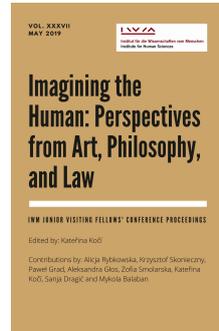


Martha Nussbaum and the Uses of Imagination in Political Philosophy

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IWM Junior Visiting Fellows' Conference Proceedings, Vol. XXXVII © 2019 by the author

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Introduction

This paper is composed of two parts. In the first part, I try to outline the importance of the study of imagination for political philosophy – especially for any political philosophy that concerns itself with the future. I will try to argue that analysing the frontiers of our political imagination and devising ways to expand these frontiers is a pressing task; I will also suggest what kind of research would be needed in order to engage with this problem.

In the second part I will move to a more detailed analysis of what is signalled in the title, namely the role of imagination in political philosophy – or in political thought more generally – taking Martha Nussbaum as my primary example.

I would like to use this opportunity to thank the Permanent and Visiting Fellows at the Institute for Human Sciences, especially Aishwary Kumar, Ivan Krastev, Miloš Vec and Jakub Jirsa for their helpful comments, discussions and suggestions. I would also thank Sanja Dragić and the Junior Fellows for inviting me to participate in the conference.

Imagination and Political Philosophy

Why is imagination a valid – or indeed pressing – issue for political philosophy? A very cautious answer could go as follows: for the last few decades, Western societies seem to be suffering from a crisis of (thinking about) the future, which thinkers such as Krzysztof Pomian deplored as early as the 1980s (in his essay “Crisis of the Future”)[[1](#)]. Although the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union brightened the horizon by a few shades, soon the outlook returned to its familiar gloom – bringing us to a landscape that Utopian studies specialist Ruth Levitas describes thusly: “Post-1989, it might be said that we live, in an almost biblical sense, after the fall, but with no hope of redemption.”[[2](#)]

The “crisis of the future” might be another name for “the end of history”, which, as we seem to have already found out, turned out to be a fantasy rather than sound political diagnosis. It seems, however that regardless of history not ending, the claims of crisis seem to be repeating, when leftist theorists such as Mark Fisher say that “[c]apitalism seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable”[3]; while Frederic Jameson and Slavoj Žižek proclaim that “it seems easier to imagine the ‘end of the world’ than a far more modest change in the mode of production”[4]. Of course, for a Marxist thinker such as Žižek, only a shift in the “mode of production” can lead to any social shift worth its name; we can therefore with some confidence say that all these accounts indicate that any serious social change seems to lie beyond the scope of our current imagination. I do not have the space here – nor perhaps (or especially) enough material yet to show how this rhymes with theories claiming that capitalism is somehow a “natural” system, one which mimics the natural order of things (as described, for example, by the Darwinian, or rather Wallacean principle of the survival of the fittest).

The focus on imagination may also have to be understood in another context. It seems that there are two possible modes (or rather “ideal models”) of bringing about social change. One works in the logic of imagination – first we imagine a state of affairs that we deem desirable, and then we work to bring it about.

The other one works in the logic of the event, which is in a way a materialist or even straightforwardly Marxist logic; it is espoused by philosophers such as Gilles Deleuze (at least in François Zourabichvili’s interpretation). Deleuze claims that what philosophy does is only to answer to the event, it copes with whatever happened and tries to stay true to it. This is clearly a variation on the traditional Marxist theme that it is only after the change in the material base – the forces and relations of production – can ideology change (this is also a possible answer to the Žižek/Jameson problem). It is not the place to discuss here if “staying true to the event” can or should be understood in terms of ideology; Marxist or otherwise.

From the perspective of what political philosophy (or political thought in general) can or should be, both of these scenarios have their flaws. In the “event” scenario, political thought is always reactive – Its only possibility is to “fly at dusk” much as Minerva’s owl in the Hegelian framework. It is also passive in the sense that it does not contribute to the change itself in a meaningful way.

The “imagination” scenario is of course the one followed by most utopian theorists and has the obvious flaws associated with this thinking – most utopias, from Plato to Moore to Wells to Callenbach, do not seem viable, nor are they sustainable when tried in real life.

The idea to focus on imagination is thus a way to take a step back and think about the conditions of possibility of coming up with utopian scenarios (or generally politically-oriented visions for the future); it would hopefully go in the way of addressing some of the flaws of the “imagination” approach.

