



BRILL

INNOVATION IN THE  
SOCIAL SCIENCES 3 (2025) 107–138

INNOVATION IN THE  
SOCIAL SCIENCES  
brill.com/iss

# Narrowing Spaces of Reasons

## *Political Polarization and Imaginary Political Rationalities*

*Mattias Lehtinen* | ORCID: 0000-0003-1960-6478

Postdoctoral Researcher, Practical Philosophy, Faculty of Social Sciences,

University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

*mattias.lehtinen@helsinki.fi*

Received 13 September 2024 | Accepted 6 December 2024 |

Published online 22 January 2025

### Abstract

This article explores the dynamics of polarization by examining the relationship between political imaginaries and the use of political rationality in polarized contexts. Scholars widely acknowledge that polarization hinders public reasoning. The article theorizes that one cause is the interplay between political rationality and the underlying political imaginaries that shape public reasoning. On the one hand, the political imaginary is understood as providing actors in society with a shared space of reasons in which to exercise public reason. On the other hand, political rationality is conceptualized as the discursive practice of legitimizing the political imaginary which enables the exercise of political reasoning. Polarization can be linked to the narrowing of these spaces of reasons, which makes the use of political rationality between different political imaginaries harder. This is exemplified by examining the political imaginary of authoritarian neoliberalism as constituting such a narrow space of reasons, contributing to further polarization.

### Keywords

political imaginaries – political polarization – political rationality – authoritarian neoliberalism – justification

## 1 Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Increased political polarization continues to haunt Western liberal democracies (Boxell, Gentzkow, and Shapiro 2024; Iyengar et al. 2019) and has been linked to several socially and politically worrisome phenomena such as heightened mistrust (Carlin and Love 2013), exclusion and discrimination (Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Westwood et al. 2018), and legitimizing violent attitudes and behaviors (Piazza 2023). That political polarization has detrimental tendencies with regard to democracies is equally well documented as it leads to difficulties in reaching consensus, weakening efficient governing and making political compromise difficult (Haghtalab, Jackson, and Procaccia 2021). This article aims to contribute with a novel perspective on the question of how to conceptualize political polarization by drawing attention to how political polarization can be understood through focusing on the polarization of imaginarily constituted political rationalities. The central argument is that one important facet of political polarization is related to the narrowing of the possibilities to reason within the frameworks provided by different political imaginaries, here denoted as the spaces of reasons constituted in different political imaginaries. This dynamic of narrowing spaces of reasons leads to lowered possibilities for cooperation across different imaginaries and pushes actors to choose sides between political imaginaries in an exclusionary way.

The concept of political imaginaries has so far not been connected to political polarization. A prevalent trend is understanding polarization as the *clustering* of ideologies and attitudes; polarization is thus analyzed as the presence of structural differences between such clusters. Polarization then entails the creation of camps of political ideas distant from each other with regard to the kind of ideological views espoused and has been analyzed, for example, by focusing on such clustering among citizens (e.g., Prior 2013), elites (e.g., Levendusky 2010), or both (e.g., Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013). The second trend has been to describe the widening emotional distance between different political camps in society, called *affective* polarization. Such accounts have focused on the deepening of hostile or cold emotions between polarized parties (e.g., McCoy, Rahman, and Somer 2018) or described polarization through the patterning of prejudices, which creates in-group favoritism and out-group animosity (e.g., Kekkonen et al. 2022). Clustering and affective polarization have also,

---

1 Thanks to Kristian Klockars and the anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful comments on this article. Thanks also to Emma Ingala, Gavin Rae, and Cillian Ó Fathaigh for organizing the 2024 conference “Critical Theory and Reason,” where I presented an earlier version of this article.

in various degrees and forms, been shown to be connected to each other (e.g., Rogowski and Sutherland 2016).

This article seeks to show how political polarization, both in its clustering and in its affective dimension, can be conceptualized as a widening rift between our political imaginaries and the rationalities to which these imaginaries give rise. Political polarization can be understood through the narrowing of what is here called the space of reasons—how open or closed different political imaginaries are to political rationalities formed in other political imaginaries. Political imaginaries which constitute narrow spaces of reasons more easily reject political rationalities and justifications coming from other political imaginaries and in this sense contribute to polarizing processes as they close in on themselves and force actors to adopt an either–or mentality in exercising political judgment. The example of authoritarian neoliberalism is discussed as a case of an important contemporary political imaginary which is implicated in narrowing the spaces of reasons in public life.

The relation between political rationality and polarization is therefore investigated by looking at how political imaginaries are connected to the exercise of political rationality. So far, the notion of political imaginaries has not figured in the discussion of polarization, nor has the notion of political rationality played a major role in the conceptualization of political imaginaries. This article aims to draw these three concepts together—polarization, political rationality, and political imaginaries—in order to contribute, on the one hand, to our understanding of processes of polarization as encompassing a polarization between political rationalities, and on the other hand, to our understanding of political rationality as being dependent on political imaginaries. The contention is that the concept of the political imaginary and its connection to political rationality can add to our understanding of the widening polarization in contemporary liberal democratic settings.

