

**The Democratic Imaginary:
a conceptual framework and analysis of universal siblinghood**

The first purpose of this paper is to sketch a conceptual approach to a larger study of what I am calling the modern democratic imaginary. The second purpose is to begin analyzing one historical dimension of that democratic imaginary. I take the concept of the imaginary from Cornelius Castoriadis who, in *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, suggests that “man is an unconsciously philosophical animal . . . and he is a poetic animal, who has provided answers to these [philosophical] questions in the imaginary” (1987, 147).¹ Through the particular imaginary constructed to govern it, “every society defines and develops an image of the natural world, of the universe in which it lives, attempting in every instance to make of it a signifying whole, in which a place has to be made not only for the natural objects and beings important for the life of the collectivity, but also for the collectivity itself, establishing, finally, a certain ‘world-order’” (1987, 149). Castoriadis’s work, concluded by his recent death, has entailed the eschewing of Marxism, postmodernism and liberalism in favour of the clarification of a radical democratic project.² Amid contemporary struggles to re-energize “praxis philosophy”, Jürgen Habermas describes Castoriadis’s “linguistic turn” in this field as “the most original, ambitious, and reflective attempt to think through the liberating mediation of history, society, external and internal nature once again as praxis”(Habermas, 327).³ This praxis is understood by Castoriadis to unfold through “speaking and making, *legein* and *teukhein*,” through which “human action is

¹ Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, transl. Kathleen Blamey (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1987, 1998).

² Andreas Kalyvas, book review, *Constellations* 1998, n1, 133. The central concern and concept upon which Castoriadis builds is the notion of autonomy.

³ Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, transl. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1992), 327.

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related to something in the world – to the at once resistant and yet workable material encountered in the world and in need of interpretation” (Habermas, 330). Castoriadis further conveys that speaking and making all unfold within “a prior horizon of meaning. And this is owed solely to the imaginary dimension” (Habermas, 331).

My project will excavate key signposts in the imaginary historically constructed through and governing the modern Western democratic political tradition and experience. My general observation and thesis is that the modern Western democratic tradition is dominated by an identifiable imaginary, crafted and practiced from the fifteenth century to the present and thus marked by republicanism, liberalism, nationalism and capitalism, and comprised of two competing but related worldviews. In the first, democracy is granted meaning through the imagery of *family* which posits organic connection to the non-democratic past as well as among citizens in the present. In the second, democracy is grasped as a new world-order that radically breaks with the non-democratic familial past to render sovereign the autonomous *individual*. My critique includes the claim that, as evident in the development and historical effect of liberal ideas, the *individualist* worldview lacks a tangible and popularly accessible account of citizens’ mutual obligations and reason for collective action. This deficiency underlies democracy’s under-responsiveness to contemporary problems of over-commodification and environmental degradation, both driven by individualism. At the same time, the *familial* worldview, while a more earthy communitarian alternative, is inadequate to the ideals and demands of contemporary democracy because of its hierarchical, often homogenizing nationalist, heterosexist and thereby exclusionary impulses. Moreover, the familial worldview rests on a dichotomization of the so-called human family from the not-human, as in the remaining living forms on the planet – a dichotomous perspective that also facilitates problem-causing instrumentalist attitudes toward

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the material earth and its ecosystems. Over all, this familial:individualist historical imaginary has failed to constitute an ecologically sustainable form of collective human life on the planet, and, simultaneously has failed to constitute an egalitarian, inclusive and collective citizenry suitable to today's migrant, multicultural world. To locate signposts that signal (the development of) this double-sided modern imaginary, I will analyze a series of historical texts and discourses from what scholars deem the founding sites of modern Western democracy: England, the U.S. and France.

This project obviously has a critical aim. For his part, Castoriadis understands social theory as a means to develop people's understanding of their social historical world -- understanding that constitutes the starting point for change by way of autonomous human action (Habermas, 328). As Habermas notes, quoting Castoriadis, "we can always only know history within and from history: 'The ultimate point of conjunction for these two projects -- of understanding and of transforming -- can always only be discovered in the living present of history, which would not be a historical present if it did not transcend itself toward a future that we still have to make.'"⁴ The ultimate critical aim of my project is to destabilize by shedding light on the naturalized but historical, dominant democratic imaginary, to open terrain for re-imaginings of civic relations in contemporary and future democratic society. Specifically, I will articulate and defend a critical, ecologically-grounded view of citizenship, rooted in an imagined egalitarian, shared and collective human dependency upon nature's material conditions, as a healthy imaginary for contemporary democracy. Deploying Castoriadis's claim that a society's imaginary defines and provides understandings of the natural world and society's relation to it, I will critique how the prevailing familial and individualist faces of the modern democratic imaginary have over time posited humanity's relation to nature. This work will involve a

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deployment of Castoriadis's understanding of nature: "the naturally given always impinges upon society as something resistant, but also as something that can be shaped; however, *what* it is that is resistant or workable – as well as how – depends on the given social world under consideration. That hydrogen atoms can be fused is a statement that has meaning for the present society and no other" [581].⁵ In my work, I will illustrate the costs to democracy and to ecological sustainability of prevailing familial and individualist imaginings of civic ties, and will argue for an ecological reimagining of citizenship as animated by collective as well as local human needs. One of the particular strengths of Castoriadis's work, it seems to me, is that, while he rejects communitarian or republican appeals to some common good rooted in tradition, so too does he eschew liberal individualism which fails to cultivate notions of collective struggle and action, and deep human interdependency.

My alternative, ecologically-based reimagining of the meaning and significance of civic ties will convey humanity's *shared* and *collective* dependence upon nature as material condition, hereby entering debates about the universal:particular in political life today. I am concerned that Western democratic tradition and its imaginary have failed to educate citizens in how to act *together*, as what Alexis de Tocqueville captures as *concitoyens*. As Leslie Paul Thiele points out, while the guide *50 Simple Things You Can Do to Save the Earth* offers valuable advice to individuals, we must also act *collectively* – including at a global level -- to resolve our most serious problems, including increasing hunger and poverty, and accelerating environmental destruction.⁶ My alternative conception of civic ties will step away from a focus on rights to posit a worldview that treats as self-evident mutual *obligations* among the collectivity of citizens

⁴ Habermas, 328-29.

⁵ Quoted and translated in Habermas, 332.

⁶ Leslie Paul Thiele, *Environmentalism for a New Millennium: the challenge of coevolution*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

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of the community and world, though without necessitating an essentialization of human nature.⁷

Given the dangerous, peculiar material conditions of the contemporary historical world in which environmental disaster has become a constantly looming or manifest reality, given the significance of this for all humans, and given that substantive solutions require collective as well as individual action, civic ties will be reconceptualized in a way that prioritizes these concerns.

This worldview will ground the idea of bonds of citizenship, collective obligation and action *first* in political imperatives related to ecology and the sustainability of diverse life on earth; this mode of civic tie will be theorized as, historically, necessarily prior to struggles around people's identities. However, this move does not require the supplanting or transcendence of today's important struggles for justice around historical oppressions, cultural values and identity issues.

Here, I aim to integrate into my critique sensitivity to what is a sweeping problem challenging social/political theory today, and a particular blindspot in Castoriadis's own work: the problem of value pluralism (see Kalyvas, 132). My goal is to conceptualize as a *political* project an environmentally sensitive mode of civic imagining that prioritizes i) ecological well being for all humanity, understood as an interconnected and thus mutually obligated *collectivity*, and ii) sustainability of biologically diverse life on the planet, without foreclosing space for other justice-seeking forms of politics.⁸ In fact, I will argue that citizenship reimagined in collective, environmentalist terms will foster alliances, coalitions and feelings of mutual obligation across

⁷ In positing a non-essentialist, political notion of collective human need and action that is tied to ecology, I will attempt to draw on Castoriadis's development of a concept of political autonomy as popular sovereignty that resists essentialism and voluntarism (Kalyvas, 131).

⁸ This imagining is, then, anthropocentric. While I respect critiques from environmentalists of anthropocentrism, given the neo-liberal world in which we live today, I don't believe that a viable and widespread ecological ethos can be fostered that is not focused on the human species. Moreover, many of the lives most horribly affected on the planet by environmental degradation and abuses are human lives. That said, I aim to articulate a form of civic anthropocentric environmentalism that is guided precisely by awareness of human interdependency with other life forms of Earth, and of the fact that non-human life forms are variously dependent on each other. We can dream of a healthy Earth free of humans, but given the historical present, the only way Earth will come to feature no humans is

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existing identity politics divisions that can help to shift perceptions and experience of historical sources of the division, in favour of new forms of recognition of and insight into shared humanity. This is consistent with Castoriadis's insistence that we "instaurate a genuine democracy under contemporary conditions" by "putting 'enjoyments' in their place, by demolishing excessive importance the economic sphere has taken on in the modern world, and by trying to create a new ethos, an ethos connected at its center to man's essential mortality" (1997, 99).⁹ Over all, while Castoriadis himself can be accused of increasing degrees of abstraction in his calls to action, I will argue that environmental crisis and necessity constitutes a "locus of explosion" by way of which a democratic political "breakthrough and new beginnings" may emerge today (Kalyvas, 133). In this way I hope to contribute to an elucidation of the potential of Castoriadis's thought, and to extend it as a promising vehicle for contemporary, emancipatory, critical political theory.