In this vein, as I currently understand my project, it should focus on limits or frontiers of political imagination, namely ask the question: why is it that our imagination stops at a certain point, that we find some outcomes – such as Žižek /Jameson’s “end of capitalism” – unimaginable? What are our “imaginative blindspots” – beliefs, “laws” or institutions that we find necessary, unchangeable or “natural”, but are not necessarily so?

In its most general scope, this project is of course too wide and too ambitious for one person or discipline to accomplish, and would require at the least a wide, interdisciplinary team. Aside from the obvious choices for analysing political matters, such as historians, philosophers, sociologists, law theorists and political scientists, such a team could and should include researchers from disciplines that concern themselves with imagination and its limits in less directly political contexts. Examples could include literary theorists conscious not only of the workings of literary imagination, but also in historical and contemporary works of science-fiction and utopian fiction; psychologists who concern themselves with how imagination works on a purely individual (even neurophysiological) level; art historians and film scholars, who can speak with authority about images and the way the limits of our visual imagination have been transcended in the past.

While working as a part of such a team might be possible in the future, its formation would require months if not years of preparatory work. It is such work that my current research seeks to be a part of. Rather than try first to construct a general theory of imagination, and only then see how it works in political contexts, I am trying to conduct a series of studies concentrated on thinkers who already engage in similar exercises, even if the questions I pose them are not entirely their own questions.

Martha Nussbaum and Political Imagination

The scope of Martha Nussbaum’s work is immense and includes commentaries to classical philosophical texts (eg. Aristotle’s *De Anima* or Plato’s *Republic*), essays on literature (*Love’s Knowledge, Philosophical Interventions*), education (*Not for Profit, Cultivating Humanity*), texts bordering on psychology (*Upheavals of Thought, Hiding from Humanity*) and economical science (*The Quality of Life*, written with the Nobel-Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen). In a number of books, Nussbaum underscores the importance of imagination, especially in the context of ethics and politics. These works include now classical works of political philosophy such as *Frontiers of Justice*, and more current political commentaries (e.g., *The New Religious Intolerance* or *Monarchy of Fear*) to works on education and literature (*Love’s Knowledge, Poetic Justice*).

Nussbaum talks about imagination primarily in the context of political emotions and the use of literature – especially realist novels – as a vehicle for political thought. She often quotes Henry James, who says that the role of the writer is “to create the record, in default of any other enjoyment of it: to imagine, in a word, the honourable, the productive case. What better example than this of the high and the helpful public and, as it were, civic use of the imagination?”[5].

Why is it especially novels that function this way?

As Nussbaum says, novels are not to represent “raw” life, but they are its “close and careful interpretative description”. Nussbaum adds that in fact nothing about our life can be called “raw”, as we are all “makers of fictions”, since we spend it in an interpretative way. What novels have to offer is perspective – “in the activity of literary imagining we are led to imagine and describe with greater precision, focusing our attention on each word, feeling each event more keenly – whereas much of actual life goes by without that heightened awareness, and is thus, in a certain sense, not fully or thoroughly lived”. Nussbaum concludes that literature “is an extension of life not only horizontally, bringing the reader into contact with events or locations or persons or problem he or she has not otherwise met, but also, so to speak, vertically, giving the reader experience that is deeper, sharper and more precise than much of what takes place in life”[6].

In *Love’s Knowledge* and in a number of other works Nussbaum points to Aristotle’s theory of imagination (also because she started out as a classics scholar). As Malcolm Schofield affirms, “Aristotle’s *phantasia* is a loose-knit, family concept”[7], which is equally important for his theory of perception as for the theory of action. What then is most important in Aristotle for Nussbaum?

I believe three points are of key importance here. Firstly, imagination plays a key role in the theory of action and in ethics. As Dorothea Frede writes in her commentary on *phantasia* in Aristotle, “[a]ll activities, whether based on non-rational or on rational desire, presuppose that I envisage something as good or bad for me, to be pursued or avoided. The necessary condition of my thinking that something is good or bad, according to Aristotle, is that the soul shall have certain *phantasmata*: I have to have the image of a future good or bad”[8]. This means, in a way on a counter note to Kant, that it is only through and thanks to the rightful use of imagination can we pursue goals in our lives, and that the more this imagination is trained (by, for example, the reading of novels), the better we are at running our lives.

Secondly, literary imagination focuses not on the real events of one’s life, but on what might happen: “history simply records what in fact occurred, whether or not it represents a general possibility for human lives. Literature focuses on the possible, inventing its readers to wonder about themselves (...) the readers’ emotions and imagination are highly active as a result, and it is the nature of this activity, and its relevance for public thinking, that interests me”[9]. This is a similar point to the one which was made for the relevance of novels, namely that imagination tends to have greater precision and focus than our experience of everyday life.