This account will, however, require us to bracket the usual philosophical preoccupation with political rationality as the giving and receiving of highly formal and abstract rational justifications for political action, where such justifying activity can be correlated to an ideal framework of political rationality and judged thereafter. Raymond Geuss (2010, 3) has summarized the blind spots which such accounts face, noting how a myopic focus on formulating opinions ignores both how opinion formation and discussion only captures one facet of political life and how even the formation and evaluation of opinions is comprehensible only against the background of different wider historical and institutional contexts. In relation to the question of political rationality, this article underscores the importance of the political-imaginary scaffolding needed for political judgments and opinions to be intelligible and effective.

When political rationality figures in discussions of polarization, it is usually in the sense of abstract and formal justification. Polarization is then usually understood as a factor which contaminates the use of such abstract and formal political reason by introducing biases or “motivated reasoning”. In an article about the effects of partisan polarization on opinion formation, Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus (2013) build on the theory of motivated reasoning to frame how, for example, confirmation biases, prior attitude effects, and disconfirmation biases affect actors’ political opinion formation under polarized conditions. The authors note how these biases influence “the reception of new information and may lead individuals to ‘reason’ their way to a desired conclusion” (Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013, 59). The authors acknowledge, however, that it is unclear if motivated reasoning significantly lowers opinion quality, as it remains unclear whether and why “unmotivated” political opinions—however one wishes to define them—are weaker than motivated ones. Indeed, the perspective adopted in this article sheds light on why an abstract discussion about unmotivated versus motivated political judgments is not helpful if we ignore the political-imaginary scaffolding required for sustaining any political judgments and the affective commitments it entails. What from the perspective of the individual’s processes of opinion formation might show itself to be motivated political “reasoning”—as scare quoted by Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus—is in fact political reasoning—*sans* scare quotes—when viewed at a macro level from the perspective of political imaginaries, because of the imaginary scaffolding of political rationality.

The concept of “rational polarization” provides a more recent intersection between polarization and rationality. If the aforementioned approach takes embedded (or “motivated”) forms of political rationality to be detrimental to the exercise of political judgment, the rational polarization approach sees polarization itself as rational and in accordance with abstract, formal political judgment (e.g., Dorst 2023). Such conceptions take political rationality to refer to idealized epistemic chains built to support various propositions (see Singer, Bramson, and Grim 2019). Even if, naturally, such epistemic reasoning is to some degree present in most political praxis, the conception of rational polarization also falls within the camp of thinkers Geuss criticizes for ignoring larger historical and social conditions influencing political judgment. Questions such as if capitalism is a more rational system of organizing the production and distribution of wealth than some other model, or if nation states are a more rational way of ordering territories than other ways of understanding the relations between territory and the scope of political decision making, or if politics itself should be thought of as an avenue to maximize national pro-

ductivity instead of, say, maximizing the conditions for exercising autonomy, are the kind of questions which show the limitations of such abstractly epistemic understandings of political rationality. In the last instance, the scaffolding of political life, within which such epistemic rationalization is carried out in certain deliberative contexts, is extremely contingent on historically evolved social and political ways of making sense of the political and social world, that is on political imaginaries, which cannot be thought to be the result of epistemic chains of rationalization. Therefore, these imaginary scaffoldings, in which chains of epistemic reasoning are carried out, can be likened to political worlds, or “homes” in which we dwell and which present the actors with an array of things that can be reasoned about and rules for reasoning about the significant things these political imaginaries postulate as important or unimportant.

The aim of this article is to draw attention to these worlds or homes constituted in political imaginaries and in which processes of “abstract” epistemic reasoning and “rational polarization” make sense. An understanding of polarization building on the narrowing of spaces of reasons within dominant political imaginaries points to a more foundational aspect of political polarization. Indeed, as Singer, Bramson, and Grim (2019) describe it, political polarization can come about just as well when all agents are (epistemically) rational. Others have also noted the falsity of the widely held thought that information provision would reduce polarization (Marino, Iacono, and Mollerstrom 2023), while some studies suggest that information provision under polarized conditions can even lead to accelerated polarization (Beattie and Beattie 2023). The perspective developed in this article can shed light on why the use of epistemically sound, formal rationality or the access to scientifically correct information cannot be seen as silver bullets against polarization, but this will require us to further a conception of political rationality as founded on political imaginaries.

In the first part of the article, the thought of Cornelius Castoriadis—a prominent theorist of the social imaginary—is used to shed light on the dependence of the rational on the imaginary. The second part introduces a conceptualization of the function of political rationality as a legitimating praxis in relation to the political imaginary and introduces the concept of a space of reasons constituted as the basis for judging political reasoning. In the third part, it is argued that political polarization can be understood through the narrowing of the spaces of reasons constituted in political imaginaries; the case of authoritarian neoliberalism is discussed as an example of this.

## 2 The Imaginary and the Rational

In order to raise the question of political rationality in a way which could throw light on the questions of political polarization and growing resentment, taking the form of affective polarization, it could therefore be helpful to turn to the question of how political rationality, polarization, and political imaginaries can be theoretically mapped in relation to each other. What is the role that political imaginaries play for political rationality, and how can political polarization be described in relation to this theoretical perspective? As this topic has not been explored, a theoretical perspective linking the imaginary to rationality is first constructed here. After this, the relation between political imagination and political rationality is brought more clearly into view in the next section.

