracy show. According to the World Values Survey, an overwhelming majority of citizens in G7 countries consider democracy crucial, rating its importance an average of 8.76 on a scale from 1 (not at all important) to 10 (absolutely important).[46] Given the strength of this idea, even authoritarian states must refer to this principle. For example, Putin presents himself as the embodiment of the Russian people, and the Chinese Communist Party claims to be the only legitimate representative of popular sovereignty.

As the data in the introduction shows, democracy is valued ideally because this foundational idea of democracy is still strongly present in the democratic imaginary, even if it is challenged by contradictory claims. Some imaginaries make it difficult to apply the principle of popular sovereignty to reality. The following sections will outline three specific anti-democratic imaginaries and their corresponding anti-democratic scripts, which include the actions, thoughts, and collective beliefs that arise from them. These imaginaries make living in a democracy more challenging and form a cumulative repertoire on which anti-democratic discourses can be built: the technocratic imaginary, the neoliberal imaginary, and the anti-political imaginary.

The crisis of the democratic imaginary consists exactly in the co-existence of the principle of popular sovereignty with these anti-democratic imaginaries. The aim of the following sections is not to provide an exhaustive description of technocracy, neoliberalism, or anti-politics, nor to be comprehensive in describing their respective imaginaries. The focus is on highlighting how the collective imaginary dimensions of these three phenomena have concrete consequences on democratic life, making the democratic imaginary conflictual and democratic practices and discourses more difficult.

The Technocratic Imaginary: Politics as a Bias

In December 2021, during a press conference on the COVID-19 pandemic, former Prime Minister of Italy Mario Draghi claimed, "For the sake of normality, all precautions must be taken, but every decision is guided by data: only by data, not by politics as it is said around."[47] Mr. Draghi probably referred to power games within political parties rather than politics in general. However, he vividly encapsulates the core of the technocratic imaginary, and how this imaginary is able to shape public discourse at the highest level—the government of human communities should hinge upon objective data rather than subjective politics. Technocracy has generally been understood as exercising political authority by

virtue of technical competence and expertise.[48] The technocratic ideal establishes a dichotomy between the realm of objectivity to be pursued and the realm of subjectivity to be dismissed. The former comprises data, science, and cutting-edge technologies, while the latter comprises human values and political decisions. The government should then be reduced to applying the scientific knowledge of competent experts to societal problems.[49]

In different ways, many scholars addressed the issue of technocracy. Carl Schmitt observed how technology plays a depoliticizing role, presenting itself as neutral and objective.[50] Deeming something neutral removes it from human arbitrariness and, consequently, from the realm of politics. The dichotomy between objectivity and subjectivity, between neutrality and politics, is well summarized by the concept of technological determinism – the notion that, independently from human values or societal contingencies, "technologies change, either because of scientific advance or following a logic of their own; and they then have effects on society."[51] Technological determinism sponsors a view of technology as a detached realm from that of politics, society, and human values. This belief exacerbates and legitimizes the technocratic idea that power should rest in the hands of technological innovation.

Similarly, in one of the more influential books for the critical study of technology, Morozov criticized the "technological solutionism" ideology.[52] That is the conviction that increased technological innovation alone can address all societal problems without collective or political intervention. Through technological solutionism, there is no need for politics in the government of society. Solutionism and technological determinism exclude human subjectivity from government and technological development. As Harari outlines, the extreme consequence is the radical view for which data becomes the new and sole power source.[53] This vision resembles B. F. Skinner's *Walden Two*. Shoshanna Zuboff recounts that Skinner's ideal sci-fi world is a society driven by data, where autonomous systems subordinate individual autonomy, and moral and political values are obstacles to pursuing some objective "greater good."[54]

