

**«A MAJORITY OF ONE ALREADY»:  
TWO NOTES ON IMAGINATION  
AND POLITICS**

Diogo Pires Aurélio, *Imaginação e Poder*, Colibri, Lisbon, 2001.

Viriato Soromenho-Marques, *A Revolução Federal*, Colibri, Lisbon, 2002.

This review considers two books on political philosophy not published in English language, Diogo Pires Aurélio's *Imaginação e Poder* (Imagination and Power, referred as IP) and Viriato Soromenho-Marques' *A Revolução Federal* (The Federal Revolution, RF). All quotations of the books result from translations of my own initiative.

**I**

Despite being modestly presented as a study on the Political Philosophy of Spinoza, Professor Aurélio's (Univ. Nova, Lisbon) *Imagination and Power* is in fact a discussion of the political thought of Machiavelli, Hobbes and Spinoza. Others come into play, such as Malebranche, but there is a particular background to the whole enterprise, that of Cartesian metaphysics. Not only for historical reasons, which would suffice, but also because of the metaphysical framework of Spinoza's philosophy, such as Aurélio understands it (quite conventionally, as it should in a PhD. such as this, one might add).

The Cartesian backdrop of the scenario becomes quite relevant when the reader confronts the association between the desideratum of most political philosophy (Power) and the particular twist it suffers in Modernity by its conflict with Tradition, i.e., its association with

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Imagination. In fact, Aurélio addresses the question in his usual straightforward way when he writes that despite Descartes' efforts to convey some degree of 'positivity' to imagination (ch. p. 217), Spinoza goes beyond that and takes imagination to be a form of knowledge (even if it is a passive form of knowledge). In pp. 219-222, he sketches the main points of this theory: with its instruments (such as time, number and measurement), imagination relates the multiple affections senses print in the passive mind; as such, Aurélio stresses that «what define imagination is that it is a different knowledge, not an inferior one» (p. 221); and if its nature is that of associating affections effectively present in the mind, even if it all goes unnoticed (the unconscious is watching you), then Imagination works with a logic of its own, instead of being a mere cause of error impending over true scientific knowledge.

That logic is named (after Spinoza's own words) the imitation of affections. The imagination's spontaneity in relating different affections and its procedure based on common ideas in anyone's mind allows for social bonding by sympathy, a mimetic feel-like that holds the social world together (ch. pp. 224-233). It is then imagination that provides a common affection that enables a political life, not reason (although Statehood is necessary to ensure it's a pacific one, unlike Grotius thesis of a natural *appetitus societatis*). But how can a society formed through common affections escape the anarchy of its own contingency? It's the *multitudo* problem: there is a universal affection present in each individual mind, whose power is in fact unavoidable – how can we live through it without constant turmoil and uncertainty?

In the Conclusion of *IP*, Diogo Pires Aurélio comments this problem in reference to a famous letter of Nils Stensen to Spinoza. In it Stensen reveals a full apprehension of Spinoza's argument and a total inability to be affected by the

proper sense of Spinoza's thought. In itself, this is already a rather benign form of the very problem. But of course the real issue is sovereignty, not political theory as a philosophical problem. And for Spinoza, as Aurélio reminds the reader, «Sovereignty is the power of the crowd, «a concrete universal»» (p. 334). Everybody's will to survive, common to the state of nature and to society leads to a natural affection of the mind towards the benefits of cooperation and that is the real social contract, one based on the social action induced by the mind's imagination of the individual profit in a social existence. What holds it together is not a reason but a feeling of danger, the sheer possibility of a decrease of the affection in the community. In order to prevent that Common Law is necessary to transcend contingency via an immanent mean, that of a republican (liberal democratic) power stated as political Law (i.e., not religious). As Aurélio remarks in the very end (p. 338), this power of imagination stands not in its stability (affections are unstable by definition) but in the possibility of its absence, in the possibility to question it, as if there was a better (more natural) alternative. Imagination stands alone in the political debate but acts as an universal majority.