Some introductory words on the political imaginary and its connection to political rationality will be helpful as orientation. A political imaginary is a network of meaning which constitutes political reality. Paula Diehl and Craig Browne have proposed in this sense to define a political imaginary as a system which organizes the symbolism of the political (Browne and Diehl 2019), and as I have elsewhere proposed, in this function it constitutes a shared network of intersubjective meaning and functions as the scaffolding for action in relation to social relations (Lehtinen 2023). Imaginaries thus are constitutive of social reality. As such it is possible to argue that the political imaginaries present in societies are confined neither to the highly institutionalized sphere of parliamentary politics, nor to the everyday social life of humans. Instead, the kind of ontoepistemic and affective environments which political imaginaries constitute crisscross the spheres of the public and the private. Indeed, if not for political imaginaries, it would be impossible to have coordinated social and political action at all, as a shared framework of meaning concerning intersubjective relations is necessary for us to function together. In Castoriadis's theoretical language, society self-institutes political imaginaries in order to make joint social and political action possible. The dimension of rationality is an important part of this self-institution of imaginaries, which also applies to the institution of political imaginaries.

The concept of a political imaginary enables us to focus on how politics emerges as a joint object which lets the participants of a political imaginary orient their sociopolitical praxis in a similar way and lets the participants in different praxes make sense of others' political and social action in the world. In this function political imaginaries are world-creating networks of meaning which inform our understandings of what politics is, what counts as political, and what matters in politics. Is politics about a conflict between classes, as Marxists would have it? Is politics about a shared national belonging where

the field of competing nation states is the area of politics proper, as realists would imagine? Simultaneously anchored in the material world and the world of human doing, the concept of the political imaginary also orients us towards an experiential account of understanding politics through the way materially anchored actors actually experience and understand the way political reality is imagined.

The rationality invoked in contexts of political doing can therefore be understood to be co-constituted within the frameworks of meaning provided by political imaginaries; indeed, it may even be possible to describe political rationality as an *emergent* property of political imaginaries. This would entail that political rationality can be present only within a field of meaning constituted by a political imaginary. To flesh out this claim and to gain a more detailed appreciation of what it entails, it is instructive to turn to Castoriadis's writings on the relation between the imaginary and rationality.

For Castoriadis, the rational is quite straightforwardly subordinated to the imaginary as the imaginary functions as “the invisible cement holding together this endless collection of real, rational and symbolic odds and ends that constitute every society, and as the principle that selects and shapes the bits and pieces that will be accepted there” (Castoriadis 2005, 143). The imaginary therefore also encompasses “the elements presupposed by our own rationality” (Castoriadis 2005, 166). Castoriadis's conceptualization of the imaginary breaks with the Lacanian conceptualization of the imaginary as denoting the identification with, and constitution of, the ego. In contrast to the Lacanian split between the symbolic and the imaginary, Castoriadis's account conflates these realms and privileges the concept of social imaginary significations (see Dews 2002). The perspective taken here does not completely follow Castoriadis's understanding of the relation between the symbolic and imaginary. Instead of conflating the imaginary and the symbolic, we might conceptualize this relation by thinking about how actors strive to symbolize components of the imaginary in different media, which contributes to strengthening the ontologization, or intersubjective reach, of the imaginary. Hence, symbolization is a tool for disseminating imaginaries and strengthening their intelligibility in society, and without symbolization the use of political rationality would be impossible.

Furthermore, elements found in the imaginary are inextricably bound up with the historical and creative capacities of societies, which at different junctures and in different contexts give rise to varying social imaginaries: “what is different in another society and another epoch is its very ‘rationality’, for it is ‘caught’ each time in another imaginary world” (Castoriadis 1991, 67). This is not an irrationalist conception, in the sense that rationality is ignored or even devalued: Castoriadis's project does not abandon rationality (Kurasawa

2000).<sup>2</sup> Castoriadis's theory could in a sense be called a *postfoundational* theory of rationality, in that the existence of rationality is not automatically given and effective—its existence is not secured by a universal foundational ground. This is important, as the conception of the politically rational as founded on the imaginary which is developed here does not contest the significance of rationality per se but seeks to situate it within the context of the political imaginary and to show how the use of rationality in politics cannot be disentangled from its dependence on a political imaginary.