In recent years, technocratic postulates heavily colonized the collective imaginary. The glorification of the achievements of entrepreneurs like Steve Jobs, Elon Musk, or Mark Zuckerberg, the economic salience of STEM subjects, the emergence of a coding elite, and the hype surrounding artificial intelligence and big data are all narrative elements that, to varying degrees, played a role in fortifying the technocratic imaginary.[55] The increasing

pervasiveness of digital technologies in everyday life has been a pivotal factor and the narrative of a disruptive, total, unavoidable, future-oriented, and permanent revolution brought about by digital technologies had a massive impact on society. This ideology gradually colonized the economy, media, environmentalism, and politics, spreading the idea that "changes in contemporary society can only be caused by the digital revolution."[56] The objective here is not to assert that technocracy alone dominates the tech imaginary, but rather to examine how the technocratic imaginary has the potential to undermine democratic practices and ideals.

For example, the anti-democratic performative script of the technocratic imaginary is to distrust human values and judgment as a source of political legitimacy. The government of the polis should not be political or oriented by human value-laden evaluations, as democratic theory would suggest. In this imaginary, only objective criteria should guide actions. Democratic politics understood as the ability of individuals to shape the course of events is reduced to a bias, a mere incident along the way to reaching a greater and objective good.

This script damages democratic practice in various ways, hindering individual political action. First, if technological progress and not human action are the drivers of society, people could be less motivated to engage in political life. One may need more incentives to engage with politics when crucial developments are unfolding elsewhere, notably in the realms of technology or economics. This imaginary further reinforces the belief that politics cannot impact reality, making the vary act of voting seeming pointless since societal changes are not politics-driven. This, in turn, significantly limits political participation and undermines the legitimacy of the system. After all, if democratic politics is not relevant, why people should care about it?

In addition, if politics is pursuing an objective common good, some people might hesitate to align with a particular stance and participate, as varying perspectives on what constitutes the common good are not taken into account. Politics becomes a domain reserved for experts rather than an open space for contributions from all citizens, thereby restricting participation and the role of lay people.

When the cumulative repertoire that feeds public discourse is influenced by this imaginary, the debate within democracy tends to become a discussion about what is true and what is false, rather than a discussion about what is preferable and what is not, since only one version of the common good is accepted. As Barbi argues "a vicious circle prompted when the public sphere approaches the political 'from the standpoint of truth', reducing the

political to expert problems with right and wrong answers."[57] This is a dangerous dynamic that not only depoliticizes democracy, but also risks increasing polarization and incivility in public discourse as it fails to recognize the legitimacy and perspectives of others, assuming there is only one objective common good.[58]

Finally, the technocratic script makes it more challenging to organize politics. For instance, sponsoring the myth of neutrality further delegitimizes political parties, which are, by definition, partisan, and therefore non-neutral. Neutrality becomes a synonym of what is good and fair, while partisanship is consistently cast in a negative light. A clear, recent example of this dichotomy is the narrative "country over party" promoted by Kamala Harris during the 2024 U.S. presidential campaign.[59] Regardless of any political or moral assessment of this strategy, it clearly resonates with a neutrality-centered vision of politics. If the common good is non-conflictual and objective, there is no need for political parties, counterpublics, or organized groups.[60] Eventually, the technocratic imaginary could lay the basis for an alternative to the democratic regime. By suggesting that what matters is only the maximization of a pre-determined output in terms of public good and not how decisions are made, a technocratic imaginary could open the door to epistocracy, a system where only certified competent people are believed to rightly have access to political power.[61]

The Neoliberal Imaginary: Eroding Collective Action

For Foucault, the primary feature of neoliberalism is considering the market as the mode of rationality for the State and society, the political and the social.[62] Consequently, neoliberalism brings the specific economic form of the market to other domains, sponsoring in every field the value of competition, inequality, and limited public action. As Brown emphasized, neoliberalism subjectifies people as *Homo oeconomicus*, that, in her view, are "financialized human capital." The goal of the *H. oeconomicus* is to "self-invest in ways that enhance its value or to attract investors through constant attention to its actual or figurative credit rating, and to do this across every sphere of its existence."[63] These aspects give rise to an imaginary built on two elements: the primacy of the individual dimension over the collective and the pervasiveness of the economic sphere.