Castoriadis: symbols and the social-historical imaginary

This research is premised on the view that "politics is a linguistically constituted activity" (Ball, Farr, Hanson, 1989), language being understood in its broadest sense to include discourse and cultural imagery.¹⁰ Further, it treats politics as embedded in a linguistically-constituted, social-historical imaginary (Castoriadis, 1987). While social and political theorists have been attending to the narratives framing the "nation" (Bhabha, 1990; Anderson, 1991; Pieterse and Parekh, 1995; Cheah and Robbins, 1998; Cohen, 1996) and the "state" (Stevens, 1999),

by way of mass, human-driven destruction of the conditions that enable life for all or most species. The humans are the main problem, and so it is on humans that I centre the project.

⁹ Cornelius Castoriadis, *World in Fragments: writings on politics, society, psychoanalysis, and the imagination*, ed. and transl. By David Ames Curtis (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

¹⁰ Terence Ball, James Farr, Russell L. Hanson, eds., *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

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“democracy” as a modern Western manifestation of imagination remains under-analyzed.¹¹ This project will extend my recent work on the meaning and political significance of the familial imagery that frames Alexis de Tocqueville’s famous text, *Democracy in America* (Janara, 2002).¹² I have shown that, in conveying his anxiety about and prescriptions for democracy, Tocqueville leans upon symbols of the idealized modern conjugal family; the effect of such thinking is deleterious to democracy as well as to what he posits as human maturity. The project I am beginning to outline here turns to the broader tradition of which Tocqueville is a part to address three contexts in which scholars generally see modern Western democracy developing its originary terms: England, the U.S. and France.

In their work, Jan Nederveen Pieterse and Bhikhu Parekh characterize the imaginary as “constitutive of community and society” and a “vector of political analysis” that can be “thematized in various historical studies.” Philosophically, I accept their claim that shared images constitute a “vector of communion” and that “liberation means the substitution of one vector of communion” with another (1995, 6). But it is Castoriadis’ founding work on the concept of the imaginary that is my starting point. For him, the imaginary does not *reflect* a given reality but is itself the social-historical and psychical *generation* – a genesis -- of particular images, symbols and forms which all historical societies are governed by (1995, 3). These images, symbols and forms are locatable in history as a “creation and ontological genesis in and through individuals’ doing and representation/saying.” That is, because “there exists no place,

¹¹ Bhabha, Homi. *Nation and Narration* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Anderson, Benedict R. O’G. *Imagined Communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983; revised edition, 1991); Pieterse, Jan Nederveen and Bhikhu Parekh, eds. *The Decolonization of Imagination: culture, knowledge and power* (London: Zed Books Ltd., 1995); Cheah, Pheng and Bruce Robbins, eds. *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feelings beyond the Nation* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); Cohen, Joshua, ed. *For Love of Country: debating the limits of patriotism: Martha C. Nussbaum with respondents* (Boston, Mass: Beacon Press, 1996); Stevens, Jacqueline. *Reproducing the State* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

¹² Laura Janara, *Democracy Growing Up: authority, autonomy and passion in Tocqueville’s Democracy in America* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002).

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no point of view outside of history and society,” Castoriadis argues, “every thought . . . is but a mode and a form of social-historical *doing*” (1995, 3, 4). So while the imaginary is generally not self-referential, from inside the social imaginary (the only place we can be), we may nonetheless gain critical awareness of it by locating governing images, symbols and forms in human action and representational discourse (1995, 3). Put another way, there is no abstract *logos* or laws or drives governing society, but rather people who speak from within the social imaginary. This is not to say that the imaginary’s discourses are merely arbitrary, but are open to critical judgment (1995, 4). That is, history and society is a self-creation of which humans are the enactors and agents. As such, the social imaginary is, as Andreas Kalyvas puts it, “a source of alterity and genuine change. By conceptualizing and valorizing . . . this undetermined surging forth of new meanings, images, and representations from the creative potential of the radical imaginary,” Castoriadis contributes to a theory positing space for critical human intervention and for “new beginnings” (Kalyvas, 131). Castoriadis thus seeks to understand what brings about past, existing and new forms of society; the answer lays in his notion of the instituted society.

For Castoriadis, society is a totality of its institutions – the “instituted society”. But it is neither neutral nor reducible to a prior reality, and is more than a procedural or instrumental historical phenomenon. What the instituted society entails is a magma of collective representations, substantive meanings and values within which formal rules and processes are posited and unfold in turn. Creative instituting power can not be specifically located, and is not equivalent to formal political mechanisms; that is, the social is not transparent but opaque, which means rationalization can never fully triumph, and which means there is always space for resistance (Kalyvas, 130-31).

While social life is comprised of material realities, these material realities, such as child-bearing and consumption, are experienced and lived as embedded in and structured by a network of symbols and meanings. Religions, legal systems and economic modes of organization are all symbolic orders sanctioned socially; sanctioned symbols entail an established obligation by the social group to validate the relationship between a symbol (signifiers) and that which it has been established to signify (1995, 117). Castoriadis gives the example of a paycheque as symbol of a worker's right to receive a collectively agreed upon amount of money; this paycheque is in turn an agreed upon symbol of the worker's right to purchase (1995, 117). Further,

The work itself which is the basis for the paycheque, although it is eminently real both for its subject and in its results, is, of course, constantly bound up with symbolic operations (in the mind of the person working, in the instructions he receives, etc.). And it becomes a symbol itself when, after being reduced to hours and minutes multiplied by given coefficients, it enters into the accounting office's calculations . . . or when, in the event of disputes, it fills the empty squares in the premises and conclusions of the legal syllogism that will settle matters. (1995, 117)

Institutional symbolism does not strictly determine the substance of social life, that is, the relation is not causal, and neither is there a transparent rationality to the symbolism (1995, 125). Functionalism, one of Castoriadis's main targets, would treat the substance behind symbols as real and rational, either by viewing symbols as a neutral and precise expression of that substance, or by seeing symbols as governed by a special logic but nonetheless subordinate to the rational order. However, he argues that interpretation demands that we recognize that symbols are not strictly functions of either substance or rationality in this way. A symbol that has been taken up by a historical society is neither predictably imposed by some natural order nor detached from all reality, neither an inevitability nor purely random expression (1995, 118-19). As any individual experiences in acts of communication and expression, the use of symbols is constrained by the already constituted language game. For societies too, though in a different way, symbolism

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cannot be fully random, but grows out of already existing formations. Nature is the first formation that constricts the emergence of symbols, as no society would use a snail to represent speed; likewise, a tropical society would probably not use ice as a symbol (1995, 121). “Every symbolism is built on the ruins of earlier symbolic edifices and uses their materials . . . By its virtually unlimited natural and historical connections, the signifier always goes beyond a strict attachment to a precise signified and can lead to completely unexpected realms” (1995, 121).

What I want to show in my project is that the modern Western democratic imaginary is predominantly comprised of two apparently distinct and opposed symbolic networks: the idea of family, which leans on notions of natural or fundamental interconnection; and the idea of individualism, which leans on notions of atomistic existence. However, I will also argue that the apparent opposition between these symbolic networks is only apparent in part, with individualism emerging out of and in many ways presupposing the familial. Castoriadis gives the example of the Soviet of People’s Commissars to illustrate how apparently new symbolic orders are never wholly new. He recounts how Trotsky and the Bolsheviks aimed to find a new name for their government after seizing power; the word “ministers” repelled Lenin because it evoked the past. Lenin embraced the name “people’s commissars” because he expected that this new language would go hand in hand with new institutions. But in this case, while the moment posed the potential for new social content, on the level of the “institution in its second-order symbolic nature,” it was nonetheless a council of ministers that Lenin ended up with (1995, 122). Very much within institutions, but also at the level of language, symbols as signifiers are not fully governed by the substance or content they are meant to convey (1995, 122). Indeed, symbolic networks embody their own logic which is not fully graspable and foreseeable, and the rules of which yield consequences that are significant for social life. “*They thus contribute to*

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'shaping' social life in a way that was not required by the functional nature of social relations, one that does not directly contradict it but that can draw society into one of several different directions left undetermined by functionality, or even create effects that have a rebound effect on the latter (the stock market represents, in relation to industrial capitalism, essential this sort of case)" (1995, 123-24, emphasis added). The degree of symbolization varies with cultures, and the intensity with which parts of life will be imbued with symbolism is unpredictable (1995, 124).

In sum, Castoriadis's view is that

Society does constitute its symbolism, but not with total freedom. Symbolism is bound up with nature, and it is bound up with history (with what is already there); finally, it partakes of rationality. As a result of this, links emerge between signifiers, relations between signifiers and signifieds, connections and consequences emerge which were neither intended nor foreseen. Not freely chosen, not imposed upon a given society, neither a neutral instrument nor a transparent medium, neither an impenetrable opacity nor an irreducible adversity, neither the master of society nor the flexible slave of functionality, not a direct and complete means of partaking of a rational order – symbolism determines the aspects of life (and not merely those it was supposed to determine) while simultaneously being full of interstices and of degrees of freedom. (1995, 125)

Political possibility resides in what Castoriadis calls a "reflective use" of the symbolic. At the same time that we cannot create from nothing a language, and what we can say is always structured by existing language and symbolism, we are not "fatally subject to language". Rather, "our mobility within language is limitless and allows us to question everything, including language itself and our relation to it. Critical response to institutional symbolism is this very activity in a complex form" (1995, 126).

