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## Reimagined Democracy in Times of Pandemic

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Never before has a majority of humanity focused collectively and simultaneously on the most elementary gift of life: Breath. We watched as the most vulnerable gave out their last breath in droves. We watched out for each other's breath. We watched for our kin and our neighbors and for the breath of strangers. We watched, as thousands of health workers around the world sacrificed their lives so that the rest of us could breathe. And amid a universal lockdown, we watched a lone black man in Minneapolis breathe his last under the lockdown of a policeman oblivious to his haunting cry: I can't breathe. In the months preceding this moment, we had willingly held our democratic breath, only for the urge to speak out to erupt again, on the part of populations grasping for air around the world. "If White People Didn't Invent Air, What Would We Breathe?" echoes Dread Scott's old ironic cry, bringing together those intertwined threads.

So what has COVID-19 done to "democracy," we ask – whatever we each put under this broad umbrella. There is little doubt that democratic practices have been and continue to be among the deeper casualties of the pandemic, as vividly symbolized by the emptying of our public spaces around the world. As many authors in this volume illustrate, the months of lockdown brought into sharper relief existing trends of democratic erosion around the world from Hungary to the United States, from India to Indonesia, as governments used states of emergency to grant themselves new executive powers. As ordinary citizens we are falling prey to the curbing of our freedoms and mobility and to the intensification of surveillance in a game of one-upmanship as people die. But there is also another story to tell here of democratic freedoms helping to navigate the

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pandemic as much as constraints do, as civil society groups and free media keep governments on their toes.

I will not try to adjudicate here between these two opposite democratic sides of the pandemic coin. All we can say is that this moment will eventually count as one episode in a long process of mutation of our societies over decades, which has been redefining the grounds for public authority, shining light on the pathologies of capitalism and the unsustainable social contract underpinning its twenty-first-century variant. We will find that the pandemic pushed the fast-forward button on what some have called “the grand acceleration” of our age. And that in the process it has exposed both the fragility and the resilience of our democracies. The ledger is open.

Instead of observing or predicting actual changes in our democratic makeup, I ask here a different question: *How is the pandemic affecting our democratic imagination?* I do so in the spirit of Yaron Ezrahi’s proposition that democracy, like any other political regime, must be imagined and performed by multiple agency in order to exist.<sup>1</sup> Beyond the picture of a deliberative self-governing polity of informed free citizens envisioned by Enlightenment thinkers, he argues, the grounds for governmental authority lie in the political imagination of its citizens. To be sure, these rolling waves of global lockdown and let-up have induced a veritable tsunami of imaginings, musings about the world afterwards, where everything is up for grabs, from the ways we move, interact, play, and work to the reconfiguration of our global politics. Whatever happens, we may hope that somehow we have become more self-reflexive, not only as individuals but also as societies. And that in the process, space has opened up for our political imaginaries. To be sure and at this early stage, we can only collect impressions, possible keys. The impressions may fade away, the keys be misplaced. But at the very least we will have been empowered to acknowledge our choices in a new light.

This is a “pandemic moment” when we might realize and reimagine what we have lost and what we have gained, what we might want to reclaim or retain. What if, half a century after the Franco-Greek philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis deployed his idea of the *imaginary institution of society* in the wake of May 1968, we were one step closer to fulfilling the conditions of “self-institution” by which we truly come to own our own

<sup>1</sup> Y. Ezrahi, *Imagined Democracies: Necessary Political Fictions* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

laws, whether as individuals or as societies?<sup>2</sup> For if democracy was born from the fall of authority figures, gods, kings, emperors, and nations, it not only needs to be permanently reinvented to stay alive, but societies need to be fully self-aware as the authoritative originators of this reinvention. While conventional accounts of democracy center around collective self-rule, having a say over the rules that govern us, it is imperative to resist the centralization of power and ultimately state capture of all levers of authority. Democracies may be about fusing *demoi* and *cratos*, horizontal togetherness, and vertical governing, but ultimately, the democratic promise lies in the collective imagination of the governing *demoi*, a reassertion of the horizontal bond between all of us. Hence the question: If radical democracy calls for the dispersion of social, political, and economic power and the assertion of our mutual responsibility, how does society imagine itself doing so?