While scholars emphasized the presence of neoliberal values in our daily lives, understanding how this imaginary has been established proves to be a more intricate task.[64] The theoretical foundations of the neoliberal doctrine presented by the Chicago School, or the so-called conservative revolution of Thatcher and Reagan alone, fell short of explanation.

Such a widespread imaginary demands an equally robust investment from a symbolic standpoint. A few narrative tropes, for instance, played a significant role in constructing the symbolic dimension of neoliberalism such as the notion of the "self-made man," or the myth of "merit."[65] Other crucial concepts include human capital, metaphors portraying the State as a business, and the ability of certain brands (like Apple, Nike, or Netflix) to become genuine status symbols and sources of social identity. The success of the neoliberal imaginary may also derive from its ability to align with pre-existing cultural transformations, such as the rise of post-materialistic values, which prioritize the individual and their rights over collective considerations.[66] Moreover, the neoliberal imaginary has greatly benefited from anti-political narratives that view government as a problem and public sector-related expenses as wasteful, as seen in the myth of the "welfare queen" in the United States, or discourses supported by policymakers themselves.[67] Neoliberal rhetoric has been increasingly employed in public discourse, for instance, in discussions about national crises, feminism and gender issues, education policies, and citizenship rights.[68]

How does this imaginary impact democracy? The neoliberal imaginary depoliticizes, but in a different way than technocracy. It does not object to the notion that individuals form the basis of the political sphere.[69] It operates more subtly, limiting human agency in two ways: 1) making political and collective goals more challenging to achieve, and 2) restricting the scope of agency itself.

First, the neoliberal imaginary complicates the realization of political human agency by promoting the notion, famously expressed by Margaret Thatcher, that there is no society, only individuals. This idea makes building a collective dimension in society increasingly difficult. Consequently, reduced to their individual dimension, people cannot come together and exert power collectively.[70] Secondly, the neoliberal imaginary curtails citizens' agency by framing all aspects of life through an economic lens. In essence, one is free to choose, but only within the confines of production and consumption. Neoliberalism does not deny human agency but restricts it to the economic domain, excluding politics. As Brown suggests, the neoliberal imaginary aims to replace the idea of human beings as *Homo politicus* – capable of political sovereignty, freedom, and legitimacy – with *Homo oeconomicus*, emphasizing economic agency over politics.[71] This dual layer, in response, aligns with two anti-democratic scripts.

The first script urges citizens to prioritize self-care, personal success, and individual careers ahead of collective or public concerns. In other words, it is an encouragement to

prioritize personal gain over the common good. A certain form of selfishness (or at least self-care) is undoubtedly good and inherent to human nature and its survival instincts. However, when selfishness becomes not only accepted but also endorsed and legitimized economically, socially, and politically that may become a problem. This shift has consequences, as it alters individuals' concrete choices and their attitudes towards public life. An example of this is higher education. For Crouch, neoliberalism extends into education when students are encouraged to see it as a competition—a mechanical process focused solely on achieving high grades to enhance their individual earning potential in the job market.[72] In this way, the core values and scripts of neoliberalism permeates the socialization processes within higher education institutions.

The neoliberal script poses a significant barrier to those diverse forms of collective beings essential for a democracy, such as organized groups, political movements, or even gathering for protests. This process works also in communication terms. As Asen suggests, "denying the possibility of a collective 'we,' a neoliberal public seeks to deny the possibility of relationality itself, or, at least, to fix relationships among people as a zero-sum battle for competitive advantage."[73] By framing every discussion in terms of personal responsibility and denying the existence of the collective, the cumulative repertoire of the neoliberal imaginary undermines the basis of collective life. This way, people lack the essential frameworks and imaginative resources needed to unite and organize sustainably beyond brief mobilizations around single issues or forms of slacktivism on social media.[74]