And thirdly, using imagination stands in contrast to simply using or applying rules of conduct such as proposed by utilitarians or certain Kantians. The Aristotelian approach, enhanced by literary imagination, helps to understand the vulnerability of the people whose fate we decide (as voters, as judges, as politicians etc). An example of this anti-utilitarianism is given by Nussbaum in *Poetic Justice*, where she argues at length, based on a reading of Dickens’s *Hard Times* against a narrow, utilitarian vision of human conduct, ethics and education. What the book shows is the emptiness of utilitarian ideas embodied in Mr. Gradgrind’s educational approach and the dullness of his best student, Bitzer.

In *Frontiers of Justice* Nussbaum makes a similar point when analyzing the strength of the utilitarian theory laid out by Peter Singer in *Animal Liberation*, she argues that it is not the simple ethical formula (suffering matters ethically, therefore if animals suffer their suffering also matters ethically) that makes this philosophical book and other interventions such an intellectual hit – it is rather the rhetorical, emotional, imaginative quality of the writing.[10]

Of course Nussbaum does not propose to supplant ethical theory with imagination – quite the contrary; in her vision, the role of imagination is rather that of a supplement – it needs to be added to other tools used in ethical and political theory.

All this leads Nussbaum to her famous pro-Liberal Education stance, described, for example, in *Not for Profit and Cultivating Humanity*, where she advocates the teaching of great novels as a tool for developing an empathetic attitude towards others, especially those farthest away from us in a geographical or cultural sense.

The Limits of (Nussbaum's) Political Imagination

This short presentation of imagination in Nussbaum is enough to notice that the question I intend to ask about political imagination itself, namely that of its limits, is not the one Nussbaum herself is asking, nor does she answer it in an explicit manner. It seems that the question of the frontiers of imagination lies outside the scope of her theory altogether. However, I believe that there is a way to approach it, based on some indications in her work.

First of all, one needs to notice that imagination in itself is not, for Nussbaum, a universally good tool – maybe it should be said that it can be shaped rather than simply developed. As she warns in *Political Emotions*: “If people interested in relief of poverty, justice for minorities, political and religious liberty, democracy and global justice eschew symbol and rhetoric, fearing all appeals to emotions and imagination as inherently dangerous and irrational, people with less appetizing aims will monopolize these forces, to the detriment of democracy, and of people”[11].

The reason for these possible abuses is double – we are prone to narrow ethical judgments, on the one hand because of “a structure of imagination and affection that is a part of our likely evolutionary heritage”[12], but most of all “the primary sources of group hatred, stigmatization, and exclusion must be sought in structures peculiar to human life.”[13].

If the latter is true and imagination-enhancing props such as novels may be used for stigmatisation, hatred and exclusion (amounting to “dehumanisation”, as she shows in *Poetic Justice*), then we need a way to choose books that accomplish the lofty goals Nussbaum has in mind. Imagination cannot be left to its own purposes, it needs to be backed by ethical theory. As Nussbaum asserts, the “[e]thical assessment of the novels themselves, in conversation both with other readers and with the arguments of moral and political theory, is therefore necessary if the contribution of novels is to be politically fruitful. We are seeking, overall, the best fit between our considered moral and political

judgments and the insights offered by our reading. Reading can lead us to alter some of our standing judgments, but it is also the case that these judgments can cause us to reject some experience of reading as deforming or pernicious”[14].

This seems to mean that whatever change to our ethical stance is to be brought by the imaginative practice of the reading of novels, it essentially stays within our already-established worldview. To use a language that might be closer to Nussbaum’s parlance, inspired by Rawls’s *Theory of Justice*, the nature of our “considered judgments” does not change substantially with reading, it can only be perfected. It might seem, then, that reading novels is not actually as “subversive” as Nussbaum claims. If we are seeking “the best fit” with what we already know to be ethically important, then we are going to choose books according to judgments that we already have – without somebody “wiser” to choose the books for us (as it happens, for example, in American Liberal Arts programs focusing on “great books”). It is also interesting in the context of Nussbaum’s own reading – as I said earlier, she values highly classical realist literature with writers such as Dickens or James being some of her favourite; she also values a number of Indian writers including Rabindranath Tagore, but rejects writers such as Beckett (whose political importance was clear, for example, for Deleuze), on the grounds of not being “social” enough, or not depicting realistic, politically useful visions of society[15].