In the following pages, I suggest where we may start or pause in exploring the eclectic patchwork of reimaginings offered by the pandemic, through the metaphors of theatre, bubbles, strings, circles, and mirrors. First, the exposed politics of life and death offer a starting point for reimagining and claiming our democratic agency. Second, the obligations imposed on us by the state open up a space for the social appropriation of R, whether as reproduction rate or as responsibility. Third, the Jewish institution of the ‘*eruv*’ can inspire us as we renegotiate democratically the boundaries of our social space. Fourth, we are coming to picture the management of interdependence as a horizontal maze of different, overlapping, or nested circles of autonomy. And finally, we may start to see ourselves as defined by new “glocalities” whereby multitudes involved in new modes of contagious contestations help redefine a new anthropo-scene, a scene where humanity invents novel democratic performances across time and space for the next generation.

### Theatre, or the Democratization of Necropolitics

The ultimate expression of democratic health lies in our mortuaries, where the dead speak of how they got there. In his *Necropolitics*, Achille Mbembe, offered a critique of the use of social and political power to dictate how some people may live and how some must die,

<sup>2</sup> Translated from the French by the author. C. Castoriadis, *L'institution imaginaire de la Société* (Paris: Collection Esprit, 1975); C. Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997).

focusing on the various forms of political violence which have accompanied colonial subjugation and slavery.<sup>3</sup> But Michel Foucault who inspired him spoke of our own societies, where the (mis)management of death brings about more vividly than anything else the close imbrication between statecraft as stagecraft. As the relentless collective contemplation of variously shaped graphs and cross-country comparisons of death figures has provided the staging for this pandemic's necropolitics, we can ask what this theatre of death does for our democratic social contract.

For one, it seems to be the case that populations across the world have had an unprecedented say on what kind of theatre this is in the first place. Leaders who followed the old Schmittean securitization recipe that war-induced states of emergency justify power grabs and self-aggrandizement, and thus initially sought to frame the pandemic as a theatre of war, rapidly needed to change metaphorical gear. Those who didn't, populist leaders à la Donald Trump or Jair Bolsonaro, will be exposed. Instead, political leaders were rewarded who staged the moment as another kind of theatre: The theatre of care. Citizens across the world saw how these "care-theatre" leaders, including often female prime ministers, from Taiwan's Tsai Ing-wen to New Zealand's Jacinda Ardern to Finland's Sanna Marin, not only spoke the language of care, caution, compassion, humility, and empathy, and were more prone to listen to outside voices, but also organized their states' response with greater emphasis on citizen participation and empowerment.<sup>4</sup>

These two theatres redefine differently the dynamics between heightened expectations and popular control. Undoubtedly, the massive mobilization of state resources to nationalize infrastructure services, subsidize industries, and pay wages in the private sector responded to a public expectation about the state. But at the same time this mobilization is accompanied by a rising demand for greater citizen engagement in defining and running state functions that manage how we live on a day-to-day basis. Moreover, in a theatre of war, cross-comparisons are about enmity and therefore zero sum: My health-gun is bigger than yours. In a theatre of care, there may be emulation but ultimately societies can literally see that if your neighboring locality or country does well, you do well too.

<sup>3</sup> A. Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> For an insightful discussion of the care society, see for instance A. M. Slaughter, *Unfinished Business: Women Men Work Family* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015).

In other words, the theatre of care offers roles with agency. In a theatre of care, citizens mobilize instead of being mobilized. Irrespective of leaders' original leanings, we have witnessed how, for the first time in the history of capitalism, the right to life has been affirmed over the functionalist rational of the modern state. Human rights activists have long sought to enforce the value of life as the supreme right, and a right not merely to protect physical existence, but to protect "life with dignity."<sup>5</sup> We may be very far from the equal enjoyment of this right for the seven billion people on the planet, but in its absence we take greater notice. A disaster it may be, but one closer to Chernobyl than to Pompei. The graphs do not tell a story of fatality but agency, a story of avoidable deaths where we are the ones to fill the void. That each citizen be equally authoritative over matters of livelihood, that is the core definition of the democratic ethos. The democratic contract may involve a common agreement regarding the obligations citizens owe the state, but it ultimately rests on the moral power we each hold to engage into mutual obligations.<sup>6</sup> And it is precisely because our agency has been radically curtailed that we are more prone than ever to claim it anew.