Castoriadis hereby returns to an "actionist construction of praxis" by way of a "radical hermeneutic self-interpretation of modern time-consciousness" (Habermas, 329). He argues that,

Contrary to what some are now claiming once again, history is not a learning process. And yet, within this segment of history that concerns us, there exists a specific steadfast

continuity, one that makes it possible for significations previously created to remain politically relevant for us. . . . It is this history itself that creates reflectiveness, reflectiveness implying and requiring, among other things, that one turn back upon the past in order to elucidate it. (Castoriadis, 1997, 73)

Habermas sees Castoriadis examining “those rare historical moments in which the mass, from which institutions are formed, is still in flux – that is, toward the productive moments of the *foundation* of new institutions: ‘Those moments in which society as instituting breaks into society as instituted, in which society as already institutionally set up destroys itself with the help of society as founding institutions (that is, in which it creates itself as a *different* institutional order) provide a vivid and exciting picture . . . of the social-historical ‘now.’ . . . Even a society that appears concerned only to conserve itself persists only through ceaselessly changing itself’ (342ff.)” (Habermas, 329). In such moments of “creative world-interpretation,” the “imaginary dimension determines the lifestyle, the *Volksggeist*, of a society or an epoch” (Habermas, 330). My work entails exposing dominant symbols that have structured modern Western thinking about civic ties at moments of historical juncture and reimagining, and exposing the narrative contexts in which those symbols emerged. The motivation is to provide a history of the present: an account of how and why we came to think about civic ties in the familialized ways, on one hand, and individualistic ways, on the other hand, that we still do today. Sites at which to read for evidence of prevailing symbols and narratives of civic ties are countless. My approach will be to examine primarily dominant texts but also less dominant ones from select historical moments of social rupture and invention, to signal signposts in the emergence, development and sustenance of the dominant Western democratic imaginary. The aim is to locate some significant founding and contributing moments of the narratives that took root and twined together into a

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dominant imaginary over time. This genealogical tracing of the making of the history of the present will remain, necessarily, far from complete and endlessly open to further elucidation.

Modern democracy as family: some historical strands

Castoriadis does not himself take up the project of elucidating the modern democratic imaginary, but focuses more on rationality, science and the capitalist ethos. That said, he does remark that the French Revolution burst out due to “the enormous pressure that was coming from the social body as a whole” and that it

expressed an immense sea change in ideas, a new social imaginary, the emergence of such significations as political liberty, equality, popular sovereignty. These significations were already at work in the American Revolution of 1776. Behind the latter, as well as, in a more indirect fashion, behind the French Revolution, stands seventeenth-century England, the two revolutions and the civil war that occurred there, Charles’s severed head. (Castoriadis, 1997, 83)

My concern here is that, especially evident in the founding moments of the American Revolution for Independence and the French Revolution, throughout the union movement, and also in the twentieth-century civil rights and women’s movements, modern democracy often has been and continues to be imagined as a society of siblings – a *fraternité* or, less frequently, a sisterhood. This vision of modern democracy reverberates in two major, prior dimensions of Western civilization: ancient Greek political and social thought, and Christian thought and practices of the early Church. With respect to the Greeks, most famously, in *The Republic*, Plato proposes a communal Guardian class that marks the obliteration of particularist family ties in favour of a universalist familialism. For the guardians, family is equivalent to the polis, or at least, to their leadership class of the polis. Plato’s justification for so imagining his guardians is that particularist family loyalties interfere with loyalty to the universal needs of the polis. Thus, the

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polis itself establishes the boundaries for a sociological form of kinship; family and political ties become one and the same. Aristotle subsequently criticizes this merging of family and politics, arguing that the particularist ties of family and the civic life of the polis are wholly distinct, though not unrelated, and must remain so. Further, ancient imaginings in the Latin language also interweave family and political conditions. The Latin root of liberty, *liber*, means, as we all know, “free”, a concept that has guided political quests for democracy for many hundreds of years. But, it turns out, *liber* also means “son”. Here embedded in the linguistic traditions of the West we encounter entwined notions of intergenerational familial and political conditions. (The term *liberi*, meanwhile, means “sons and daughters, children in connection w[ith] their parents.”)

¹³ In these etymological roots we catch a glimpse of that enduring Western tale, articulated in Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* and re-told in the American and French Revolutions, in which men win freedom by vanquishing the authority of their fathers (such as King George III and King Louis XVI) to govern themselves as brothers.

While ancient Greek political thought and the Latin language had already posited the possibility of conceptualizing political ties as familial and vice-versa – classical imaginings later recovered by Renaissance scholars, modern Western democracy has unfolded more immediately in relation to Christian culture and practices of the European Church. Through the history of the West, kinship has been predominantly defined as biological consanguinity, and secondarily as sociological ties fixed by legal arrangements including adoption, marriage and so on, although the distinction between biological and sociological kinship remains problematic.¹⁴ Moreover, as

¹³ See the Oxford Latin Dictionary and Marc Shell, *Elizabeth’s Glass* (Lincoln, Nb: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 312, n181.

¹⁴ “The commonplace Western view is that kinship by consanguinity is primary, or real kinship. Anthropologists and sociologists usually have lumped together all other kinds as pseudo-kinship (or kinship by extension), which they then divide into subcategories such as figurative, fictive, artificial, and ritual. However, the fundamental distinction between ‘real’ kinship and ‘pseudo’-kinship – or between literal and figural structure – is the topic of a still-unresolved debate about whether kinship is essentially a matter of biology (whose terms include ‘genitor’ and

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both Marc Shell and Carey McWilliams articulate, “Blood kinship is, in fact, a beneficent myth” which “declares that one’s kindred are established genetically, and hence automatically. It is a myth because it attempts to make human relations, in which an element of volition is always involved, appear to be the result of a primal necessity independent of choice.” As such, “bonds of blood kinship are the human relations farthest from personal relations” (McWilliams, 1973, 37).¹⁵ Consanguineous kinship is a myth that we turn into a science of ineradicable fact. That said, some significant institutions and forms of society in Western history have imagined kinship in wholly other terms. Literary theorist Shell argues that “the idea of Universal Siblinghood has influenced the Western tradition for millennia,” and has been clearly part of the Christian tradition which has posited all human beings as brothers and sisters, or, all humans as potentially part of the siblinghood (Shell, 1988, 10, 11). Members of the Catholic orders defined themselves by way of dissolving their earthly biological/sociological kin relations to pave the way for a new heavenly familialism in which all people are siblings – monks as brothers, nuns as sisters (Shell, 1988, 10). Blood brother societies, friendship societies, other kinds of religious orders and modern democracy itself are all further examples of historical associations that have employed unconventional (non-biological/consanguineous) notions of kinship to define themselves (Shell, 1988, 9).

In this latter part of my paper I begin to point to and discuss some strands of historical imagining that have contributed to the positing of modern democracy as a political experience and community constituted by familial relations among citizens. The main modality of kinship that has been used to define modern civic democratic ties is the notion of universal siblinghood.

‘genetrix’) or sociology (whose terms include ‘father’ and ‘mother’) (Marc Shell, *The End of Kinship: ‘Measure for Measure,’ Incest, and the Ideal of Universal Siblinghood* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988], 4).

¹⁵ Wilson Carey McWilliams, *The Idea of Fraternity in America* (Berkeley, Ca: University of California Press, 1973).

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Discourse around democracy has tended to configure this siblinghood as a symbolic or metaphorical relationship. The fact that humans have reached for familialism in this way, as a code or language through which to imagine the political community, be it in moments of absolutist monarchical patriarchalism (as during the reign of England's James I), or in moments of reaching for republican egalitarianism, as during the French Revolution, is unsurprising. As mentioned, as Castoriadis suggests, "Every symbolism is built on the ruins of earlier symbolic edifices and uses their materials" and "the signifier always goes beyond a strict attachment to a precise signified and can lead to completely unexpected realms" (1995, 121; see Janara, 2002, 2-3). At the same time, however, there is ample evidence that, in founding moments of modern democracy, in unsettled moments characterized by radical struggles to create the world in altered terms, many political actors have imagined the universal siblinghood of democracy in literal terms, radically and fully juxtaposing the political and the familial. This familialist dimension of the modern democratic imaginary has hereby worked with the material of nature, interpreting it in ways that challenge previously assumed natural limits.