Addressing the challenge of collective action becomes more demanding as this script amplifies individuals' inclination to free ride, increasing participation costs.[75] The very existence of collective entities such as political parties or unions gets more problematic since the burden of collective organization is deemed irrational within a neoliberal imaginary and discouraged by common sense discourse. As a result of the rise of individualistic culture and the decline of collective identities, organized political forces have, over recent decades, steadily lost members and influence, becoming isolated elites, delegitimized and disconnected from society.[76] The reduced inclination for people to cooperate and unite, minding their own business, also decreases social capital, which studies have linked to the well-being of democracy and effective governance.[77]

This script clearly challenges the very foundation of political representation. When a collective identity exists, representing a community is more straightforward. But as that idea

lacks in the collective imaginary and citizens become isolated individuals, or "monads," elected politicians found increasingly difficult to represent the people, and the gap between lay citizens and political institutions may increase.

The second script, emerging from the pervasiveness of the economic sphere in everyday life and the rise of the *Homo oeconomicus,* encourages people to view social problems as personal issues rather than political ones. A neoliberal public sphere challenges the very notion of multiple public spheres, as it subjects everything to the lens of economization.[78] This belief makes discussing problems in the public arena or framing them as public issues very hard, contributing to their depoliticization.[79] For instance, eco-anxiety about climate change is not addressed by advocating for environmentally friendly policies but by seeking psychological support. The solution to economic inequalities does not involve advocating for higher taxes or higher incomes for the working class; it is advancing one's career and increasing personal income. Solutions to problems are then individual, not collective. In the technocratic imaginary, problem resolution relies on technological innovation, while in the neoliberal imaginary it falls on the individual and the market. Challenging structural elements (allocating funds for health care differently, supporting reform in the job market, and so on) would require collective action, which the previous anti-democratic script makes difficult to achieve. In this way, politics ceases to be the realm of human action and choices. In the neoliberal imaginary, politics becomes a mere consumer good, a topic of discussion like many others.[80]

The Anti-Political Imaginary: Demonizing Institutions

Anti-politics is a simple, though contested, concept.[81] While there are insightful academic reflections on anti-politics, the anti-political imaginary is less theoretically sophisticated than the neoliberal or technocratic one.[82] It does not support a specific vision of how the world should be, but instead expresses opposition to the political status quo.

As Clarke et al. suggest, anti-politics is "citizens' negative sentiment towards the activities and institutions of formal politics."[83] Derived from that, the basic assumption of the anti-political imaginary is the common sense for which politics is inherently flawed and corrupted. That leads to a negative evaluation of politicians, elected institutions, and established organizations dealing with politics, such as political parties. These institutions are deemed closed, self-referential, and aimed at perpetuating their power without considering popular demands. The anti-political imaginary does not necessarily involve

depoliticization or a full delegitimization of democratic politics but rather a radical contestation of those institutions that allow it to function.

Compared to the previous imaginaries, the anti-political imaginary is more straightforward to quantify in survey terms.[84] To have an idea, in France, almost 66% of the population does not trust the government. In Italy, this number rises to almost 70%. Concerning political parties, in the G7 countries, just 17.6% of the population states to have some confidence in them. In the US, it is just 10%, and in France, 11.5%.[85] It seems that many people would share Simon Weil's view: “The institution of political parties appears to be an almost unmixed evil. They are bad in principle, and in practice their impact is noxious.”[86] Recent polls indicate that 65% of U.S. citizens feel exhausted when thinking about politics, while 55% report feeling angry, and only 10% say they feel hopeful. Likewise, the words most commonly associated with the current state of U.S. politics include: “divisive,” “corrupt,” “messy,” “dysfunctional,” “bad,” “polarized,” “confusing,” and “disgusting.[87]

