Sovereign Imaginaries

How Corporate Digital Imaginaries are endangering our Political Practices

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Corporate digital sovereignty as a *"coup des gens"*

Debates on digital sovereignty go straight to the question of what democracy means in the digital age, as they are traditionally concerned with the fundamental relationship between the state itself and the different subjects that live in that state.

This chapter aims to explore the question of digital sovereignty by reflecting on its ambivalent character, as current technological and political ways of intending and practicing sovereignty can be understood in fact either as limiting or as expanding democracy and the democratic rights.

While the question of digital sovereignty is usually analyzed through the struggle over control of the digital space between states and corporations (and also among states or among corporations[1]), I propose in this chapter to bring forward the question of sovereignty focusing on the relationship between corporations and *individuals* (or better, the collective subject). The reasons for doing so are several.

1 We have seen examples of these struggles over the exercize of sovereignty many times. To mention only the most recent ones from this summer 2020, we could remember the failure of the British Government to develop a centralized Corona App without using the API from Google and Apple; or the still open legal battle over the use of TikTok in the US.

First, in modern western democracies all forms of sovereignty are understood as taking their legitimacy from popular sovereignty (which can be described as the individual sovereignty that becomes socialized in a political and collective subject). Second, I believe the question of digital sovereignty is a question that should be addressed by each and every one of us, because as Luciano Floridi puts it, the consequences of the fight over digital sovereignty will affect us all, "even those who do not have a mobile phone or have never used an online service" (Floridi 2020, 369). Third, as I will try to make evident in this chapter, I consider the struggle over the concept of sovereignty on the individual level to have an incredible and symbolic impact. This is because it is at the individual level (through the dissemination of the myth of the "all-powerful" individual) that the fight over sovereignty between corporations and states is developed. By forging this image of the all-powerful digital citizen, corporations are in fact undermining the state sovereignty from the bottom-up, through the image of technology as a tool for liberation that gives control to its users. If popular sovereignty is historically where the legitimation for the democratic state lies, then in order to understand how digital sovereignty is being reshaped we need to start from "the people." I share on this Shoshana Zuboff's analysis that the corporate takeover of our economies and lives in the digital sphere is not a *coup d'état* but a *coup des gens*. In her own words: "It is a form of tyranny that feed on people but is not of the people. In a surreal paradox, this coup is celebrated as 'personalization,' although it defies, ignores, overrides, and displaces everything about you and me that is personal" (Zuboff 2019, 513). In this chapter I would argue that it is by building the image of the all-powerful digital user (and citizen) that many digital corporations claim to take their legitimacy and their sovereign power.

On the following pages, I will explore first what it means to pose the concept of *sovereignty* as a social and political imaginary and how this concept is used to exercise power in practice, what its roots are and what the implications. I will then reflect on how (and whether) digital sovereignty could be imagined differently within the digital society, by drawing on the field of social movement studies and digital activism. What has been happening in these fields in fact exemplifies the power of imaginaries in the digital age, and how they have been shaping the concept of activism and resistance as well. The chapter concludes

with a reflection on why society needs to deal with these imaginaries first, in order to develop a critique and practice of resistance that are effective in the longer term in regaining our sovereign digital rights.

Sovereign imaginaries: building the legitimacy for digital sovereignty

Yaron Ezrahi in his book *Imagined Democracy* talks about the imaginary character of democracies by claiming that the main idea of self-government by the people is actually based on what he calls "fictive-performative foundations" (Ezrahi 2012, 3). Political imaginaries, he says, are fictions, metaphors and ideas that, once established, have the power to regulate our political behavior. Ezrahi is not alone in pointing towards the powerful role of imagination in shaping political structures and institutions. Benedict Anderson (1983) in his book *Imagined Communities* shares the same principle, where he famously states that the nation is nothing less than an imagined community, as we will never get to know in person our fellow citizens, but we are nevertheless linked to them through an act of imagination.[2]

According to Cornelius Castoriadis (2005 [1987]) imagination is *always* and *already* in power, in the sense that it is imagination which shapes our ways of understanding and seeing the social sphere, and that it is imagination that can make us shape the social otherwise. The power of the social imagination, Castoriadis continues is the most powerful but also the most dangerous of all forms of power, as it operates invisibly. Until it is contested, the power of the social imaginary would appear to us as completely self-evident. In other words, this "power is conspicuous by its absence" (Wolf 2013, 197). The project of a digital form of activism should aim at making this power present and visible instead.