In the theatre of care therefore, the collective is inclined to engage in a moral task, albeit through process rather than outcome-related obligations. Between lives protected and lives taken, the pandemic moment has shown the best and the worst of humanity – side by side, those who sacrifice *for* others against those who call for the sacrifice *of* others.<sup>7</sup> We may hence become more attuned to the election of sacrificial victims. While democrats rightly call for better understanding of the chains of cause and effects that may have led to where we are, others prefer to skip directly to the last stage, pointing the fingers at their favorite scapegoat, within and without. Donald Trump may crudely blame Chinese people wherever they might be, Europeans, or the WHO, but tomorrow, people everywhere will be tempted to blame refugees, migrants, foreigners, Romanies, and other would-be "carriers." Or it will be the fault of young people who took containment too lightly, or of old people whose lives have cost us too much, or of civil

<sup>5</sup> According to the UN Human Rights Committee. See C. Heyns, "The Value of Life," EJIL: Talk! (June 20, 2020), [www.ejiltalk.org/the-value-of-life/](http://www.ejiltalk.org/the-value-of-life/).

<sup>6</sup> P. Pettit, *On the People's Terms: A Republican Theory and Model of Democracy* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> See K. Nicolaidis, "D'Édipe au coronavirus, les pandémies et leur boucs émissaires," *Le Grand Continent* (May 19, 2020), <https://legrandcontinent.eu/fr/2020/05/19/oedipe-et-le-coronavirus/>, and "From Oedipus to Coronavirus: Homo Sapiens and the Making of Scapegoats," *Open Democracy* (September 2020), [www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/oedipus-coronavirus-homo-sapiens-and-making-scapegoats/](http://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/oedipus-coronavirus-homo-sapiens-and-making-scapegoats/).

servants who have not done their job properly. As anthropologist René Girard explained, societies that are in the grip of mimetic violence, whatever its source, need to shift the burden of that violence onto certain groups or individuals living among them, preferably people who are as much the same as they are different from the norm.<sup>8</sup> Despite ancient awareness, the scapegoat reflex seems to remain the civilizational trademark of *homo sapiens*. And yet mature democracies are reluctant to assign blame. The hope today is for what we can call “pandemic pedagogy” bringing to light complex causalities as we debate what failed us, from bureaucracies to executives to industrialized food systems, and as citizens’ heightened self-reflexiveness turns them squarely against the scapegoating urge.

In sum, if our politics is reset from theatre of war to theatre of care, our sense of what responsibility our togetherness entails “in sickness and in health” may be recast too.

### Bubbles, or the Appropriation of “R”

Picture a family watching their country’s prime minister’s address on their television screen. The leader explains that what their life will look like in the next few months, and who knows, possibly years, will be determined by a sliding scale of alert levels. And where we fall in turn will depend on a mysterious number “R,” the COVID-19 reproduction number, or the average number of individuals to whom a single person passes the virus. The contract the leader offers our family is simple: Bring and keep “R” down and the authorities will ease restrictions. How fast this lockdown is modified depends on you. It is in your collective hands and will be wholly determined by whether we continue to obey various rules starting with social distancing. In short, this crisis is fundamentally about what I call *the social appropriation of “R.”* This social appropriation expresses itself on a spectrum of regard to disregard for emergent social norms, and is clearly beset by risks of free riding. But this is a story of highly visible free riding, exposed for everyone to see.

Castoriadis built his theoretical edifice of the social imaginary around the mutual constitution between the *logein* or social representation and the *teukhein* or social doing. Individuals in our societies constantly negotiate the relationship between their public and private persona in interaction with others, with whom they literally create and recreate this relationship

<sup>8</sup> R. Girard, *La violence et le sacré* (Paris: Grasset, 1972).

between *logein* and *teukhein*.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, our citizen is conscious that what escapes them, behind visible social reality, is the infinite wealth of alterity present in the world itself, meanings that can never be permanently fixed. Society evolves each time it is faced with the shifting boundary between what is or is not feasible, desirable, meaningful, inside and outside, in us and in nature. The pandemic moment gives us such transformative potential.