The diffusion of the neoliberal and technocratic imaginaries contributed to anti-politics, exacerbating the delegitimization of political institutions. However, there are some specific and original elements to explore. For instance, it is noteworthy that almost all public narratives depicting institutionalized political power portray it as something negative. There is a kind of "Orwellian bias" in the stories we tell. The narrative archetype of an empire/party/government against some form of resistance is present in some of the most popular stories that inhabit the Western imaginary: Orwell's *1984*, the *Star Wars* saga, Philip K. Dick's novels, and *V for Vendetta*, not to mention movies, TV series, and books about political leaders whose sole purpose is maximizing power, no matter the cost (to name just a few recent examples: *Vice, Napoleon, House of Cards, Il Divo*). This may seem trivial, but movies, books, and pop culture play a fundamental role in shaping the social imaginary. They provide elements for the cumulative repertoire of politics, offering categories to interpret social reality and sources for people to emulate. Just as it is important to have female heroes to represent women (and other historically under-represented categories), it would be equally vital to portray "good" politicians and leaders who can inspire positive change in society.

To understand why politicians are among the most despised professional class in modern society, Clarke et al. emphasizes the role of folk theories in fostering anti-politics.[88] In particular, the changing understanding of what constitutes a good politician has raised

expectations too high. If once citizens expected a politician to be only "for the people" (capable and trustworthy), now they must also be "of the people" (typical, in touch). These two features are often in contradiction with each other, making the model impossible to reach and exacerbating political dissatisfaction.

The anti-political imaginary does not provide a clear answer to societal problems. The anti-democratic script that arises from it is, in fact, reactive rather than proactive. The script advises distrusting institutions, politicians, political parties, and all that is related with politics. In other words, the anti-political script urges us “not to trust.” On the one hand, this script may foster the development of a critical attitude and the will to monitor policymakers' activities, which is undoubtedly good for the functioning of democracy.[89] On the other hand, this critical approach can lead to political apathy and alienation, resulting in a personal withdrawal from societal challenges.[90]

Political institutions remain the primary means for democratic change. However, citizens who could actively contribute to this change often refrain from doing so. That is because “common sense” tells you that politics does not work, is futile, or has been hallowed out by new powers.[91] While there may be good reasons for this perception to be accurate, it is crucial to emphasize how the anti-political imaginary plays a significant role in exacerbating this process and turning politics' futility into a self-fulfilling prophecy. Democracy requires participation, but if common sense discourages involvement, the democratic machinery is at risk of getting stuck. If institutions are the means through which the people express their will, but institutions are delegitimized, and people do not participate, democracy falls apart.

The anti-political imaginary thus provides a key cumulative repertoire for the rhetoric of populist parties. For instance, the frequent demonization of the elite and establishment, the vilification of opponents, disdain for institutions, and the use of hate speech are effective because antipolitical ideas and frames are deeply rooted in the anti-political imaginary, which channels anger and resentment against the political elite.[92] Sometimes, populist parties explicitly employ this imaginary. For example, the Italian Five Star Movement uses the V from "V for Vendetta" in place of the V in "Movement" within its logo.

The anti-political imaginary not only enables certain anti-democratic narratives but also constrains discourse that supports democratic institutions. As Asen argued, imaginaries provide the elements through which subjects are represented in public discourse. Therefore, when the collective imaginary around politics is deeply negative, it obstructs the

development of a positive portrayal of political institutions. For instance, advocating for an increase in political representatives or stronger, better-funded political parties to enhance democratic participation would be difficult. While such debates may thrive in academic circles, the anti-political imaginary inhibits their broader acceptance, restricting the very possibility (or, at least, the electoral effectiveness) of public support for certain political institutions.[93]