The same can, in fact, be said of the early modern European doctrine of patriarchalism which literally imagined the king as the Christian God's representative on earth and thus a patriarchal authority over child-subjects. But then Christianity itself provided terms that served efforts to challenge such familialist absolutism, and blazed a trail for a new democratic familialism. Shell suggests that the form of kinship "hypothesized and to some extent practiced" by traditional Christianity, especially the celibate Catholic orders, provides the main Western example of universal brotherhood or siblinghood (Shell, 1988, 10). Monachism in the early Church entailed the coming together of ascetics in sibling-based communities structured by "spiritual marriage" that excluded all intergenerational forms of hierarchy. Such egalitarianism

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and views of liberty were shocking to the prevailing patriarchy because of the challenge posed to popular kin structures and the related economic structures and property relations (Shell, 1993, 53, 54).¹⁶ What Shell himself is concerned to elucidate is that, “By universalizing kinship in this way the doctrine of spiritual kinship puts into question, not merely the status of consanguinity as the standard for kinship, but also the distinction between kin and nonkin and thus between incest and chastity on which all other structures of kinship rely and, some say, on which society itself is founded” (Shell, 1988, 11). Shell surveys a number of Western literary works to show an extreme but pervasive story line in Western life and thought:

whenever a nun or monk has sexual intercourse outside the convent, it turns out that the lovers are consanguineous brother and sister. Their act of sexual intercourse is not only spiritual or figural incest, insofar as everyone (including a sibling) is a Sibling to a nun or monk, but also literal incest. By such incest, these works indicate one generic end, or intent, of a religious order insofar as the order emulates a kinship group: to incorporate and transcend incest. In the convent, intercourse with a sibling is not better – or worse – than with any other human being. (Shell, 1988, 12)

Shell discovers a second, companion story line in Western literature and tradition, wherein “a lay person, for whom some people are kin and some are not, tries to escape from the desire to commit sibling incest or the guilt of having done so by entering a nunnery or monastery. Here all people are equally kin or not kin and making love to one’s sibling is no worse or better than making love to any other person in the Universal Siblinghood” (Shell, 1988, 10; see 13, *ff*).

When Shell turns to explore this theme of incest as central to the notion of universal siblinghood in the West, let us be clear that he refers not to child molestation, child rape and other abuse of children, or “the unhappy fact of father-daughter seduction and rape in our vestigially patriarchal society. Exposing and preventing intergenerational molestation is, I think, an admirable goal; it is one with which, I trust, the argument of my book does not interfere.” Rather, he casts his gaze

¹⁶ Marc Shell, *Elizabeth’s Glass* (Lincoln, Neb: University of Nebraska Press, 1993).

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on the idea of universal siblinghood and, the corollary, universal incest, as they have been linked in Western thought and practice (despite the nature of the Western incest taboo) to the *political and social quest for liberty and equality* (Shell, 1988, 197). We must interrogate Shell about what sort of non-patriarchal conditions could facilitate a universal siblinghood that would not potentially feature its own forms of power-over and abuse between siblings, including between the sexes, for example. Shell, for his part, ultimately argues that

the full implications of universal and equalitarian Siblinghood are utopian and idealist, even unbearable, for most of us. . . . Not only do most all people need a visible authority in order to behave well, . . . but Jesus' rule 'All ye are brethren' is, for all practical biological and political purposes, impossible to obey insofar as the hypothesis of Universal Siblinghood require either celibacy or incest, both of which lead to the ending of the body politic as we know it or as we need to know it. (Shell, 1988, 187)

What is striking for democratic theorists and historians of political ideas is that this problematic, of the relationship between universal siblinghood and universal incest, has been central to the development over time of the understanding of democratic citizenship as a fraternity (and sorority). In his willingness to excavate these unsettling strands of Western thought – these notions of universal siblinghood and universal chastity/incest, Shell presses us into awareness of the terms that fomented still prevailing symbols and expressions of democratic community, liberty and equality. As Shell himself observes, “The relationship between brothers and sisters inside and outside the Catholic orders calls to mind a secular attempt to deal with the societal dilemma of incest through the political goal of universal fraternity in liberty and equality” (Shell, 1988,15).

By the eighteenth century and subsequently, Romantics in Europe, England and the United States expressly transmogrified the longstanding Christian idea of universal siblinghood into a secular proclamation that humans universally are siblings such that particular relations and

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affinities are transcended to give way to a perfect egalitarian communitarianism or democratic politics. In cultivating this imaginary, the Romantic era is simultaneously marked by a struggle with its logical conclusion: that a community of universal siblings (relations “at least akin to kinship”) means sexual relations between siblings which means a kind of incestuousness (Shell, 1988, 16). So, Shell writes,

The ideal of universal fraternity – which seems at first to be not only a politically reassuring notion (insofar as it seems democratic) but also a psychologically and socially reassuring one (insofar as its realization appears to require no change in sexual arrangements) – thus raises the specter of incest. One reaction to the fear of this incest was the Catholic orders’ asocial doctrine of spiritual incest in celibacy. Another reaction was the call to practice universally physical incest. (Shell, 1988, 16).

Shell reviews a range of early modern thinkers in Europe and the United States who seek the latter

option. Republicans, including the French revolutionary government, recognized that the Catholic option of celibacy would inevitably end the republic, as well as signify social repression in the meantime (Shell, 1988, 17). So, in “French People, Yet Another Effort Is Needed If You Want To Be Republicans,” the Marquis de Sade argues that “Incest extends the ties of family and consequently encourages the citizens’ love of country,” and “incest must be the law of any government of which fraternity is the base.”¹⁷ Mirabeau and Shelley both take up the issue, as does Montesquieu in his *Persian Letters*, where he works to reject the anti-egalitarian notion of good and bad chastity in favour of universal fraternity. Taking the French Revolution as their springboard, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Robert Southey planned ideal egalitarian communities in the U.S. which they imagined as pantisocracies, that is, where universal social egalitarianism, and physical incest as part of the principle of universal siblinghood would render all intercourse “chaste and unchaste” (Shell, 1988, 17). Interestingly, while Coleridge proposes

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that sibling love is socially powerful as it gradually extends itself from particular relations to love of others, he does not see this love extending beyond the particular community/tribe/nation/country to all human beings. Coleridge ultimately withdrew his support of universal siblinghood because it meant either incest or celibacy, although he worked to argue that being in one's "family of the soul" is not the same as being in one's bodily family, sexual relations not being permissible with members of the latter (Shell, 1988, 18, 19).

John Humphrey Noyes's actually founded in 1848 the Perfectionist Society in Oneida, New York, which apparently incorporated physical incest as an expression of true liberty and as part of the doctrines of universal siblinghood, universal marriage and pantisocracy (Shell, 1988, 17, 21). Countering such experiments, in Victorian England, echoing Aristotle (and predating Freud's similar critique), James Fitzjames Stephen condemned communal fraternity for problematically supplanting the concrete particular with the abstract universal: "Love for Humanity, devotion to All or Universum, and the like, are . . . little, if anything, more than a fanatical attachment to some favorite theory about the means by which an indefinite number of unknown persons (whose existence it pleases the theorist's fancy to assume) may be brought into a state which the theorist calls happiness" (quoted by Shell, 1988, 19). Herman Melville's *Pierre: or, The Ambiguities*, also delves into the theme of secular universal siblinghood and incest. "And believe me," writes Melville, "you will pronounce Pierre a thorough-going Democrat in time; perhaps a little too Radical altogether to your fancy" (quoted by Shell, 1988, 21). This text by such a central commentator on American and modern democracy deserves thorough analysis, which I will incorporate into this work in the future. The thrust of the book is that Pierre

¹⁷ Marquis de Sade, *Philosophie dans le boudoir*, as quoted by Shell, 1988, 17.

is himself the rock, the *pierre*, on which he plans to build a new church. The doctrinal and practical basis of Pierre's church is the transcendence of the distinction between vice and virtue, a transcendence that involves erasing and rising above all distinctions between kin and nonkin. For Pierre all human beings are finally autochthonous Siblings "of the clod" and "children of Primeval gloom." From this unity of man Melville figures the old theme of a simultaneously spiritual and physical incest. Pierre, like Mohammed and other holy figures that Melville culls from the Western tradition and its tributaries, would transcend the taboo on incest. (Shell, 1988, 23).

Evidently for Melville, transcending all distinctions between the particular and the universal, kin and nonkin, signifies an end to humanity as we know it. Sister/wife character Isabel says to Pierre, "Were all men like to thee, then were there no men at all, -- mankind extinct in seraphim." And ultimately, Pierre commits fratricide, killing his cousin. As Shell remarks, "Between liberty and death – which the optimistic American revolutionary Patrick Henry set forth as comedic alternatives [consider New Hampshire's license plate motto] – there is, tragically, no essential difference" (Shell, 1988, 24).

But well prior to the American and French republican revolutionaries' express call for fraternity-as-liberty, we can see in Tudor England the political deployment of the notion of universal siblinghood as a means to create a nation. This leveling move, wrought centrally by Elizabeth I, contributed to a historical development of secular ideas friendly to democracy and communism. In 1544, Elizabeth, then princess, translated for her stepmother Catherine Parr *Le Miroir de l'âme pécheresse* (The Glass of the Sinful Soul), a text by Marguerit Angoulême, spiritual libertine and intellectual queen of Navarre. Beginning in this text, and developed later once queen, Elizabeth, Shell shows, reconfigured and expanded into a new secular, nationalist language "such medieval theological notions concerning kinship as universal siblinghood, whereby all men and women are equally akin, and dormition, wherein the Virgin Mary plays at once the role of mother and daughter as well as wife" (Shell, 1993, 7). Shell sees in Elizabeth's

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Glass a struggle to transmogrify desires and fears of physical incest into desires and fears of spiritual incest. “It thus reflects the beginnings of a new ideal and real political organization, which, partly out of Elizabeth’s own concerns with incest and bastardy and partly out of political exigencies of the time,” Elizabeth conveyed to her people to signify England itself as a kind of national siblinghood in relation to which she was both mother and wife (Shell, 1993, 7; see Janara, “Elizabeth I and Machiavelli,” in progress).