First, the value of “R” and the size and transparency of “bubbles” serve as metrics of sociability. In this story, “R” also stands for responsibility, or rather mutual responsibility. And the question that it raises is whether citizens’ awareness that the future is literally in their (clean) hands creates the conditions of possibility for moving closer to self-institution of society. The meme “bubbles” serves as a metaphor for the transformative potential. Before the pandemic moment, bubbles had come to refer to the closed networks of like-mindedness in which people locked themselves thanks to social media. Now bubbles have become the metaphor of choice for conveying responsibility to others within, and the desire to expand this responsibility outwards: I invite you in my bubble.

Second, the pandemic helps us leave behind phantasm of collective mastery of our destiny bestowed from above. We still need the King but the King is naked, unprepared and uncertain, like the rest of us. Everything seems about wide-open probabilistic ranges, whether for “R,” appropriate social distancing, appropriate quarantine time, and so on. We can see that the public supplies at least in part the public goods. The social contract concerning who is responsible for our well-being seems up for grabs. At this moment, will society resist the melancholia of powerlessness and the shirking sirens, and learn that it is not instituted by something outside itself (a god, nature, reason, necessity, a historical law) but by itself and as itself?

Third, this moment is about mutuality and the sharing of social imagery – as the many memes on social media attest to. We understand ourselves as part of democratic societies not only because this is how we each know that we want it but also because we know that this is how other women and men around us want it and live it. In this story, everything we do is relational. If one person is not safe, no one is. As with religious rituals, what we have to do is less about outcome and more about process, the thoughtfulness of it all. There may be no such thing as “society know

<sup>9</sup> Castoriadis, *L’institution imaginaire*, pp. 493–6.

thyselves,” but there may be moments like this one where societies come closer to watching themselves know themselves.

Castoriadis saw in the birth of philosophy, together with the birth of democracy, the first historical example of a society that is able to radically question its own imaginary institutions and therefore earn its autonomy. But in doing so, he seemed to be forgetting the fact that the autonomy of a minority of the population, that of the male active citizens, was constructed upon the heteronomy of its majority, women, slaves, people of foreign origins.<sup>10</sup> If we are to cash in on the promise of societal self-institution, we must hope that as our bubbles burst open in the “world afterwards,” “R” remains the afterglow of a covenant of absolute inclusiveness in our mutual concern.

### String, or Freedom in the Eruvian Age

This brings us to a third image relevant to how our democracies may come to reinvent themselves: Strings, or more accurately, almost invisible strings attached to poles high up in the air to envelope part of our cities.<sup>11</sup> I am referring here to the eruv, that is the imaginary enclosure which serves to delineate a religious space in which it is permissible to overcome the prohibition to carry objects outside one’s private space during the Sabbath. The eruv was introduced in Roman Palestine around AD 50 for a Jewish community where many of the daily activities were performed in the shared courtyard – deemed a public space – in order to enclose these commons and join the inhabitants in an imaginary private space. As the rabbis teach us, each inhabitant had to donate a dish to these new commons, and we understand that the allowance for enlarged social interaction was dependent on the participation of the whole courtyard community. In time, the size of eruvs grew to entire towns around Europe and later the United States. “Imaginary” enclosures everywhere transformed public spaces into private ones, including large swaths of Manhattan, the busiest city on earth.

Could it be that the pandemic is teaching us to treat as private what was previously considered public space, much as the rabbinic eruv has done for the past two thousand years? Reminding us that social space is always imagined and negotiated, the model of the eruv and its magical power for

<sup>10</sup> C. Bottici, *A Philosophy of Political Myth* (Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>11</sup> An earlier version of this section was published as A. Mintz and K. Nicolaidis, “Towards the Eruvian Age,” *Open Democracy* (May 2020), [www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/coronavirus-towards-eruvian-age/](http://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/coronavirus-towards-eruvian-age/).



observant Jews may yet help secular societies at large think through the complexities of transforming public spaces into safe “user-friendly” ones. The prospect could be ominous if the line between unsafe and safe socializing was not ultimately up to us. As we reinvent our common space, the boundaries which define it, and the ways we can and should interact within it, we may be entering an Eruvian age when the insights garnered over time by these Jewish communities will be precious, especially when it comes to enlarging our circles of conviviality.