The anti-political imaginary fosters a negative bias against politics, leading to the interpretation of institutional actions, party activities, and political figures in an unfavorable frame. Consequently, those who are outside the realm of traditional politics gain credibility and legitimacy. Winning political power often requires presenting oneself as a departure from the past, with movements, not parties, becoming the preferred vehicle for change—examples include Emmanuel Macron in France, the Five Star Movement in Italy, or Donald Trump's MAGA movement in the U.S. At the level of public discourse, this is evident in what Giovanni Orsina calls the "Erysichthon syndrome."[94] Within this view, to gain support and consensus, politicians must draw from the cumulative repertoire of the anti-political imaginary in their public statements. However, by doing so, they perpetuate a vicious cycle in which politics (and therefore they themselves) become increasingly delegitimized. In fact, political parties and institutions are still the primary means to express collective aspirations. Therefore, despite leveraging the anti-political imaginary for initial support, new political entities eventually assimilate into the establishment they aimed to challenge. Consequently, these new formations foster the problem they proposed to solve.

Conclusion

As Benjamin Barber noted, compared to other forms of political culture, democracy may be in particular need for common memory and imaginative elements. While other political systems may rely on imaginaries primarily for the legitimation of their structures, democracy necessitates the funding of myths, rituals, heroes, and collective narratives to vitalize citizens' shared convictions and motivation to engage in the public sphere.[95] Democracy then becomes vulnerable to internal erosion, jeopardizing the democratic common sense of the people. This makes the functioning of democracy significantly challenging, as it is happening today.

This article argued that to better interpret the crisis facing democracy, we should turn our attention to imaginaries. Thanks to their features—productivity, collectivity, normativity,

and plurality—imaginaries are a useful heuristic tool allowing us to take into consideration contradictions and tensions that run through democracies. Looking through the lens of imaginaries helps us understand the paradox where democracy as an abstract idea and as a general way of government is still strongly supported while facing intense practical challenges.[96] The crux of the matter is that while the fundamental imaginary of democracy (popular sovereignty) remains solid, some opposing anti-democratic imaginaries contest this principle, informing anti-democratic actions and discourses. Thus, the democratic machine gets stuck, making individual, collective, and institutional political action increasingly complex and undermining democracies' legitimacy.

The technocratic, neoliberal, and anti-political imaginaries are closely interconnected, mutually reinforcing, and contributing to the collective erosion of liberal democracy, by exacerbating phenomena such as populism, polarization, lack of participation, and hardships in organizing political movements. As Gramsci noted, a crisis is an obstructed situation in which "the old is dying and the new cannot be born."[97] Similarly, the crisis of the democratic imaginary consists in emerging anti-democratic imaginaries that challenge popular sovereignty, without being able to establish a new regime. This makes the overall democratic imaginary plural, contradictory, and contested, with different principles mutually coexisting.

None of these imaginaries are new. A neoliberal common sense has been evident at least since the 1980s, and the technocratic imaginary, along with the fear of technology, dates back even before World War II. Perhaps only the anti-political imaginary, or at least some of its elements prevalent in public debate and common sense, can be traced to the past two/three decades. The contribution of this work does not lie in the recognition of these three phenomena but in understanding their impact on democracy and how their mutual support and interrelations have gradually eroded democratic life, creating a vicious cycle that seems increasingly difficult to break. The argument proposed here is mainly theoretical, and I hope it will open a fruitful debate with more empirical works, addressing how anti-democratic imaginaries emerged and how they affect democratic practices and discourses - topics I have only briefly addressed to support my main argument in this work, but that would need further analysis.

If the crisis of democracy also depends on a crisis of the imaginary, those who support democracy should explore avenues for changing these very imaginaries, employing both political and communicative strategies. Another interesting branch of research would then be to investigate the conditions for which new imaginaries could emerge today. In his study,

Taylor shows us how imaginaries facilitated the emergence of political modernity and democracy in the West.[98] Today, we observe that some imaginaries could lead us in the opposite direction. In other words, the collective stories that allow us to live together and shape our discourses do not always benefit democracy. That is why we need new democratic imaginaries.