It is also important to note that Nussbaum rejects a far-reaching historical skepticism as an approach that is not conducive to the actual experience of reading novels. Such a skepticism would include the rejection of any extrahistorical standards and the contention that such standards are crucial for any binding ethical judgments. Nussbaum rejects this type of skepticism based on the fact that (1) it has never been really proven to be true; (2) more importantly – it does not describe the way we actually read novels, not as critics, but as human beings.

I will not unpack Nussbaum’s notion of the human being at the moment; but what is crucial is that this reasoning shows that our imagination, engaged and used in the way Nussbaum would like it to be engaged and used, can only serve to perfect or better embody the values that are already present in our society. It is an understandable conclusion in view of Nussbaum’s own goals – for example *Poetic Justice* is a book aiming to prove the usefulness of imaginative reading for judges in the tradition-driven, precedent-based American law tradition – but it is not conducive for imagining radical social change.

Conclusions

It seems that Nussbaum’s philosophy of literature cannot be used to analyse the frontiers of our current political imagination as I tried to describe them in the first part of this text – at least not in a straightforward manner. Its especially problematic element is the choice of novels, which is limited to the realist, liberal tradition – both her take on Beckett in *Love’s Knowledge* and the seeming lack of interest in more transgressive texts, also in the formal sense (she appears to completely ignore much of the 20th-century avant-garde movement or postmodern literature, just to name a few examples), seems to indicate as

much. An easy-to-formulate (and perhaps facile) reason for this seems that, as some of Nussbaum's critics have indicated, is that she operates squarely within the limits of the liberal tradition – for this reason she has been dubbed a “compensatory humanist” who proposes “outdated” ideas as a “utopian project still to come”[16]. She has also been accused of not taking into account the structural failures of capitalism, seeing it as an essentially perfectible system[17]; in this sense she might be seen as exhibiting the same lack of imagination that Jameson and Žižek have described. Another reason might be Nussbaum's eminently practical stance, which makes her more prone to addressing social problems in a way they can be addressed here and now – this way, if her theory is “utopian”, it is the only utopia she can imagine happening in the foreseeable future.

Nonetheless, Nussbaum's take on imagination and the novel do provide at least two useful pointers to how we can and should use imagination in a political context. Firstly, imagination is an empathetic tool which is neither supposed to supplant theory, nor yield itself to it – true ethical and political thinking can only be accomplished in the intersection of the two. And secondly, and perhaps more importantly, empathetic imagination is a tool that helps to at once particularise and universalise certain thoughts, emotions and experiences – it is perhaps this empathetic imagination that is lacking in philosophical utopian thinking, forcing it to focus on ideals and projects that seem dry and lifeless in the face of actual, lived experience.

[1] Pomian, Krzysztof. “Kryzys przyszłości”. In *Oblicza XX wieku. Szkice historyczno-polityczne*. Lublin: UMCS 2002.

[2] Ruth Levitas, “For Utopia: The (Limits of the) Utopian Function in Late Capitalist Society”. In *The Philosophy of Utopia*. Edited by Barbara Goodwin. London: Routledge 2001, p. 31.

[3] Fisher, Mark. *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Winchester: Zero Books, 2009, p. 8.

[4] Žižek, Slavoj. *Mapping Ideology*. New York: Verso, 2012, p. 1.

[5] Qtd in: Nussbaum, Martha C. *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1992, e.g., p. 165.

[6] All quotes from Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, pp. 47-48.

[7] Schofield, Malcolm. “Aristotle on the Imagination.” In *Essays on Aristotle's de Anima*, edited by Martha Craven Nussbaum and Amélie Rorty, 249–77. Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 256.

[8] Frede, Dorothea. “The Cognitive Role of Phantasia in Aristotle.” In *Essays on Aristotle's de Anima*, edited by Martha C. Nussbaum and Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, 279–95. Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 288-289.

[9] Nussbaum, Martha C. *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life*. Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1995, p. 5.

[10] Nussbaum, Martha C. *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership*. Cambridge, Mass. London, England: Belknap Press: An Imprint of Harvard University Press, 2007, esp. pp. 352-356.

[11] Nussbaum, Martha C. *Political Emotions*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013, p. 256.

[12] Nussbaum, *Political Emotions*, p. 168.

[13] Nussbaum, *Political Emotions*, p. 168.

[14] Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, p. 10.

[15] See Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, pp. 286-313.

[16] Braidotti, Rosi. *The Posthuman*. Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA, USA: Polity, 2013, pp. 76 and 149.

[17] Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, p. 149.