While the eruv was imagined in order to wave prohibitions, our new COVID-19 social space is about introducing prohibitions to a public arena we once traveled with little care or concern. And unlike the eruv, the rules apply to all, and at least initially, only temporarily. But like the eruv, our new shared space is meant to allow for interaction against the background of prohibitions as we all consider each other as a potential “carrier.” In other words, like the eruv, we are reimagining our social space in order to avoid being quarantined, even if with COVID-19 each household may have its own allowed perimeter, its own radius defined by imaginary strings.

Perhaps most importantly and like in an eruv, this new theatre of interaction requires the participation of everyone in the community. These limits do not work if they are simply dictated by those in position of authority. Instead, they need to be internalized by each of us. If one person fails to abide by the rules, the space is no longer safe and therefore no longer shared. How ironic that a shared space redefined for greater distancing requires the same level of communal participation and cooperation as the eruv of old, defined in the first place to allow for greater interaction.

Yet, is it really ironic? The ability to share space is a right that we usually take for granted. Public space is by definition free and available to all of us. Of course, we have to be law-abiding citizens in that space, but not for the sake of maintaining the space itself. The pandemic reminds us that classical liberalism, the idea that people should be free to do what they want so long as they don't harm others, is not quite enough, albeit a solid start. Instead we must contend with the old message of the eruv, that public space carries with it responsibilities and a communal set of rules.

When we finally find ourselves on the “day after,” it may be that religious and secular interrogations about our commons enter a new fruitful conversation. For one, workers cannot return safely to the factory, employees to the office, storekeepers to the shops if even a few of us ignore the responsibility of being part of the “community,” a community

that recognizes that empathy for self and for the other are intrinsically linked. Recalling the special value of the eruv for women in the Jewish community, who were thus enabled to carry out their business, we will ask about inequalities of access and recognize the invisible contributions to our common space by often unrecognized members of our communities. We will recognize the value of shared green spaces for those who have none of their own. And we will ask about the ways in which the modern technological equivalent of invisible strings tied to poles – such as Apps indicating that a space is “safe” (as well as our data) – can help empower individuals within our future commons rather than curtail their freedoms from above.

Further afield, we will need to reconsider the ways we have allowed for the creation of distance with refugees locked down at our borders without the corresponding care we are now associating with our reinvented public spaces.

The Eruvian age could offer an ethics of horizontal mutuality rather than vertical imposition, defined in part by the empathy and compassion that shared space creates for each of us.

### Circles, or the Antinomies of Autonomy

In the end, however, each eruv defines a single circle for a single community. But of course, democracy is also a game of scales involving many types and sizes of circles. This is where we may ask how pandemic politics might help reimagine a more horizontal understanding of our polities and their interdependence. In other words, what if we could imagine away the vertical idea of “levels” of governance, with authority moving further away from citizens as issues fall under the edicts of “economies of scale” and “externalities”?

Instead, a democratic experience that is citizen-centric involves circles of autonomy of different sizes, each with its own logic even if they overlap.

Autonomy is first reinvented in the basic unit of confinement, households. It is then organized at the level of neighborhoods, metropolises, cross-border regions, states, and at the supranational level when necessary. Each circle organizes interdependence within while minimizing dependence without.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> See K. Nicolaidis, “L’ambition première de l’UE devait être de devenir la gardienne du long terme,” *Culture* (April 9, 2020), [www.franceculture.fr/politique/kalypso-nicolaidis-lambition-premiere-de-lue-devait-etre-de-devenir-la-gardienne-du-long-terme](http://www.franceculture.fr/politique/kalypso-nicolaidis-lambition-premiere-de-lue-devait-etre-de-devenir-la-gardienne-du-long-terme).

In this picture of overlapping circles, our neighborhoods come to the fore as the critical locus where we experience the daily habits of coexistence, where the “collective effort to lead a private life” becomes a school of local democracy, *the democracy of everyday life*.<sup>13</sup> With the pandemic world, never before has it been so clear that neighbors are not just the closest strangers, they are the fabric of our lives, a universe of constant negotiation through micro-interactions. When minding one another’s business was optional, it now becomes a matter of life and death. At the same time the routine self-distancing expected from the neighbor becomes ostentatious, a solicitous mutual distancing, a gesture becoming a paradoxical mark of closeness and care.