Castoriadis's pivot towards conceptualizing rationality along such postfoundational tracks—understanding rationality as emerging from the imaginary—stems from his critique of Immanuel Kant's and Max Weber's concepts of rationality. Kant's subordination of imagination to regulation by an abstract faculty of reason is rejected by Castoriadis (see Castoriadis 1997, 249; Castoriadis 1983, 92–97). Instead, Castoriadis takes the imagination to be genuinely and essentially ontologically creative. The world as it appears to humans—presenting itself to us as imbued with meanings—is created by imagination. For Castoriadis, the imagination is not only creative within limits set by reason, but reason itself—understood as an abstract faculty of logical thought—must be thought of as an imaginary institution. Castoriadis's theory avoids lapsing into solipsism by introducing *social* imaginary significations and the socialization process, which tames the radical imagination of the individual psyche by imposing on it a shared, historically and socially structured world of meaning (see also Heap

---

2 Castoriadis presupposes that a certain basic universal rationality is present in all social-imaginary creation. This rationality, however, encompasses, as he says, mostly trivial universalities such as that some forms of predication must always be used, and some criteria for something being correct or incorrect need to be in place, some applied knowledge of the world including an understanding of the conditions of material reproduction must be invoked, and so on (see, for example, Castoriadis 1991, 40–41). One might ask in this context what to make of such political imaginaries that break with very fundamental tenets of rationality, for example natural scientific facts, or that contradict themselves. An example of the first sort: many far-right imaginaries include deep anti-scientific stances in relation to climate change. An example of the second sort: green capitalist imaginaries purportedly want a more sustainable future but lean on the concept of infinite growth, which logically is nonsensical in relation to the demands of sustainability. What both examples underscore is how rationality is anchored in political imaginaries. The far-right imaginaries often involve conspiratorial affectivities and motivations for why the science behind climate change is “wrong,” while green capitalism might include some techno-optimistic reasons for why capitalism can be harnessed towards furthering sustainability (it fosters innovation and so on). By reflecting on current discussions around climate politics, one might come to the more skeptical conclusion that the universal “basic rationality” that all imaginaries need to encompass is significantly narrower than Castoriadis presupposed.



2021, 197). Societies erect what could be called reality principles, criteria for distinguishing what is real and rational from what is unreal and irrational, which in our own societies, at least in the modern time, correspond to the abstract kind of Kantian rationality. Rationality becomes reality and vice versa (see Castoriadis 2005, 161).

Castoriadis's critique of Weber's conception of rationality shares its roots with his critique of Kant insofar as Castoriadis's critique of both Weber and Kant hinges on the critique of the ego-centric or "egological" conception of rationality. Castoriadis takes issue with Weber's concept of meaning. For Weber all social collectives can be broken down into units of rational individuals whose rational activity constitutes the intelligibility of social phenomena. Here meaning appears on the social stage insofar as it is constructed by the operation of rational individuals. For Castoriadis, in contrast, the individual appears only through the socialization process in which individuals internalize the imaginary social significations in society (Castoriadis 1990, 71). This process is irreducible to rationality, being the result of complex socio-historical activity (Castoriadis 1990, 72). While the instituted social imaginary significations are naturally instituted by humans, the dynamic between what Castoriadis calls "instituting" and "instituted" imagination cannot be reduced to "rational" individual action where the "individual" as a rational instituting agent meets the "social" as instituted object.

This leads Castoriadis to conclude that there are multiple social imaginaries, corresponding to different societies and historical situations. Weber is credited for grasping this conclusion under the banner of the polyvalency of values, but "the true referent for the 'incomparability' or 'incommensurability' of 'values' and ultimate 'ends' of 'people's social acts' and for the 'war of the gods' is the otherness or *alterity* of different social-historical worlds and of the imaginary significations that animate these worlds" (Castoriadis 1990, 75). However, because Weber (rightly according to Castoriadis) refuses to set up an objective rationality to inform the intelligibility of societies, he has to stick to his individualist rationalist ontology in order to explain the incommensurability between different socio-historical imaginaries. According to Castoriadis, this leads Weber to understand "instrumental rationality as the horizon of intelligibility for the social-historical" (Castoriadis 1990, 76). Weber is therefore unable to grasp the historicity and sociality of different forms of rationality (Ktenas 2021, 4). As Castoriadis asks, what substantial insight into totalitarianism would we gain from understanding Hitler, the SS, or members of the Nazi party or Stalin and the members of the Stalinist parties as instances of instrumental rationality? Not much of course, because what sets totalitarianism and its different historical instances apart from non-totalitarian societies is the entire set-

up of social imaginary institutions present in society. The same could be asked of our contemporary political landscape: understanding the rise of right-wing, illiberal, xenophobic parties as instances of instrumental rationality would not say much about the kind of understanding of politics and the social which these parties espouse in relation to “traditional” parties. However, as Yannis Ktenas has shown, Castoriadis’s critique of Weber is not, on closer analysis, completely fair: “the idea that Weber’s view of the social reality is limited to an individualistic and rationalistic ontology cannot possibly be maintained” (Ktenas 2021, 7). Especially interesting in this context is that Weber could be argued to sustain a more perspectivist stance on rationality, closer to Castoriadis than the French-Greek philosopher’s remarks would lead one to believe. This is quite clear if one couples Weber’s conceptualization of the different value spheres (see, e.g., Weber 1949, 81) that provide human action with meaningful frameworks with remarks on the divergent ways rationalization can proceed in these. Weber, for example, writes how “each one of these fields may be rationalized in terms of very different ultimate values and ends, and what is rational from one point of view may well be irrational from another” (Weber 2001, xxxviii–xxxix), which even allows Weber to speak of the “special peculiarity of Occidental rationalism” (Weber 2001, xxxix). Indeed, Weber’s conception of “value polytheism” also underscores how different value spheres rest on different logics that can be fundamentally incommensurable (see also Presnyakov 2020).