To clarify how and why Elizabeth, though daughter of a near absolute monarch and subsequently one herself, related to this discourse of universal siblinghood, let me recount in the barest of terms the complex kin situation by which she found herself defined.

First, Elizabeth’s *pater*, Henry VIII, had claimed publicly that she was a bastard and that her uncle Lord Rochford, her mother’s brother, was her consanguineous *genitor*. Just as Anne was accused of having had sexual intercourse with her brother Lord Rochford, Elizabeth was declared a bastard by a 1536 Act of Parliament.

Second, Sir Thomas More argued that the union between Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon was not incestuous and hence that both Henry’s divorce of Catherine and his marriage to Anne Boleyn were null. It follows that whether Henry or Rochford was Elizabeth’s *genitor*, she was in either event a bastard.

Third, Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn were married less than nine months before Elizabeth’s birthday, in suspiciously speedy and secret circumstances. Even if the marriage to Anne was legitimate (which More said it was not) and Henry the *genitor* (which Henry himself said he was not), Elizabeth might at least seem to have been conceived out of wedlock.

A fourth allegation was that Elizabeth’s mother was also her sister, or, put otherwise, that Anne Boleyn was not only Henry’s loving wife by marriage and sister by carnal contagion but also his daughter by consanguinity. . . . Though the allegation was false, we ought not to dismiss it as altogether frivolous, for in the context of the Christian religion, children of incestuous unions -- including the annunciated God (Jesus) and several saints (Gregory the Great) – come to assume powerful places in both profane and sacred institutions.

Finally, Elizabeth’s consanguineous aunt, Mary Cary (*née* Boleyn), had been her father’s mistress either before Anne or at about the same time (probably 1527-28); therefore, Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury and Elizabeth’s godfather, relied on the doctrine of carnal contagion and the parallel 1536 Act of Parliament – according to both of which it was nominated incest to sleep with the sister of one’s mistress (“flesh of my flesh”) – to declare both that the marriage between Henry and Anne was incestuous and that Elizabeth was a bastard. (Shell, 1993, 9-10)

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Moreover, after Henry VIII's death, Thomas Seymour, step-uncle and stepfather to Elizabeth, pursued sexual intimacy of some form with Elizabeth, who was thirteen at the time; and later, after Catherine Parr, Elizabeth's stepmother, died, Seymour attempted to marry Elizabeth next. Suffice it to say that Elizabeth's kin situation was unclear at best. Meanwhile, in English culture, the doctrine of carnal contagion lent general confusion about kinship and legitimacy. As J.H. Fowler writes, "there is something like a communicable disease metaphor involved in early medieval notions of sexuality. If one sleeps with a woman who sleeps with another man who sleeps with another woman who sleeps with me, then whether I will it or not my flesh is inextricably bound up with the flesh of that first man's" (quoted by Shell, 1993, 13). This insidious spread of kinship leads to a situation in which tracking who is kin and who is not becomes impossible. Shell observes that, alongside the uncertainty surrounding Elizabeth's own kinship context, "potentially universalist 'figurative' kinship structures of this sort were replacing 'literal' physical ones. It would seem, especially to one in a position like Elizabeth's, that all sexual liaisons were, or were likely to be, incestuous" (Shell, 1993, 14). In translating Marguerite of Navarre's text, Elizabeth attaches herself to a new way to think about kinship – one in which "kinship by *alliance* supersedes kinship by blood (where some people are brothers and some are others) and which looks to universalist standards of kinship (where all people are equally brothers and others)" (Shell, 1993, 20). Since Christianity simultaneously had long since posited the notion that all men are brothers, and since the English Protestant Reformation was transforming the Catholic notion of celibate universal siblinghood into a new Renaissance sexuality in which spiritual siblings are spouses, the leap to kinship by alliance may not have been so great for Elizabeth to make (Shell, 1993, 41).

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Of course, while universal siblinghood could reassure Elizabeth about her own particular family's sexual and kin status, it also raised the problem of on what grounds she could claim the throne over all her brothers and sisters (Shell, 1993, 21). Because her sex was seen in this patriarchalist context as problematic for her ascent to the throne, and because her questioned legitimacy as Henry VIII's biological daughter posed a further problem, another means was needed to secure her status as monarch – and , apparently, as *mother* -- to the new nation conceived as a community of siblings. This need was met by a claim to a nobility of spirit: Elizabeth's noble spirit justified her claim to be mother to Britons and, as it turned out, wife to England (Shell, 1993, 22). This context on the whole contributed to a challenge to biological consanguinity as a central means to define not only kinship *but also politics*. Put another way, Elizabeth had to meet the challenge of reconceptualizing the relationship between family and politics in order to secure her rule and consolidate her power. More broadly, an emergent social quest for liberty was fundamentally taken up in relation to the old patriarchal structures of family – patriarchalism in the family was being challenged in favour of more egalitarian and temporary forms of authority. These foundational connections between family and politics were evident elsewhere, as well. More radically, in sixteenth-century England, a religious, libertine and communist sect called The Family of Love proclaimed that all “are equal in degree among themselves; all Kings, and a kingdome of kings” (quoted by Shell, 1993, 53). Not much later, the Ranters and Levelers were also rethinking the meaning of social and kinship ties to posit new ways to connect humans as free equals – as brothers: a more that proved a precursor to the revolutionaries' calls for *liberté, fraternité, égalité* in France. The idea of liberty, for its part, was bound up for Christians in the Church's riddle-like view of the Holy Family that featured the Virgin Mary as simultaneously spouse, sibling, child and mother of God the simultaneous Father

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and Son. In this confusing kin situation, Mary's evidently incestuous relationship with God the Father/Son is defined as good (Shell, 1993, 23). So, as Shell observes, while religious celibacy and religious libertinism may appear very different things to us today, in Western history they are entwined ideas related to a common problematic (Shell, 1993, 51). Elizabeth consolidated her power against this backdrop by developing, in part by drawing on Roman history and legend, an ideology of the English nation as a site of universal siblinghood, with herself taking up the role of mother to Britons and wife to England – a particular expression of the merging of family and politics that outlasted her. As Shell puts it, she managed to “walk the line between rejecting and reverencing consanguineous familial and national parenthood, between the spiritual mysticism wherein all are one in God and the political fact whereby someone lords it over others” (Shell, 1993, 58). And so Elizabeth wrote to Henry Sidney in 1565, “You know a kingdom knows no kindred” (quoted by Shell, 1993, 66) – the sort of perspective that helped foster the European “nation” as a new political form. The next century in England then featured the further development of notions of equality and universal freedom -- of liberalism and democracy -- ideas facilitated by Elizabeth's political-familial ideology, but which required the demolition of the political leader as parent. However, this recasting of familial politics raises the question of whether modern Western democracy, in continuing to signify citizens as siblings, has in fact fully abandoned the idea of leaders as parents.

Working conclusion to a working paper

The modern Western democratic imaginary features in its development a problematic of universal siblinghood as an expression of the meaning of egalitarian and free civic ties. But a vision of democracy-as-siblinghood poses serious problems for democracy – a thesis that I begin

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to develop in this conclusion. *First*, the notion of universal siblinghood presumes parentage – somewhere – that must either be embraced as a special authority (Elizabeth I), killed off (as was Louis Capet in the French Revolution), or recreated in a new, friendlier form (founding fathers of the American Revolution). But the point of the French Revolution was to destroy the patriarchalist monarchical past and start afresh. However, by casting the revolutionary republican present in the language of brothers, a primordial tie to that hierarchical past was sustained. This problematic is even more true in the American case, where American revolutionaries turned away from Mother England to Liberty as a new mother, and to their founders and leaders as non-monarchical new fathers (see Janara, 2002, chs. 2, 3). In his monumental study of the idea of fraternity in the U.S., McWilliams rightly observes that not only does the idea of brothers imply equality; all fathers are similarly equal to one another. Indeed, all kin terms suggest equality within their particular class. Moreover, fraternity conveys not simply equality but, perhaps more centrally and singularly, shared inferiority to parental figures. In fact, McWilliams notes, “The single kinship term which suggests liberty and equality had already been discovered by the kin-conscious monarchs of Europe: the term is ‘cousin’” (McWilliams, 1973, 4).