“Sovereignty” becomes experiential rather than ideological in this story. Individual functionality is the name of the game as circles of autonomy scale up or down and political units below the state take over. Even in Jacobin France, it is clear that regions offer different vulnerabilities and capacities, and thus have organized their response relatively autonomously with bridges between them. Citizens can experience optimal circles as more or less fluid, formed and reformed according to circumstances and contingent vulnerability, to past experience or other social criteria such as habitus of social interaction, inter-generational living, state–society relations, and so on. Patterns are explained by the heterogeneity of situations, both local and international, rather than intensity of affects.

To be sure, at least in the EU, the quintessential circles of autonomy remain the Member States, whose national fiscal power can almost instantly deploy funds to help businesses and individuals. It is not surprising therefore that the EU’s first act was to strengthen the autonomy of the Member States by relaxing budgetary and state aid constraints – in effect reaffirming the primacy of national circles of autonomy. Beyond, the EU remains torn between championing global governance anew and establishing itself as an optimal circle of autonomy in a world where procurement, research, and investment seem to call for “European sovereignty.” Here, as elsewhere, EU democracy is about organizing its diversity as the multiple actors that compose it come to grips with the new games of scale ushered in by this new era.

<sup>13</sup> N. Rosenblum, *Good Neighbors: The Democracy of Everyday Life in America* (Princeton University Press, 2018).

### Mirrors, Space-Time in the Global Anthro-Scene

Whatever we may think of the “wisdom of the multitude,” it is hard to deny the irresistible sense that humanity seems to surf on the coronavirus wave to create a global scene where its own follies and potential redemption in the age of the Anthropocene are to be debated through a new kind of connectiveness. We could be creating the first global “anthro-scene,” where slowing down helps us renegotiate not only the space but the time we inhabit together. As we learn to debate radical uncertainty and ask how to invest in collective resilience, we may be starting to lay the foundation of “democracy with foresight.”<sup>14</sup> Fascinatingly, social movements have already cunningly subverted COVID-19-based “states of emergency” to amplify calls for a social and ecological state of emergency. When past pandemics yielded to collective amnesia, will this one entrench the urgency of the long term?

What is democracy if not a crowd, conscious of its collective power? If the pandemic has not spelled the end for contestation, it has changed the way we may imagine it and reinvent the act of being a crowd, starting with socially distanced mass protests. The disciplined and somber crowd of people voicing their anger at Prime Minister Netanyahu two meters apart in Rabin Square is hard to equate with the image of the “unruly mob” of anti-democrats.<sup>15</sup> By adapting the methods of civil disobedience to the COVID-19 era, the spatial posture subverts its interdictions for democratic aims. Social distancing may make visible the sociability that we have lost everywhere, but dissent, like water, continues to infiltrate our politics in new forms. A group of US and UK academics has identified more than a hundred new methods of nonviolent activism adopted during the pandemic, including car rallies, labor strikes, and consumer boycotts.<sup>16</sup> Whether connecting from cars or roof tops, or hanging the same sign on windows or doors, to mobilize while keeping apart calls for *imagining* ourselves as a crowd. As we watch each other, we are present to each other. When, in Brazil, millions bang their pots from their balconies to express their discontent with their President’s handling of the

<sup>14</sup> K. Nicolaidis, “Sustainable Integration in a Democratic Polity: A New (or not so new) Ambition for the European Union after Brexit,” in Benjamin Martill and Uta Staiger (eds.), *Brexit and Beyond* (UCL Press, London: 2017), pp. 212–21, <https://ucldigitalpress.co.uk/Book/Article/56/81/4230/>.

<sup>15</sup> Y. Serhan, “Israel Shows Us the Future of Protest,” *The Atlantic* (April 23, 2020), [www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/04/protest-demonstration-pandemic-coronavirus-covid19/610381/](http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/04/protest-demonstration-pandemic-coronavirus-covid19/610381/).