Beyond Castoriadis’s debatable critique of Weber, it is important to remember in this context that for Castoriadis, social reality, as created, is made up of social imaginary significations which “construct (organize, articulate, vest with meaning) the world of the society considered” (Castoriadis 1991, 42). These social imaginary significations structure social reality along three main vectors: “they determine at the same time the representations, the affects, and the intentions dominant in a society” (Castoriadis 1991, 42). Castoriadis repeatedly stresses that what is at stake in the creation of social reality is precisely the creation of a world: it is “the same thing to say that society institutes the world in each case as its world or its world as the world, and to say that it institutes a world of significations” (Castoriadis 2005, 359). Furthermore, it is important to note that neither representations, nor affects, nor intentions can be fully grasped without recourse to each other, or to the form (*eidōs*) of society created in an imaginary. Hence this also points to how rationality as such can never really be distinguished from the broader imaginary in which it is applied because even if we can rationally reconstruct the intentions and motivations of a society, these remain hollow without an understanding of the affectivity and the specific representations that connect to the intentions of a society (see

Castoriadis 1991, 44). Cognitive, affective, and representational aspects of social and political life therefore always, even if we might distinguish between them analytically, phenomenologically form an effective motivating whole.

Some scholars have attempted to construe a subset of imaginaries as rational themselves (e.g., Machin 2022), lifting rationality to a hallmark of certain imaginaries. Following Castoriadis, we should be careful not to introduce our rationality and make it play the role of the only rationality, or of rationality *as such* (Castoriadis 2005, 161). According to Castoriadis then, rationality can be understood as a “proto-institution”, as something which needs to exist in society, but as such it cannot be functional without being situated within webs of imaginary significations which orient the actor in relation to the world. Castoriadis did not, however, further describe the functioning of rationality in political life, which is the theme I turn to in the following sections.

As was mentioned in the introduction, ideology is often cited as a key clustering factor for understanding and identifying political polarization. The problem, as scholars have noted, is that a majority of people do not neatly fall under conventional ideological labels such as liberal and conservative (Kozlowski 2022), while it is contested whether what is relevant to consider is the ideological polarization of the populace or the institutionalized political actors (Rogowski and Sutherland 2016), drawing attention to difficulties associated with the concept of ideology for understanding political polarization. More fine-grained concepts of ideology have been offered as conceptual tools to better capture the heterogeneous markers that could be connected to different kinds of ideological wholes. Some have proposed focusing on a split between “moral” and economic attitudes (Carmines, Ensley, and Wagner 2012), racial attitudes (Layman and Carsey 2002), or attitudes pertaining to national security (Baldassarri and Gelman 2008), but as has been shown, these often overlap and intersect in ways that prove hard to connect to larger-scale ideological unities (Baldassarri and Goldberg 2014; Carmines, Ensley, and Wagner 2012).

The perspective on the polarization of imaginary political rationalities is not meant as a critique of the concept of ideology in discussions of political polarization, but it points to a potentially rich area of phenomena which informs processes of political polarization. Interrogations into the imaginary and its rationality might also be informative for considering the different problems faced by accounts of ideological polarization. From a political imaginaries perspective, there are no easy shortcuts which will let us identify neat ideological categories for analyzing the fault lines between the totalities, ideological or however they are conceptualized, involved in polarization. Imaginaries denote the differently shared, often anonymous and collectively instituted, webs of

meaning on which political life hinges, and as Western liberal democracies are pluralist in character, the overall composition of political imagination in societies is variegated.

It is also not evident that individuals should feel affinity with only one political imaginary, but as is argued here, political polarization does exert a force which pushes actors to make exclusionary choices between imaginaries. We live in conditions which are overdetermined by different political imaginaries that crisscross each other and where more or less stable bridges are formed between different imaginaries where elements from different imaginaries enjoy more or less intelligibility and affective pull in relation to each other (see also Brubaker 2022). The “new consensus” formed between authoritarian and neoliberal imaginaries discussed in this article is also an example of how imaginaries interact. However, accepting and acting on political imaginaries does not necessarily require ideological or political self-identification, which can be seen as a secondary effect of affective attunement to different interpretations of political imaginaries. All social doing already implicates one in some political world where certain ways of exercising political rationality are intelligible: social and political doing in general is already constituted within some political imaginaries.

This account of imaginary political rationality means accepting, as Michael J. Thompson argues, that all “reasons have to have some account of the way the world works” (Thompson 2020, 453), and the way the political “world works” is contingent on the ontoepistemologies constituted in political imaginaries. Taking this perspective means seeing a dynamic interplay between political rationality as a legitimizing praxis, and the political imaginaries which make the exercise of political rationality possible. The following sections discuss the operation of such imaginary political rationality, after which its functioning under polarized conditions is discussed.

### 3 Political Rationality and the Spaces of Reasons

Political rationality might then be understood as a praxis of legitimizing discourse present in societies, resting on the presence of political imaginaries denoting the central objects and relations of the political world, which enables the use of certain forms of political rationality. Without political imaginaries, the use of political rationality would be nonsensical as there would be nothing to legitimate, no shared world to speak about or act in. When we speak, for example, of it being rational to privatize state-owned services such as healthcare in order to incentivize individuals to strive to better their own sit-

uations on the labor market, we seek to legitimize a certain neoliberal political imaginary which creates the conditions for the rationality of such privatization.