A *second* problem with conceptualizing democracy as a universal siblinghood is something that Shell begins to confront in his work. He argues that the

most disturbing aspect of the Christian idea of Universal Siblinghood is not the inevitability of a retreat from it but the inevitably inhuman or inhumane practical consequence of making a retreat that is not openly acknowledged. The Christian ideology of universal human brotherhood tends to conflate intraspecies difference with interspecies difference, or, put otherwise, it can encourage us to call or treat as ‘animals’ all living beings outside the ‘universal’ group of siblings. . . . Who, or what, are ‘human beings’ to a Christian? (Shell,

In articulating a universal siblinghood as the context for democracy, as for Christianity, we run the risk of expelling significant human difference (including political difference) to an outer frontier of sub- or not-exactly-humanity. Shell argues that “it is better to be an outsider in a particularist kinship system, where there are human kin and human aliens, than to be an outsider in a universalist kinship system, where there are only humankind and animals. . . . Such a formulation metamorphoses a human being who cannot, or will not, be a member of the happy brotherhood into a dog (the fate of [Shakespeare’s] Shylock), just as Coleridge metamorphoses a cat into a member of his family” (Shell, 1988, 19). Concerned along similar lines, Paul Gilroy, among others, has interrogated the fraternalist dimensions of European fascism: “The comprehensive masculinization of the public sphere” which entailed the “strongly masculinist character derived principally from the exultation of war as a space in which men can know themselves better and love one another legitimately in the absence of the feminine” based itself in an idea of political fraternity (Gilroy, 2000, 146).¹⁸ Of course fascism has, through such a worldview, centrally involved the radical othering of those not of the brotherhood. Similarly, the female experience of the French Revolution, wherein even female republican activists were expressly excluded from citizenship, despite arguing against such a move in the assembly itself, is ample evidence of how vast proportions of humanity may be excluded from any imagined universal fraternity.¹⁹ Evidently, the historical imagining of civic ties as fraternalist or a siblinghood requires analysis through the lens of sex-gender – a move I will pursue as I develop this project, since universal siblinghood may or may not entail gender equality, justice or

¹⁸ Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: imagining political culture beyond the color line* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000).

neutrality. The story of *Beauty and the Beast* is another expression of the problem of universalism as exclusionist, wherein the protagonist Beauty will not marry the Beast she loves because he is too unlike her evident humanity; the resolution comes only when her kiss transforms him into an apparent human more like her (Shell, 1988, 20). I must add to this catalogue of concerns about universalism as exclusionary whether, in this moment of rapid extinction of species due to environmental destruction, the positing of non-human life forms as diametrically “other” adequately serves our need to sustain diverse forms of all sorts of life on the planet, including insects, animals and plants, as well as humans. This is a theme I will take up later in the project.

Third, and this point adds to the first and sits in productive tension with the second, imagining democracy as universal siblinghood presupposes that siblinghood is a harmonious and egalitarian relationship of fully shared interests. But from where do we derive such a model of siblinghood? It strikes me that the historically deployed notion of democracy as universal siblinghood is simultaneously loaded and empty, loaded in that it conveys layers of historical meaning that need to be unearthed and interrogated, and empty in that there is no rich reality of siblinghood behind it – this emperor wears few clothes. As many feminists have richly argued and illustrated, “family” does not have a natural form but is rather socially, historically multiplicitous, and thus is not naturally a site of harmony, love and necessarily compatible interests among individuals. In our society, the place each of us is most likely to experience violence is in the family. Even the Christian tradition that so embraces universal siblinghood centrally features the story of Cain and Abel. While Shell is right that “myths of common origin do have their political use,” he too quickly accepts the notion that “We treat brothers better than

¹⁹ See Margaret George, "The 'World Historical Defeat' of the Républicainnes-Révolutionnaires," *Science and Society* 40:4 (winter 1976-77): 410-437.

others, don't we?" (see Janara, 2004, forthcoming).²⁰ McWilliams notes that classical philosophers "believed that hostility occurred between men who had common goals when the values and virtues involved were scarce, limited, not shareable in themselves. . . . The law of exclusive possession is, moreover, supplemented by the law of insecurity of possession." Given the problems posed by scarcity, the pursuit of abstract values seems a more promising terrain for constructing a communal fraternity, especially since on this front, full "success is impossible; and if this is recognized to be so, it guarantees the permanence of relations between those who remain true to the goal. Failure does, however, create frustration; and frustration creates aggression toward whatever impedes success"(McWilliams, 1973, 44). McWilliams, for his part, suggests a fraternity must include meaningful disagreement. And this is largely why he finds the eighteenth-century creed of fraternity dangerous.

To invest any human relationship with total value, to presume that my "identity" is possible only in that relationship, is to make me totally dependent on the other, who now controls ("is") myself. For the other is mortal: he may be injured or die; worse, he may change toward me. . . . Fear of betrayal and fear of natural processes, both inherent in any human relation, are raised to a psychotic level of anxiety when the relationship is charged with nearly total meaning.

The greater the dependence, the greater will be the desire to control the relationship.

In the extreme case, the aim will be the elimination of the separate personality of the other, the achievement of total subjection. . . . Fratricide is the hidden theme of those who would make fraternity an ultimate value. [Chamfort summarized the doctrine of 1780 in the statement, "Be my brother or I will kill you"]... It is possible to love everyone equally only if one loves nothing in particular. And, to the extent that others are won to the creed, I need not fear betrayal. Evaluation of my character will not matter beyond the bare fact of my humanity; and given that, another's love can be commanded. (McWilliams, 1973, 47-48).

²⁰ Laura Janara, "Brothers and Others: Tocqueville and Beaumont on U.S. Genealogy, Democracy and Racism,"

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This latter passage sounds like a powerful account of the meaning and character of an incestuous family, and the reason for its unacceptability: the merging of all distinctions among people and among their actions into borderlessness and nothingness. So, in a universal fraternity, either we level distinctions among human actions and virtues, an extremely disturbing option, or, as Shell fears, we denounce some members as not human, an equally terrible option. Unified fraternity works to erase the reality of the other, both inside and outside the siblinghood. Erich Fromm thus argues that such a mode of conceptualizing human community is founded upon a subterranean dread of dependence and hatred of the different other, and thus signals a flight from life itself (McWilliams, 1973, 49) – and, let me add, from democracy.

Shell concludes his study by observing that, while the ideology of universal siblinghood presses a claim of radical sameness, historical adventures in the West featuring such interpretations of kinship have, in practice, sat alongside some positing of heterogeneity. That is, efforts to achieve a universalist, egalitarian siblinghood as ideal association that brings an end to kinship as we have understood it have never been realized (Shell, 1988, 184). Certainly the Christian church, alongside Jesus's proclamation that "All ye are brethren," has structured itself hierarchically in a move that offsets universalism, not to mention that the Church distinguishes Christians from non-Christians (Shell, 1988, 185). Other Western societies that have attempted universal siblinghood have likewise mitigated universalism by registering difference. Shell cites the Greek Phratry, a religious and political association, as an example, as it stressed both intratribal homogeneity of a sort (all men were defined as brothers and sons of the same fathers) and difference between tribes. French revolutionaries, meanwhile, stressed intertribal homogeneity while pointing to difference within the republic, especially along intergenerational lines (Shell, 1988, 189).

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The notion that political hierarchy and authority from above can be supplanted by egalitarian brothers (and, sometimes, sisters) captures, among other things, a utopian disposition toward a future that entails the end of politics. In this way, the universal-siblinghood conception of democracy shares with Platonic and Hobbesian theory an impulse to imagine a world where politics – struggle, difference, the dangers of power-over -- is overcome. But all three of these broadly outlined problems with democracy-as-universal-siblinghood show that it actually threatens human egalitarianism and liberty. I intend to develop further this analysis of universal siblinghood as a problematic expression of the relation between the universal and the particular in politics and social life. Let me end up returning to Castoriadis's call upon us consciously to register the imaginary in which we find ourselves embedded, and creatively and critically to inaugurate an imaginary that better serves democratic ends. Sharing this sentiment, in his critique of the family trope in black cultural discourse, Paul Gilroy laments the "disastrous consequences that follow when the family supplies not just the only symbols of political agency we can find in the culture, but the only object upon which that agency can be seen to operate as well. Let's remind ourselves that there are other possibilities" (Gilroy, 1992, 315).

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**The Democratic Imaginary:
a conceptual framework and analysis of universal siblinghood**

by Laura Janara

Department of Political Science

University of British Columbia

janara@politics.ubc.ca

WORKING DRAFT

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While in the ancient West, Sophocle's *Oedipus Rex* is the central example of stories about incest – parent-child incest, Shell observes that tragedies and comedies from the modern era

are likely to involve sibling incest: German 'tragedies of fate,' Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, Horace Walpole's *Mysterious Mother*, Dineson's *Caryatids*, Voltaire's *Zaire*, and Diderot's *Natural Son*. The plots of relevant comedies generally involve a protagonist who wishes to mate with someone he wrongly believes to be kin, and the comic recognition scene shows that an act thought to be incestuous is chaste. Examples of comic concern with sibling incest include Lessing's *Nathan the Wise*, Goethe's *Siblings*, and Beaumont and Fletcher's *A King and No King*. (Shell, 11)

This modern Western preoccupation with sibling incest is unsurprising, in my mind, given the modern struggle to imagine democratic community against the backdrop of Christianity and its notion of universal siblinghood. Likewise, as I have discussed elsewhere, while eighteenth-century Europeans were preoccupied with the child as symbol of the emergent democratic world, by the nineteenth century, these images gave way to the more particular case of orphans who did not know their origins nor where they belonged, conveying the sense of dislocation and uncertainty felt amid the loss of traditional political structure and the rise of a new, atomizing industrial economy (see Janara, ??). As Shell points out, literary orphans,

fearing that any sexual intercourse might be incestuous, leaves not only his family home but all human families to become a child to some god or goddess and a Sibling to all human beings. When this 'child of adoption' to god or goddess descends from heavenly Siblinghood to the world of earthy ties, however, his fears or desires are fulfilled in enactment, for in this typology he unknowingly falls in love with, or makes love to, a person of his earthly family.