The study of social imaginaries is a growing academic field (Adams et al. 2015) that enquires into how different symbols and meanings can historically shape the political instituting of different modes of society. As societies perform the task of trying to understand and picture themselves to themselves, they produce what have

2 According to the authors I will be referring to – and this is also the stance that I take on the topic –, imagination is not to be understood as the producing of visual images of something that might be unreal, as in "imaginary." The imagination to which these authors refer is rather a social activity that is politically creative and that shapes and motivates political action.

been defined as social imaginaries, which are self-representations that become socialized and reified (Gilleard 2018; Lennon 2015; Gaonkar 2002). These imaginaries influence how individuals in a specific society behave, what they believe to be possible and what they dream of, as they have a normative and performative power. The right to be sovereign, for instance, was thought to be derived from gods, oracles, blood or vote at different points in history. Each of these imaginaries were at some point perceived as "true," and through them the sovereign could exercise his/her power. Once they lost the power, they were subsequently replaced by renovated ones.

When it comes to analyzing what Emiliano Treré has defined as *socio-technical* imaginaries, we need therefore to understand that these are not simply vague images that influence our perception and what we think. They are in fact very concrete social processes that operate as forms of "power-knowledge," through the use of media tools and digital technologies: "Imaginaries developed around technologies constitute one of the most important resources that different actors involved in the technical process mobilise at different stages and for different purposes" (Treré 2019, 110).

Following Treré, I therefore suggest in this chapter to frame socio-technical imaginaries as competing imaginaries that are built and that form our visions of what technology is, what the digital space is and what our concept of sovereignty is in that space. We have in fact to appreciate the following: i) that social imaginaries are not only the making of those in power but are built through much more complex and multi-actors processes; ii) that social imaginaries tend – once established – to create and maintain the order and perpetuate the status quo; iii) that social imaginaries – once their inherent mechanisms are better understood and appropriated by those not in power – could be not just the problem but also the cure. I propose in fact to consider social imaginaries as devices that can disempower people, as well as being the terrain where social struggles for democracy can happen. To the dominant imaginaries driven by corporations or mainstream media, for instance, citizens could respond by developing alternative imaginaries pushed forward through engaged parts of the civil society and social movements. In summary, as Kathleen Lennon reminds us, "[t]he task of revolutionary change and that of creating an alternative social order is not … that of dispensing with imaginaries, but of providing alternative ones" (Lennon 2015, 83).

Trying to address and understand digital sovereignty through the concept of social and political imaginaries – as this chapter is doing – has the advantage of adding a symbolic level to the many analyses that have so far increasingly focused on the *materiality* of digital platforms (the resources and funding needed, the legal frameworks and the infrastructures). Without wanting to undermine the importance of the material conditions of digital sovereignty, a focus on the imaginaries reminds us that discourses and symbols are powerful too, and that perhaps they could provide another way (hopefully a fruitful one) to understand how digital corporations have acquired so much digital and sovereign power. Similarly to Christopher Kelty, I believe that using the conceptual tool of social imaginary is "particularly appropriate in this case because the practice of writing software is precariously situated between verbal argument and material practice ..." (Kelty 2005, 186). At the same time, we should also rethink the notion of the social imaginary in itself, as coding (together with speech, writing, images, etc.) becomes another language that adds to the symbolic level, and does this in a very peculiar way.