Of recent attempts to reconceptualize political rationality, Rainer Forst's approach merits attention in this context as Forst has taken justification to be primary and has connected it to a form of social constructivism, calling attention to justificatory variety, power, and the embeddedness of justification. Forst's model, however, lacks engagement with the political imaginary, which I argue is primary for what Forst calls orders of justification or narratives of justification. Indeed, from a quasi-Forstian perspective it might be claimed that political reason legitimizes the underlying political imaginary it is contingent upon and operational within. For Forst, political rationality operates through what he calls *narratives of justification*. In Forst's view, justification and the orders of justification refer to something foundational for social reality: "every social order must be conceived as an order of justification [that] consists of a complex web of different justifications" (Forst 2017, 34). What Forst neglects is that in order to be intelligible, such orders of justification should be understood as connected to political imaginaries which create the space in which different justifications can become intelligible and effective.

Forst builds his theory of reasoning on Wilfred Sellars's concept of "the space of reasons" which can be applied to elucidate the functioning of imaginary political rationality. For Sellars, the space of reasons is a tool for countering the "myth of the Given", the thought about there being some privileged cognitive states which constitute the ultimate court of appeal for facts (Sellars 1981). It is clear that a conception of political rationality such as that offered here will have to take a similarly postfoundational perspective on the epistemic, at least when it comes to knowledge of political matters. Conflicts over what kinds of government are desirable or what kinds of policy choices constitute rational choices in a situation cannot be inferred from reference to given cognitive states or "objective" experiences of the external world but are intelligible only against a constituted world of political meaning which already affectively commits the actor making such choices. We always have the possibility to act differently than political rationality in a certain situation may dictate, as there are several political imaginaries one might lean upon when making statements about what is rational to do in a given situation.

The thought that we can have immediate experience of a state, a form of government, or migration law is naturally a nonsensical statement as such objects are imaginary creations and are as such knowable and intelligible only against their elaboration in different political imaginaries. This does not of course entail that they are easily changeable as they are incorporated into the materi-

ality of social life. That knowledge on political matters cannot be inferred from immediate experience does not, however, mean that experience is irrelevant to the exercise of political rationality—to the contrary—but that we have to operate with a thick phenomenological account of experience where experience is shot through with meaning and intention which stems from the imaginary significations carried by the political imaginary.

The space of reasons denotes, as John McDowell explains, how phenomena become intelligible “by revealing them as efforts on the part of subjects to conform to the requirements of rationality” (Mcdowell 2018, 5). The point of view argued in this article would instead restate this point by saying that *political rationality is a praxis by actors of making political and social phenomena intelligible by conforming to the requirements of the political imaginary*. The political imaginary, in other words, creates a space of reasons, in which the use of political rationality is intelligible.

For example, the neoliberal imaginary creates a space of reasons built on, but also exceeding, the ontology and epistemology of classic capitalist accumulation, for example as Marx famously describes the classical core of capitalism in *Capital*, by judging actors according to their performance in the competition on markets. The neoliberal imaginary then attempts not just to restore classical “pure” capitalism but to radically alter the mode of government power and doctrinal references by changing the operating rules of capitalism (Dardot and Laval 2014, 167–168). As Wendy Brown has condensed this change, in neoliberalism *competition* replaces earlier capitalist models of exchange (Brown 2015, 64–65). In relation to classic capitalism, the neoliberal imaginary institutes the imaginary of the enterprise as the sole and reigning instrument and actor. It becomes the locus of innovation, constant change, and adaptation to variations on the market and an engine for the search for excellence to which the neoliberal imaginary expects subjects to conform by enacting constant self-work and discipline to survive the intense competition that markets entail (Dardot and Laval 2014, 292). To judge and to measure the performance of actors, the neoliberal imaginary also entails an enormous process of normalizing procedures that are monitored through a neoliberal bureaucracy borrowing its procedures from the corporate world (see Hibou 2015). The neoliberal imaginary then proceeds from an ideal of free-standing economy, meaning that only those justifications and forms of exercising political rationality which accept the economic realm as ideally free-standing from state power and embrace the political goal of accumulating surplus value are intelligible and acceptable within the neoliberal space of reasons. It is noteworthy, however, that the “free-standing” character of the economy that neoliberal rationality entails accepting is by no means free but is connected to a neoliberal governmental-

ity that deploys “the logic of the market as a generalized normative logic, from the state to innermost subjectivity” (Dardot and Laval 2014, 23). The neoliberal space of reasons therefore builds on the ontoepistemology of the market and judges the performance of actors on the success of their operation according to the competition carried out within the market. Thus, in the neoliberal imaginary the market and its rules constitute important imaginary significations modifying capitalism that creates the imaginary spaces of reasons to judge actors according to the neoliberal rationality of performance. Action not in accordance with maximizing performance according to market indicators “can only be an impediment destructive of the economy” (Dardot and Laval 2014, 123). In short, phenomena in intersubjective political reality will therefore be judged according to these requirements of the neoliberal political imaginary.