## II

In his six chapters on political philosophy and constitutional debate concerning the foundation of the USA, *A Revolução Federal*, Professor Viriato Soromenho-Marques (Univ. Lisboa) addresses a set of historical and philosophical problems that illustrate quite candidly the powers of imagination and some of its practical uses. In fact, Soromenho-Marques soon notices (ch. pp. 13/4) a substantial difference between old seventeenth century European contract theories and the New World's social con-

tract. He sees it as a difference between a defensive approach to politics and a constructive one. Against anthropological pessimism and metaphysical frameworks in which only the sage was really free (ch. Aurélio, p. 334), an optimistic attitude towards the world of politics, no matter how sober and cautious a Founding Father (say, John Adams) could be.

It is a difference explainable in several ways. In his 1980 *History of the Idea of Progress*, Robert Nisbet associated it to a Puritan heritage that linked faith and reason; in *Achieving Our Nation* (1999), Rorty took a more liberal path; examples could go on, but Soromenho-Marques chose to stress the American historiography (ch. chpt. 1) and the «usable past» theory. A significant choice, to say the least. For it deals with American social and political mythology, a constant webbing of different aspects of reality through imagination, not only of the individual but also of society as a (unaware) whole, America's civil society. The specific political culture of this civil society is described by Soromenho-Marques (ch. p. 38) according to Daniel Elazar's view: America has a political culture that is a) individualistic, b) moralistic, and c) traditionalistic. Under the late twentieth century American mass media culture, one could say that the individualism is becoming multiculturalism and that both the moralistic and the traditionalistic are fading way or at least changing substantially. Maybe a late side effect of a famous diagnosis of Arendt (quoted by Soromenho-Marques in p. 76): «the only revolution in which compassion played no role in the motivation of the actors was the American Revolution.» But this is only a possibility, of course.

It must be noticed that Soromenho-Marques does not pretend that the Founding Father were terminally optimistic (ch. pp. 77/8). Only, drawing again from Arendt, the public *virtu* of the Americans is in a great deal based on imagina-

tion, the imagination of a public future superior to the present (concerning the past things get more fuzzy, as myths get in the way). Marques keen affection of Madison, constant throughout the book, can serve as a showcase of the book's interwoven constitutional analysis and philosophical reflection on the uses of imagination over power (ch. pp. 91-3, on the relations between government and sovereignty), also visible in the comment (p. 121) about Hamilton's reflections on the proper Constitution in the Federalist Papers. Ultimately, however, it's the reply of Thomas Paine to Edmund Burke, briefly mentioned in p. 140, that sets the right tone to imagination in Modern political thought: just the same way as Jefferson attributed the usufruct of the earth to the living, Paine claims life for the future – instead of Burke's pact between past and present, the imagining of the conditions necessary so that the present becomes the future.

This requires a federalist response to the *multitudo* problem that damaged so much the French Revolution's image in England and America. Hence all the discussion concerning the Constitution and the checks and balances system that pervades FR as well. Soromenho-Marques sees the American success as the result of a split between a strong unity towards the outside and a reasonable degree of remaining state liberty inside (ch. pp. 154-156), and this seems true at least so far. It is in fact an altogether different approach than those (opposites) of Hobbes and Spinoza to the tranquillity and prosperity of the State – and yet still depending on imagination's spontaneous creativity. In a way more diverse in appearance than in reality to that of Neumann (in his essay on the theory of federalist statehood, ch. *The Democratic and the Authoritarian State*), Viriato Soromenho-Marques concludes: «The federalist heritage, stated in Europe and matured in the American Revolution experience, is far from

being a parochial relique, or an attribute of a specific national culture.. Federalism constitutes, in its essence, a method of political solution-construction alternative to the war option, a way towards social and political aggregation by mutual consent and mutual advantage, instead of the classic run of the sword and might that creates an abyss of hate between winners and losers.» (p. 170). Spinoza would look kindly to it, we imagine.