Thus, in many literary works, whenever a nun or monk has sexual intercourse outside the convent, it turns out that the lovers are consanguineous brother and sister. . . . By such incest, these works indicate one generic end, or intent, of a religious order insofar as the order emulates a kinship group: to incorporate and transcend incest. In the

convent, intercourse with a sibling is no better – or worse – than with any other human being. (Shell, 11-12).

Sources of praxis and resistance?

Habermas is concerned that Castoriadis's framework fails to articulate a site or means by which critical perspective may be gained by social actors on their prevailing social historical imaginary.

Intramundane praxis can gain no independence in relation to the power of this imaginary magma of meaning, because the concept of language used by Castoriadis permits no differentiation between meaning and validity. As with Heidegger, the 'truth' of semantic world-disclosure also founds the propositional truth of statements; it prejudices the validity of linguistic utterances generally. As a result, intramundane praxis cannot get learning processes going. At any rate, there is no accumulation of knowledge that could affect the previous interpretation of the world and burst a given totality of meaning – not even in the dimensions of the natural sciences and the forces of production. . . . Why a society institutes a specific horizon of meanings is a question Castoriadis has to reject as meaningless. . . . The institution of any world is a creation *ex nihilo*.

When the relationship of the world-disclosing imaginary dimension to labor and interaction is set up in this way, however, one can no longer conceive of autonomous action as intramundane praxis; instead, Castoriadis has to assimilate it to the language-creating, world-projecting, world-devouring praxis of the social demiurge itself. But praxis thereby loses precisely the traits of human action that Castoriadis rightly

emphasizes – the characteristics of a context-dependent intersubjective undertaking under finite conditions.²¹

The finite conditions of workable nature and also the constraints imposed by the historical, social, embodied life of human subjects are the backdrop to human praxis, Habermas argues. He is concerned that, in “assimilating intramundane praxis to a linguistic world-disclosure hypostatized in to a history of Being, Castoriadis can no longer *localize* the political struggle for an autonomous way of life – the very emancipatory, creative-projective praxis with which Castoriadis is ultimately concerned.”²²

A first case study: England, Elizabeth I and the Putney Debates

In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault poses the question of how power operated once the prince was gone. My project poses the question of how, as the imaginary was establishing grounds for the prince’s departure, and once the prince was gone, relations among citizens were imagined.

²¹ Habermas, 331-32.

²² Habermas, 332-33. Habermas also registers concern about the “second stream of the imaginary dimension, namely, in the individual unconscious, which constitutes the monadic core of subjectivity in early childhood.” He takes up the problem of how Castoriadis separates out a pre-linguistic and thus pre-social imaginary form of psychic production of the individual from the socially instituted world and its guiding imaginary (333-34). I will not tackle this problem here.

Reacting to these shortcomings, I will assess whether themes in democratic theory today - the idea of *cosmopolitan* citizenship (Bohman and Lutz-Bachmann 1997; Euben 2001; Giraudon 1991) and of citizenship as between *friends or strangers* (Honig 2001; Phelan 2001; Ignatieff 1986; Parekh 1994; Derrida 1997; Mansbridge 1980) -- signal preferable, alternative democratic imaginaries.

Situated on such terrain, my ecologically-informed view of civic ties will contribute to today's emergent citizenship studies and to public notions of citizenship that facilitate meaningful individual and collective responses to pressing, contemporary political problems.

My purpose is to illustrate and critically assess the historical habit, in liberal, republican and even radical conceptions and discourses of modern Western democracy, of imagining democracy in either familial or individualist – and sometimes both -- terms. I will challenge the benefits to democracy and human flourishing of this dominant modern imaginary. This critique will also respond to recent conceptualizations of citizenship as cosmopolitanism and as friendship/strangerhood, and will seek alternative civic imaginings from the scholastically marginalized Canadian and Scandinavian historical democratic imaginaries, ultimately to defend an ecological model of civic relations. The aim is to reimagine citizenship in terms that render it responsive to contemporary problems of environmental crisis, local and global cultural conflict, and a widening gap between rich and poor within and among states.

Context:

I will show that, evident in an array of formative texts and discursive moments of the modern democratic tradition as it has emerged from the fifteenth-century to present-day, political actors have repeatedly leaned upon family imagery. They have done so to articulate the meaning of ties among citizens, and between citizens and political institutions and the politico-territory itself. The claim is not that some fixed notion of family has structured thinking about democracy across centuries, but rather that the idea of family – itself historically shifting -- has time and again been deployed to signify the meaning of democracy, in times of founding and beyond. However, there is a dearth of scholarly commentary on this phenomenon. Consider the fact that, in recovering republicanism from the ancients to the later effect of shaping democracy's founding in the U.S, early modern theorist Niccolò Machiavelli trades in familial imagery to characterize the pagan founding of Rome. Also in the Renaissance context, Elizabeth I of England, as I have discovered in other research (Janara 2003), deployed a notion of siblinghood to craft her polity as a (national) unit (Shell 1993). In part because her symbolism differs from the androcentric fraternalism of so much subsequent democratic familialism, the impact of Elizabeth's discourse on the emergent democratic arguments found fifty years later in the Levellers' debate with the New Model Army at Putney, England, in 1647, is of interest.

Some scholars have noticed that the American colonial period, Revolution for Independence and the post-colonial U.S. were richly framed by political actors with the language of family ties.

“Mother England”, loyalists argued, must be respected for her authority and care.

Revolutionaries maintained the familial paradigm but insisted that England's illegitimate authority over them be replaced by self-governing “sons”/“brothers” and, as it turned out, by founding “fathers” (Janara 2002; McWilliams 1973; Rogin 1976). This democratized familial

politics was reflected not only in Euro-American liberation from imperial and monarchical controls but also in the Euro-American practices of slavery, genocide of aboriginal peoples, class-exclusion and male-rule (Janara 2002 and forthcoming). Meanwhile, during the French Revolution, symbolically paternalized Louis Capet was beheaded so that his republican “sons” could create a *fraternité* that signified *liberté* and *égalité* (Janara 2002; Hunt, 1984, 1992; Kadish, 1991; Wingrove, 2000). In both the U.S. and French cases, something about the supposedly given nature – the natural nature -- of “family” helped legitimize new political structures, just as familialism had once in another form been used to legitimize absolutism and colonialism. After these founding moments, democratic deployment of the family trope remained popular, as among the eighteenth-century American writers in the sentimental tradition who deployed it to inspire a sense of mutual obligation among citizens (Burstein 1999; Stern 1997). Even radicals have deployed familialism: Into the twentieth century, critically rejecting the exclusions and violence of “fraternity,” nascent and later second wave feminists sustained political familialism to herald “sorority” as a means to rescue and deepen American democracy (Mohanty 2003), echoing the earlier discourse of abolitionists. Union and black civil rights activists also embraced symbols of brotherhood, sisterhood and other familialism to press political, social and economic claims for democracy.

Still today familial tropes remain ubiquitous in how we *think* democracy. In recent strike-action by teaching assistants at the University of British Columbia, activists deployed “fraternity” and “sorority” to legitimize their politics. Consider also the peculiar but popular appeal of governing family lines in today’s democracies. In the United States the Kennedys exemplify this habit (most recently John F. Kennedy, Jr. has been known as “America’s prince”, [*Globe and Mail*, Saturday 19/07/2003, R3, R7]); so too do the Bushes. In Canada, following his death, Pierre Trudeau was characterized as our “stern father” while his politically inexperienced son was romanticized as a future political leader (*Globe and Mail*, Saturday, 7/10, 2000, R1, R9, R10).

My excavation of familialism as a broad and enduring trend in the modern Western democratic tradition works as complementary counterpoint to Bonnie Honig’s recent study of the role of foreigners or strangers in democratic theory (2001). Honig examines how the figure of the foreigner commonly functions not only to mark what the community is not, but also to contribute something necessary to or even to (re)found the community. While Honig focuses on the idea of the foreign in democratic thought, my project examines the idea of the familiar and of organic connection. What is the implication of familial metaphor for democratic citizenship? Charting, lamenting the loss of, and critically defending the idea of fraternity as a trope for civic relations in American political life, Carey McWilliams claims that “fraternity is a need” as “all men are kinsmen and brothers” (1973, 624). In contrast, in his critique of the family trope in black cultural discourse, Paul Gilroy laments the “disastrous consequences that follow when the family supplies not just the only symbols of political agency we can find in the culture, but the only object upon which that agency can be seen to operate as well. Let’s remind ourselves that there are other possibilities” (1992, 315).