The space of reasons could in this sense be thought of as encompassing the acceptable and intelligible ways of relating phenomena in the social and political world to the imaginary significations available in a political imaginary, and the exercise of political rationality is the praxis by which this relating activity is done. Often the “conforming” of subjects to the requirements of the political imaginary via the exercise of political rationality happens in a patterned, structural way, linking Forst’s claim about control over the space of reasons with Castoriadis’s thought of there being privileged imaginaries in society steering social and political doing. In one way, the exercise of political rationality thus conceived can be seen as being about control over the space of reasons, as Forst argues, but this picture should in this case be deepened by seeing it as a praxis that aims at strengthening or maintaining a political imaginary which simultaneously operationalizes the imaginary through its political rationality. At the same time, there is always the possibility to question strong political rationalities in society from the perspective of other political imaginaries.

Undoubtedly also, the efficacy of exercising political rationality is intimately tied to affective responses structured according to the political imaginary. If it is, within a political imaginary, imagined that there are some “structurally” more legitimate positions from which to speak, then actors that occupy these more legitimate positions will have more influence within the scope of the political imaginary to exercise political rationality. But even within such structurally legitimate positions—even in the most structurally condensed dictatorial imaginaries—political rationality cannot be exercised without reference to the political world built in a political imaginary. Of course, we might imagine a political imaginary where one leader has the absolute power of exercising political rationality, of arbitrarily making political judgments, but even in such

a situation a political imaginary would need to be present, disseminated, and accepted to give the leader this univocal power of exercising political rationality.

Thus, what is primary for political reason to function is not justification, but the imaginary which both delineates the acceptable space of reasons and is reinforced by way of applying justificatory “narratives” or justificatory operations which lean on the ontology and epistemology of social and political relations instituted in the political imaginary. From this perspective, what transpires in a parliament, where ministers act and debate according to different political imaginaries, is not only intelligible as the giving of best reasons for carrying out a policy choice, but is also a competition for *legitimizing* a certain imaginary or certain imaginaries. The explicatory power which political rationality exerts when it draws upon the political imaginaries in society is employed in temporally and spatially situated processes of problem-solving which attempt to answer problems via recourse to resources in the political imaginary or imaginaries from which one is operating. As Castoriadis often writes, the social imaginary is an attempt by society to answer the questions posed by society itself. The political imaginary affects the exercise of political rationality by both providing the *content* for what is being reasoned about and delimiting the *process* of reasoning; the imaginary influences the exercise of political rationality by providing both answers to the process and the content of political reasoning. When we give reasons for political action, we are not simply stating that things are in accordance with the political imaginary; we are also legitimizing the ontology and epistemology of the political imaginary in which it seems rational to act in the way we are acting. The exercise of political rationality is therefore in the first instance an attempt to legitimize the political imaginary, to demonstrate its applicability, its power of making things intelligible, and hopefully its power of solving the problems identified or discussed. Moreover, the exercise of political rationality is of course also an attempt to disseminate the political imaginary and to strengthen its presence in society.

Obviously political actors, ministers of parliament and ordinary citizens, are not automatons lacking all possibility to see intelligibility beyond the political imaginary on which they act. Is it not feasible to claim that a member of a left-wing party could understand or even accept parts of the arguments of a right-wing populist party member? Even in highly pluralist democracies there are widely shared political imaginaries which build on highly accepted imaginary significations giving rise to political ontologies and epistemologies widely shared in society. The political imaginary of the nation state (see Anderson 1983) is at least one example of such an imaginary, as is the capitalist imag-



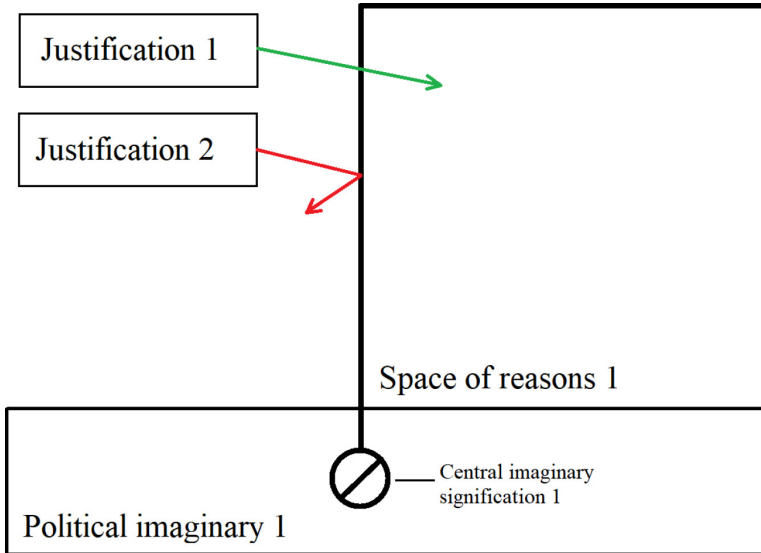


FIGURE 1 The relation between the political imaginary and the space of reasons  
AUTHOR

inary (see Fraser 2023). Their ontoepistemology is shared by many contemporary political imaginaries and their political rationalities remain virtually non-contested by the political imaginaries which hold sway in society. There are therefore significant overlaps between the spaces of reasons constituted in different political imaginaries, enabling certain shared ways of exercising political rationality. It would be excessively difficult, for example, for political actors to operate in contemporary democratic parliaments if they could not operate according to the political rationalities of capitalism and the nation state. Such sharing of core imaginary significations embraced by political imaginaries creates “bridges” and points of contact between different political imaginaries, where justifications for political action might be intelligible and acceptable within multiple spaces of reasons in otherwise different political imaginaries.