<sup>16</sup> E. Chenoweth et al., “Methods of Dissent and Collective Action Under COVID – A Crowdsourced List,” Crowd Counting Consortium (2020), [Crowdcounting.org](http://Crowdcounting.org).

pandemic, political protest becomes symbolically and practically a global household action. Myriad acts around the world function as infinity-mirrors, creating virtual crowds looking together in the same direction, as if stretching all at once our projected togetherness in space and in time.

This digital world of mirrors has become more than ever the refuge of democracy. Global digital mobilization is exploding. And while online activism is not new, this time around it has allowed us to visualize our shared human experience and the power this may give us to make good on the ravages of the Anthropocene. To be sure, for speech acts and virtual worlds to foster social transformation, something else has to happen which has to do with democratic struggle.<sup>17</sup> Democracy depends in part on whether and how forms of power are appropriated by the multitude of ordinary citizens against elite entrenchment, as Machiavelli put it long ago: “in every republic are two diverse humors, that of the people and that of the great, and . . . all the laws that are made in favor of freedom arise from their disunion.”<sup>18</sup> Political stability thrives on insurrection, but contestation no longer need rest on violence.<sup>19</sup>

Our democratic *aggiornamento* can only be transnational, but it matters to see democracy reinvented in different ways. Glocality is a potent democratic idea grounded in the resistance to a homogenized world. No system can survive without interaction with others, but too great a degree of systemic coherence can be as lethal as too little: The universal is about the mutual recognition of the different ways in which we negotiate our differences. Anthony Barnett is surely right to argue that the potential for far-reaching change has been created all along by progressive movements and ideas in the last half-century, under governments of all political stripes, even if the emergent new reality has taken us by surprise.<sup>20</sup> When President Emmanuel Macron tells the *Financial Times* in May 2020 that COVID-19 “makes us refocus on the human aspect” and that “there is something more important than the economic order,” many are tempted to exclaim: Welcome to the club!

<sup>17</sup> R. Celikates, “Forms of Life, Progress, and Social Struggle: On Rahel Jaeggi’s Critical Theory,” in A. Allen and E. Mendieta (eds.), *From Alienation to Forms of Life* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018).

<sup>18</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy* (University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 16.

<sup>19</sup> I. Cockerell, “Under Lockdown, LGBT Russians Were More Isolated than Ever. Then, the Zoom Parties Started,” *Coda* (June 4, 2020), [www.codastory.com/disinformation/russia-lgbtq-zoom/](http://www.codastory.com/disinformation/russia-lgbtq-zoom/).

<sup>20</sup> A. Barnett, “Out of the Belly of Hell – COVID-19 and the Humanisation of Globalisation,” *Open Democracy* (May 21, 2020), [www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/out-belly-hell-shutdown-and-humanisation-globalisation/](http://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/out-belly-hell-shutdown-and-humanisation-globalisation/).

### Conclusion

COVID-19 certainly constitutes a stress test for democracy, with hugely unequal impact. But I have argued that the test will be deployed in part in our political imagination. If this pandemic has demonstrated anything, it is that we can collectively push farther and faster the limits of what is possible. We have long sought ways of democratizing democracy itself via the invention of new modes of action and transnational citizenship. What if this was the advent of a new world of democratic effervescence, ushering in a third democratic transformation à la Robert Dahl, transnational and transgenerational democracy?

I have only offered here an impressionist landscape of potentials, detours, horizons. It will be up to citizens to cash in on this pandemic pedagogy, as they realize like never before the value of diverse viewpoints and distributed intelligence where each of us feels free to speak up, the imperative need to monitor the surveillance thrust upon us, and the inseparability between protection of the individual and commitment to the collective.

To be sure, the liberal democracy narrative went too far in its universalist pretensions. But even as we adopt a self-critical gaze, let us not indulge in the story told by strongmen that democracy is a Western invention, that others do things differently.<sup>21</sup> Whatever local idiosyncrasies, our modernity has produced the same condition across the globe: People demand to be in control of their destiny and deny the state a monopoly on the rules of togetherness. The unprecedented intimate globality brought about by this pandemic is only beginning to expose the power of a deeper universal: Our democratic imagination.

<sup>21</sup> L. El Amine, "Beyond East and West: Reorienting Political Theory through the Prism of Modernity," *Perspectives on Politics*, 14(1) (2016), 102–120.