As Wendy Hui Kyong Chun reminds us, the word "codes," which historically are the laws that govern the social life and define, among other things, what it means to be sovereign, today is more likely to evoke the notion of computational codes of which the software is made rather than the code of law: "What is surprising is the fact that software is code, that code is – has been made to be – executable, and that this executability makes code not law but rather what every lawyer's dream of what law should be: automatically enabling and disabling certain actions and functioning at the level of everyday practice. Code as law is code as police" (Chun 2011, 101). In the age of digital societies, the computational code takes the role of the sovereign state, one that has absolute power – the sovereign that encompasses in one figure the legislative, executive and jurisdictional power.

To start unpacking what imaginaries are shaping the concept of digital sovereignty is therefore the task intended for this chapter. As many authors have argued (Floridi 2020; Couture and Toupin 2019; Ávila Pinto 2018; Chun 2011), the concept of sovereignty has been deeply re-shaped by the pervasive process of the digitalization of society, where new subjects, new immaterial (as well as material) resources, new codes have *de facto* emerged. Nevertheless, the basic

principles of digital sovereignty do not profoundly differ from the historical ones: the principle of control, freedom (both "freedom from" and "freedom to") and legitimacy are in fact still valid. It is around these concepts that the new variant of corporate digital sovereignty has been affirmed. Interestingly, while in practice corporations take a vantage position on all of these principles, in theory they claim to do this for the people. Claims of technology giving back control to the user (citizen) are in fact widespread. Tech corporations have made their role in giving freedom to people in to a banner proposition to accomplish what they want through a seamless user-experience (through their platforms, online services, user-centered design) and simultaneously to defend their freedom from regulations and control from the state, which is depicted as the only and ultimate threat to our democracies (as it exerts total control, limits our liberties and sometimes violates human rights). My argument is that corporations do so in order to meet the third founding sovereignty principle – the one they will otherwise not meet and which is possibly the most important of all – that of legitimacy. By promoting, in theory, a narrative of the people as sovereign and liberated from state control, they, in practice, empty the concept of sovereignty of all that is meaningful and simply substitute one form of control with another more subtle and powerful one, leaving to the people very little in terms of rights and autonomy.[3] In this way, state sovereignty is undermined from below (from liberated people of the internet), while also superseded from above (from tech corporations).

The way in which the code works in the computational realm aims at making the subject to appear as the real sovereign instead, fostering the idea that the "all-powerful" user, producer, decider that shapes the technology (through its codes) around her and for her own benefit is each and every one of us (Chun 2011). Tech corporations build for themselves this role of the promoter of individual sovereignty, while building their own legitimacy. In the next section in more detail,

3 On the topic of human rights, Rikke Frank Jørgensen (2019) provided an interesting analysis, based on Google and Facebook official documents and staff interviews, which identified the three main narratives these corporations use to avoid taking responsibility: 1) Google and Facebook protect their users against Governments overreach: 2) The companies are depicted as collaborating and assisting law enforcement by removing illegal content; 3) Privacy equals user control.

I argue that this sovereign subject is the opposite of the democratic subject (*the subject of*) as she only keeps the illusion of the sovereign power, but is in practice increasingly powerless (*subject to*).

"The Emperor has no clothes": what is the digital doing to our democracies

Once we start framing digital sovereignty through the lens of socio-technical imaginaries, we can start appreciating the importance of unveiling their power and how they are built. As Yaron Ezrahi reminds us, in fact, when this creative political power is "hidden from the public eye, its efficacy in presenting the imagined as real may significantly increase" (Ezrahi 2012, 51).

As we have seen, it is crucial for the corporate digital sovereignty to be seen as directly legitimated by the popular sovereignty, to justify the fact that the state is left outside of the equation, as there is no need for the state to interfere. As we have also seen, next to the enormous economic power built through a *de facto* monopolist economy – next to the ownership of all strategic digital infrastructures and the power of big data – next to the intellectual property of codes, software and algorithms that are purposively left opaque – a crucial part of the corporate digital sovereignty power is actually built on the symbolic level, through the incredible effort that goes into the formation of a new technocratic social imaginary. This imaginary (also defined as Californian Ideology[4]) is actually made of a complex mix of cybernetic culture, free market economics and counter-culture libertarianism that aims at spreading the idea that more free tech and less state control are ultimately needed.