Declaration of interest statement: No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

1. Easton, "A Re-Assessment of the Concept", 452.
2. Haerpfer et al., *World Values Survey Wave 7.*
3. Papadopoulos, *Democracy in Crisis?*
4. Crozier et al., *The Crisis of Democracy.*
5. Crouch, *Post-democracy.*
6. Mounk, *The People v. Democracy,* chapter 3.
7. Galston*, "*Populist Challenge to Liberal Democracy"; Bauman, *Liquid Modernity;* Dalton, *Democratic Challenges Democratic Choices;* Schulze, "How Populism and Polarization"; Stavrakakis, "Paradoxes of Polarization"; Mair, *Ruling the Void;* Habets, "The Threat of Counter-narratives"; Plattner, "Authoritarianism Goes Global."
8. Achen and Bartels, *Democracy for Realists.*
9. Ignazi, *Forza senza Legittimità,* VII – XV.
10. Habermas, *A New Structural Transformation.*
11. Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries,* 24.
12. Rosa, *Social Acceleration;* Mendelberg, "From the Folk Theory"; Kahneman, *Thinking, fast and slow.*
13. Di Gregorio, *Demopathy and the Democratic Malaise.*
14. I do not aim to provide exhaustive explanations of how technocracy, neoliberalism, and anti-politics could be detrimental to democracy. This paper focuses on the imaginaries derived from these phenomena and how they can constitute an autonomous element in fostering democratic malaise.
15. Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries.*
16. Brown, *Undoing the Demos.*
17. Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution.*
18. Anderson, *Imagined Communities,* 6-7.
19. Harari, *Homo Deus*, 193-220.
20. Asen, "Imaging in the Public Sphere", 357.
21. Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries.*
22. Ibid., 23.

23. Ezrahi, *Imagined Democracies,* 38.
24. Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries,* 23.
25. Ibid., 24.
26. Jasanoff, *Dreamscapes of modernity* and Mager and Katzenbach, "Future imaginaries."
27. Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries,* 350.
28. Ibid., 361.
29. Ibid., 358.
30. Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare.*
31. Goodnight, "Meta-Politics of the 2002 Iraq Debate", 68.
32. Perrin, *Citizen Speak;* Machin, "Climates of Democracy"; Gumbert, "Anti-Democratic Tenets?"; Johnson, "A Leftists Democratic Imaginary"; Smith, *Laclau and Mouffe;* Wiggan, "Contesting the Austerity"; Blokker, "The Imaginary Constitution"; Shire, "Social-democratic imaginaries": Santos Pereira et al., "Imaginaries of Nuclear Energy"; Molla and Cuthbert, "Crisis and Policy Imaginaries"; Larsen, "The Lutheran Imaginary."
33. Calhoun, "Imagining Solidarity"; Heikkilä, "Beyond 'In so far' as Questions"; Gunn, "Refiguring Fantasy"; Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*; Goodnight, "Meta-Politics of the 2002 Iraq Debate"; Gole, "Islam in Public"; Cisneros, "(Re)bordering the Civic Imaginary."
34. Bruner, "The Narrative Construction."
35. DeVito et al., "Algorithms Ruin Everything", 3165.
36. Bruner, "The Narrative Construction."
37. Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries,* 183.
38. Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses", 82.
39. Galli, *Ideologia,* 84.
40. Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries,* 25.
41. Asen, "Imagining in the Public Sphere", 351.
42. Chadwick, *The Hybrid Media System.*
43. Ezrahi, *Imagined Democracies.*
44. Democratic theories provide a different understanding of this contribution. For elitist theories, it is encapsulated in voting and choosing different leaders. For those who support a participatory view of democracy, citizens should participate more substantially in political life, as is the case for participatory budget plans, protests and manifestations, public consultations, etc. See: Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, Democracy* and Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory.*
45. Ezrahi, *The Descent of Icarus.*
46. Haerpfer et al., *World Values Survey Wave 7.*
47. ANSA, "*Draghi Considers.*"
48. Gunnell, "The Technocratic Image."
49. Carlisle, "The Birth of Technocracy."
50. Schmitt, "The Age of Neutralizations."
51. MacKenzie and Wajcman, *The Social Shaping of Technology,* 24.
52. Morozov, *To Save Everything,* 1-17.
53. Harari, *Homo Deus,* 449-485.
54. Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism, 383-392.*