But the *familial* is only one of the two faces structuring the dominant modern Western democratic imaginary. Actively rejecting familialism as a means to conceptualize legitimate political relations, seventeenth-century proto-liberal John Locke condemned Robert Filmer’s doctrine of patriarchalism that had characterized the king as patriarchal father and thereby

absolute authority over child-like subjects. Locke rebutted Filmer by insisting on the “difference betwixt a ruler of a commonwealth” and “a father of a family”. Through this move, Locke radically redefined political legitimacy by adopting the new non-familial terms of abstract sovereign individualism (Mehta 1992). This proto-liberal sensibility was presaged by Thomas Hobbes’s imperative that modern individuals imagine themselves not as situated in complex social ties but, rather, as existing spontaneously like mushrooms. So over all, democratic thought has responded to the familialism of European absolutism and imperialism in three ways. First (as in the American Revolution), democratic thought did not abandon political familialism but adapted this existing language to encode the new democratic world as one of fathers, sons and brothers, leaving an intergenerational political familialism in place. Second (as in the French Revolution), political familialism was again maintained but reconfigured to legitimize democratization, but this time for sons/brothers alone, although such imagery presumed the parental hierarchy of the past. The third way in which democratic thought has responded to the non-democratic familial politics of the day was to self-consciously abandon it in favour of the founding premise of sovereign *individualism*. Still, despite Locke’s protestations, this new individualism hinged on visions of a particular kind of sociological family structure from which the individual emanates, and thereby, in a submerged way, also tied democracy to a familial premise.

Why, over time, has anti-familialist individualism co-existed with, rather than trumping, democratic familialism? I will argue that political familialism has held continuing appeal as a homey counterweight to the atomization of modern individualism. Democracy in the modern West developed historically by leveling feudal and aristocratic social webs, extending the suffrage to free the individual from being predestined to a fixed place in standing social hierarchies. Grounded as it is in the principle of equality, democracy thereby both promised and threatened to undo familiar hierarchies and social structures, replacing these constraining but sometimes comforting certainties with uncertainty and unspecified identities (Tocqueville 1969; Janara 2002). Moreover, and significantly, modern Western democracy has evolved in tandem with industrial and technological capitalism and the concomitant replacement of extended family and community networks with wage-labour and limited, privatized family associations. That is, capitalism is premised on competitive individualism and thereby fosters a sense of detachment. Furthermore, today, widespread global migration and expanding local struggles around socio-cultural “difference” accentuate a sense of unfamiliarity in the local experience of western societies. The psycho-cultural underbelly of this broad historical trajectory has been a feeling of homelessness and yearning for home – for that family “haven” in a “heartless world” (Lasch 1977; Nash 1993; Honig 1996; Brennan 1997). Strikingly, then, over the time that capitalism and liberal individualism have fed a sense that the familiar is disintegrating, democracy has been imagined not only through liberalism’s individualistic terms but, in reaction, also through the familial. Typical was New York Governor Mario Cuomo’s 1984 plea to the Democratic National Convention to imagine the country as one big family in an effort to re-legitimize social welfarism’s networks of obligations as they collapsed under libertarian assault. Fascism, again percolating in Europe and North America, was the twentieth century’s parallel, extreme communitarian reaction against atomistic individuation. While non-democratic political societies have also leaned upon familial metaphors, then, one can readily perceive a relation between Western modernity’s felt homelessness and detachment, on the one hand, and, on the other, the democratic tradition’s (and fascism’s) appeal to the organic and apparently familiar

trope of family as a means to invest a robust sense of interrelatedness and belonging in society and politics.

In the contemporary world, how far can we press an individualist ethos of detachment and individual mobility before being politically as well as psychologically shattered by a sense of homelessness? Given humanity's collective dependence on nature's material resources, does individualist democracy foster the kinds of bonds of obligation, to each other and to the natural environment, needed? Widening gaps between rich and poor within and across countries point to the non-democratic effects of our individualist democratic imaginary. At the same time, does familialism serve democracy well as emotional and political salve for such a world? Surely it is too hierarchical and exclusionary a concept to cultivate egalitarianism. Indeed, a modern family ideology proved central to Hitler's transformation of liberal democratic Germany into a fascist and genocidal as well as androcentric state (Pine 1997; Horan 2003). Further, evident in today's debates around so-called "family values" and around marital and adoption rights of heterosexual versus same-sex couples, what constitutes "family" is passionately contested terrain (Shapiro 2001). Moreover, given the multicultural reality of democratic nation-states which renders democracy a site of so-called "difference", a culturally variable idea like "family" cannot adequately anchor democratic civic obligations and membership (Phelan 2001). It is for all such reasons of deficiency that I will turn, away from individualism and familialism, toward an ecologically-informed imaginary for civic relations. While a small amount of attention has been given to ecologicalism in relation to democratic thought (Dryzek 1997; Eckersley 1992; Sagoff 1988; Thiele 1999; Bookchin 1991), such efforts remain marginal and under-theorized as a means to lend popularly accessible meaning to citizenship in local, state and global terms.

The dominant familial:individualist democratic imaginary under critical scrutiny hails from the Anglo-Americo-French tradition. Meanwhile, though tied to the European tradition, the historical Canadian and Scandinavian democratic imaginaries receive scant scholarly attention but can complicate the ongoing reproduction by both scholars and citizens of the dominant imaginary. Canada's self-understanding as "two solitudes" and then as multicultural, and Scandinavian democracy's roots in the Viking egalitarianism of the tenth century will be read for signs of departure from the familial:individualist Western democratic imaginary (Dahl 2000). Further, the Scandinavian case invites speculation about how its democratic imaginary may relate to robust public commitments to environmental care, as well as to why recent waves of immigration there have triggered nationalist and even racist appeals to a homogeneous polity.

Methodology:

My program works on the terrain of the historically produced politico-cultural imaginary. The research thus begins with a *conceptual study* of the idea of the "imaginary", to be rooted primarily in the work of Cornelius Castoriadis (1987). This study will frame both my book and my exploration of the history of Canadian and Scandinavian ideas about democracy. To supplement my work on Castoriadis, I will examine Benedict Anderson's widely-received study of the modern nation as "imagined political community" (1991). While Anderson focuses on the nation, he argues that "all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined," such as that of Javanese villagers whose "ties were once imagined particularistically – as indefinitely stretchable nets of kinship" (1991, 6). So too will I

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consider discussions by I will deliver the results of this conceptual study at a conference at the University of Alberta, June 2004.

For the book project, I will then turn to *historical textual analyses* of particular moments in the development of democratic ideas in the modern West, to specify that tradition's imaginary. Methodologically, I understand texts (written works, speech, transcripts, visual art) as historical artifacts embedded in particular contexts. As such, I will approach every text under analysis historically to show that the familial and individualist faces of the modern democratic imaginary are comprised of varying specific manifestations. Importantly, I will also read these texts for evidence of how the prevailing imaginary configures human relations with nature, to cultivate the environmentalist dimension of my critique of the familial and individualist worldviews. In general, practically speaking, such textual inquiry could be endless, especially given the historical breadth of the proposed project. With the necessary help of graduate student research assistants, my aim is to isolate key historical signposts to produce a genealogical accounting of how democratic citizenship has been thought and felt about in the modern and contemporary West. Texts under consideration include "canonical" works of political thought as well as speeches and letters by political leaders and activists, and popular political discourse as registered in literature and visual arts as documented by historians, literary critics and art historians. My subsequent assessment of citizenship as cosmopolitan and as friendship/strangerhood, and my defense of an ecologically-inspired critical theory of civic ties, will again require the reading of a fairly vast array of texts in democratic and environmental theory, and a critical conceptual and historical analysis of them.

I will do the research for the book project first (years 1-2) because this material will provide a body of work on the dominant Western democratic imaginary to which the later articles can refer. The work of the book will also enhance my own understanding of the implications of the Canadian and Scandinavian cases. Strikingly, while English, U.S. and French democratic thought has been extensively examined as developing historically, scholars have not provided the same kind of analysis of Canadian democratic thought and ideas. While Canadian political theorists lead debates today about citizenship, "difference" and multiculturalism, this work has a very contemporary focus. To address this notable gap, I will undertake a historical accounting of Canadian democratic thinking and imagery in years 2-3 of my research program. This work will entail location and exploration of an array of texts and popular discourse from the Canadian context. I will need support for translation of French documents, which I will seek from graduate students at UBC. I will then undertake the same kind of research into the Scandinavian historical body of ideas (year 3) which is much less evident and alien to me. Because of the language barriers I face, I request funds that will enable me to hire translators, hopefully from among the graduate student population at UBC. I have scanned library holdings and initiated contact with the one humanities scholar at UBC who is expert in Scandinavian social and political history. My research to date indicates that fieldwork will most likely be necessary so I also request funds for travel to libraries and for meetings with scholars in continental Scandinavia, and potentially in Iceland (site of the world's oldest parliament and of a "maternalist" women's party).

In relation to all parts of this program of research, I will lean upon graduate students to locate and read archival material, and to prepare summations to facilitate my selection of texts for

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analysis. I am developing expertise in the history of modern Western political ideas; in the (re)production of political consciousness, especially with respect to modern democracy; in the linguistic foundations of political experience; and in the relationship between political thinking and nature as both an idea and material condition. It is in relation to both this *substantive* terrain and the *process* of careful textual work and structuring of a large research program that SSHRC funds would enable me to attract and train graduate students.

Let me conclude by commenting further on my ecologically-informed reimagining of civic ties – a set of ideas I will develop in years 2-3. Given these concerns, my work will tap into current debates about whether citizenship can and should be conceptualized in universal, as opposed to particular, terms (Butler, Laclau, Žižek 2000; Balibar 2002). I will articulate ecological premises for an imaginary that posits civic relations and obligations that generate the widespread, collective political action needed to respond effectively to such problems.