I am going to refer to what is happening in the field of digital activism as a case study in order to exemplify and analyze the impact of sovereign socio-technical imaginaries on political practice of democratic participation. First, because it very well illustrates the democratic perils that a corporate version of the digital sovereignty can have, as our most basic democratic rights (the right to participate, dissent and protest)

4 This term was originally used by Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron (1996, 45) and defined as a "loose alliance of writers, hackers, capitalists and artists from the West Coast of the USA have succeeded in defining a heterogeneous orthodoxy for the coming information age: the Californian Ideology."

are affected by the digital affordances that these corporations have built into their platforms. Second, because moments of protest are what Chun would define as moments of *crises*, which are moments of intense present where immediate responses are needed and where the digital control systems can be seen as operating in a *state of exception* (Chun 2011). Finally, I advance this field of study as a crucial field to critically assess the competing visions about emerging technologies and their role on society. Following Treré, I propose in fact to consider that "the realm of digital activism is both a privileged space and a contested terrain where to detect the development and the refinement of utopian and dystopian media imaginaries, and where to appreciate the existence of competing imaginaries and practices between the powerful and the weak" (Treré 2019, 115).

Some of us will remember the time, at the onset of the diffusion of the internet, when many activists and scholars from social movements' studies welcomed the web as a space for liberation, as it was free, transcended national borders and allowed for a new mode of "many-to-many" communication. At that time, people talked about a sort of *ideological congruence* of the internet as a bottom-up medium, perceived to facilitate the dissemination and growth of certain groups and ideas, which were more liberal and progressive. This euphoria and optimism reached its peak with the so called "Twitter revolutions,"[5] considered by many to be the ultimate incarnation of that power and freedom that the internet could deploy. Since then, and as the use of social media platforms increased, it became visible that "'making the Web social' in reality means 'making sociality technical'. Sociality coded by technology renders people's activities formal, manageable, and manipulable, enabling platforms to engineer the sociality in people's everyday routines" (Van Dyjck 2013, 12). Pippa Norris' (2000) mobilization thesis[6] states that the internet (or better

5 As Chun interestingly noted, "a name that erase the specificity of local political issues in favour of an internet application […]" (Chun 2011, 93).

6 This thesis distinguishes between: 'cyber optimist, who highlight how due to the new information and communication technologies,' previously disengaged groups are being drawn into politics and enabled to take part; 'cyber pessimist,' who assumes that, in the best-case scenario, the internet has not changed existing patterns of political participation, and in the worst-case scenario it may actually have widen participatory gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged populations.

digital) participation was a distinct type of participation that came with incredible potential, but also raised new modes of exclusion as well. The appearance of a Digital Activism Gap (Schradie 2019) perfectly illustrates the formation of a democratic divide between those who are able to use the internet for political aims and those who are not. People with lower income and education levels are in fact less likely to produce new political content (such as social media posts, memes, comments, etc.), but more often will be limited to share pre-produced and pre-formatted content, which tends to be characterized by more radical opinions or controversial facts.

Rethinking activism in the era of corporate digital sovereignty means therefore to adopt a critical approach to the myth of the internet's ideological congruence (exploring whether the internet might rather be ideologically *non*-congruent with progressive movements). It also means to critically investigate other established myths (or better imaginaries) that seem to be prevalent in the public domain: first, the de-materialzsation of organizational structures from digital activism, that end up ignoring (digital) labor and (digital) bureaucracy that go into activism on-line (Shradie 2019); second, the obsession with measurement that drives certain practices of computational politics – what Karpf (2017) has defined "analytic politics" – which determine for instance the fact that political events end up being algorithmically *curated* (Gillespie 2014). When this happens, the implications are numerous and beyond the activists' control, as when in 2014 the Facebook algorithm decided that the "ice bucket challenge" deserved more visibility than what had just happened in Ferguson, Missouri, where an (yet another) unarmed African American had just been killed by a police officer.