55. Burrell and Fourcade, “The Society of Algorithms”, 216-218.
56. Balbi, *L’Ultima Ideologia*, 47.
57. Barbi, “Technocracy and the Public Sphere”, 392.
58. Urbinati, *Democracy Disfigured,* 4-7; Rega et al., “Incivility in Online Discussion.”
59. Caramani, “Will vs. Reason.”
60. Le Monde, “*Kamala Harris Promises.“*
61. Brennan, *Against Democracy.*
62. Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics.*
63. Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 33.
64. Bauman, *Liquid Life* and Han, *Psychopolitics.*
65. Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit.*
66. Inglehart, *The Silent Revolution.*
67. McKeon, “The Power of Names.”
68. Crines, “The Rhetoric of Neoliberalism”; Colley and White, “Neoliberal Feminism”; Orphan et al., “State of Rhetoric”; Mavelli, *Neoliberal Citizenship.*
69. Brown contends that neoliberalism's depoliticization goes deep into the foundations of politics. However, the neoliberal imaginary I refer to is much more superficial than neoliberalism itself and it does not entail a full delegitimating of politics. It is limited to the core ideas of the neoliberal ideology (the prominence of the individual dimension and the pervasiveness of the economic sphere) and the common sense derived from that. These claims do not directly challenge the principle that human agency should be the basis of political life, like the technocratic imaginary did. This also highlights the importance of distinguishing between ideology and imaginary.
70. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 200-201.
71. Brown, *Undoing the Demos.*
72. Asen, “Neoliberalism: The Public Sphere”, 16.
73. Crouch, “Post-democracy After the Crises”, 175.
74. Cabrera et al., “Activism or Slacktivism?”
75. Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action.*
76. Dalton and Wattenberg, *Parties Without Partisans.*
77. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work.*
78. Asen, “Neoliberalism: The Public Sphere”, 16.
79. McAfee, “Neoliberalism and other.”
80. Han, *Psychopolitics.*
81. Truffelli and Zambernardi, “Taking Modernity to Extremes.”
82. Hay, *Why We Hate Politics* and Wood, *Politicisation, Depoliticisation and Anti-Politics.*
83. Clarke et al., *The Good Politician*, 77.
84. Pharr and Putnam, *Disaffected Democracies.*
85. Haerpfer et al., *World Values Survey Wave 7.*
86. Weil, *On the Abolition of*, 13.
87. Pew Research Centre, “*Americans’ Dismal Views.*”
88. Clarket et al., *The Good Politician.*
89. Rosanvallon, *Counter-Democracy.*
90. Finifter, “Dimensions of Political Alienation”, 390-391; moreover, trust (among people and towards institutions) is one of the indicators most associated with the

proper functioning of democracy and with pro-democratic attitudes. See: Catterberg and Moreno, "The Individual Bases" and Zmerli and Newton, "Social Trust and Attitudes."

91. Crouch, *Post-Democracy* and Mair, *Ruling the Void.*
92. Lacatus and Meibauer, "Crisis, Rhetoric and Right-Wing"; Çinar et al., "Presidential Rhetoric and Populism"; Demaske, "Trump's Hateful Rhetoric."
93. Rosenblum, *On the Side of the Angels.*
94. Orsina, *The Democracy of Narcissism*, 122-127.
95. Barber, *Strong Democracy*, 191.
96. Wuttke, Gavras and Schoen, "Have Europeans Grow Tired", 426.
97. Gramsci, *Quaderni dal carcere vol I*, 311.
98. Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries.*

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