Many scholars, and activists as well, have finally started to critically examine the mismatch between what these corporate sovereign imaginaries preach as well as their practical implications and applications, trying to come to terms with "the apparent inconsistency between the disenchantment of individuals with politics and the popularity of global movements, international mobilisations, activism" (Floridi 2015, 59). These reflections should be seen in context of wider research on the impact of the digital on the public sphere and society, where scholars increasingly acknowledge how the "democratic"

features of the internet and some digital platforms are, perhaps, endangering democracy itself, generating new forms of inequalities, surveillance, disinformation and polarization (Anderson and Rainie 2020; Zuboff 2019; Bucher 2018; Byung-Chul 2017).

Re-imagining new sovereign practice of protest

As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, Cornelius Castoriadis tells us that imagination is always and already in power, in the sense that it is imagination that shapes our ways of understanding and seeing the social. This power of imagination is the power through which individuals are socialized. This power, again following from Castoriadis, is more powerful as it operates invisibly. It only becomes apparent – Castoriadis calls this the explicit power – when the imaginaries on which the power is built are called into question and challenged by the autonomous collectives that exercise their imaginative and alternative power against the status-quo. Until it is contested, the power of tech corporations would appear to us as completely self-evident.

As this imaginary power of the corporate digital sovereignty aims to stay absent (and invisible) in order to function effortlessly, the project of the alternative imaginaries of digital sovereignty should aim at making this power present and visible instead. In order to build the popular digital sovereignty, one should start, among other things, to critically re-appropriate the symbols of this power. As Zuboff beautifully said, this would mean reminding the younger generations "that the word 'search' has meant a daring existential journey, not a finger tap to already existing answers: that 'friend' is an embodied mystery that can be forged only face-to-face and heart-to-heart; and that 'recognition' is the glimmer of homecoming we experience in our beloved's face, not 'facial recognition'. … These things are brand-new … They are unprecedented. You should not take them for granted" (Zuboff 2019, 521). Finding imaginative ways of continuously reminding us of the naïve principle of technological determinism that wants to shape technology as some sort of abstract force which influences society but is not itself the product of social forces, means to resist the technological fetishism that is a key symbolic concept of the digital sovereignty principle. There are many examples of how this can be done and has been done (including in fact many of the contributions in this book). I am thinking here about civic tech initiatives that reclaim a

different and locally rooted use of technologies, or critical data literacy tools (Brand and Sander 2020) that remind us of the importance of cultivating both a digital literacy and a critical capacity as well.

The main argument of this chapter has been to focus on the relationship between the digital sovereignty of people versus the corporate, as a way to advance the wider debate on digital sovereignty and to build a critique of the legitimacy of the corporate version of sovereignty from the bottom up. We have briefly seen how competing imaginaries are shaping democratic practices of protest and activism and that claims of the individual (or better collective) digital sovereignty – as defined by these corporations – do not actually find any confirmation in practice but are very powerful on the level of the symbolic to claim legitimacy for corporations *vis-a-vis* the state.

Emptied and commercialized, the possibility of achieving "people sovereignty" has therefore been made more difficult even to simply imagine, as corporate sovereign imaginaries structure the ways in which activists develop their protest logic – what forms of resistance are seen as possible and which ones are successful. But activism is – I believe – at the same time the victim and the savior of corporate digital sovereignty. Social movements have in fact traditionally played a crucial role in building and mobilizing the collective imagination (Haiven and Khasnabish 2014), and this role now becomes crucial to address the digital sovereign imaginaries, unveiling the limits of the existing ones and building alternatives. As Evgeny Morozov reminds us, a radical critique of technology "can only be as strong as the emancipatory political vision to which it is attached" (Morozov 2015, 1). We need stronger movements and civil society actors (together with states and supranational institutions) to re-imagine a new relationship between politics, society and technology where technology is not at the center. A renewed and popular digital sovereignty will in fact only follow from a renewed democratic practice.

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