The exercise of political rationality can be seen from this perspective as a form of legitimating praxis contingent on the ontoepistemic resources present in political imaginaries. By encompassing and accepting certain central imaginary social significations, political rationalities constitute certain spaces of reasons. These spaces outline the acceptable political justifications for the kind of politically rational praxis which can, within the scope of the political imaginary, be accepted as legitimate. Hence, in Figure 1, we can schematically conceptualize the central imaginary significations and their epistemologies as

boundaries which limit the acceptable space of reasons constituted in a political imaginary. In order for a political justification to pass as legitimate, it needs to encompass certain central components of a political imaginary; these significations then, in a sense, act as “filters” on the form of political rationality acceptable or intelligible in the political imaginary. Justifications which pass are compatible and intelligible with the space of reasons and the concomitant political rationality of the imaginary. Justifications which fail to pass are jettisoned from the perspective of those who accept the core ontoepistemology of the political imaginary. This means that when judging justifications from the inside of an imaginary, those forms of justification which are found to lack anchoring in the core imaginary significations encompassed by an imaginary will be rejected.

In the following section, a dynamic of political polarization is built on this account and exemplified by discussing the imaginary of authoritarian neoliberalism. To exemplify this briefly here, we might use the political imaginary of neoliberalism. If we presuppose that neoliberalism entails an ontology and epistemology of capitalist accumulation coupled with the aforementioned market-based ontoepistemology of competition as core imaginary significations, this will act as a border on the space of reasons and the political rationality that follows, which will let adherents of neoliberal political imaginaries accept or jettison political justifications. Let’s further say that the core imaginary signification of capitalist accumulation entails that one imagines that the accumulation of surplus value is potentially endless when social and political relations are freed from destructive “political influence”, albeit acknowledging that this “freedom” from political influence entails a certain ontoepistemic configuration of both the state and the economy according to neoliberal principles of performance and competition. If a political actor then makes the claim that an environmentally sustainable transition requires that we abandon the thought of infinite economic growth, this justification cannot therefore be introduced, in the sense of being acceptable or intelligible, into the neoliberal space of reasons as it is in direct conflict with the core imaginary signification of capitalist accumulation and will be rejected as a politically irrational form of praxis. Political action based on degrowth imaginaries, for example, therefore break deeply with the neoliberal requirements for judging rational behavior in terms of performance within the competition on the markets and becomes irrational and unintelligible from the perspective of actors acting within the neoliberal imaginary. If, however, a political actor justifies the equal treatment of women and men in front of the law by recourse to human rights, this claim can legitimately be introduced into the space of reasons of our very simplified neoliberal political imaginary, as long as this equality does not stand in any con-

flict with the requirements of the market and the rationality of performance and competition. Naturally, our plural, complex, political worlds are seldom as clear cut as this, as the dynamic of political polarization, discussed next, shows.

Generally, the space of reasons is narrower when constrained by more central imaginary significations which justifications need to encompass in order to be acceptable. At the same time, the space of reasons is broader when justifications can pass more freely into the space of reasons without being confined by multiple ontoepistemic limitations. A political imaginary with a narrower space of reasons is therefore more incompatible with other political imaginaries and vice versa.

#### 4 Political Polarization and the Narrowing Spaces of Reasons: The Case of Authoritarian Neoliberalism

Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot propose a model of understanding justification which splits between a number of “orders of worth”, which, according to Boltanski and Thévenot, arise from different conceptions of goods. Importantly, at the individual level, as Boltanski and Thévenot also argue, people usually move between justificatory orders of worth with their distinct justificatory systems: “in a differentiated society, each person regularly has to confront situations stemming from distinct worlds” (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006, 216). From the perspective of political imaginaries, the orders of worth should not, however, be taken to be free-standing as they are constitutable and intelligible only from within political imaginaries and from the point of view of those socialized and susceptible to accepting something as valuable or less valuable according to the ontology and epistemology of a political imaginary. Indeed, following Boltanski and Thévenot, we can argue for a conception of moving between political imaginaries that describes how different political imaginaries might be intelligible and even desirable from the point of view of discrete actors. From the perspective developed here, different imaginaries’ spaces of reasons can be more or less compatible with the political rationalities emerging from other political imaginaries, making translations and transitions between political imaginaries possible and thus buttressing wider political cooperation under plural political conditions.

Therefore, actors in varying degrees accept facets from different political imaginaries and navigate the use of different political rationalities accordingly. However, under conditions of increased political polarization there are widening incompatibilities between the ontologies and epistemologies of the different political imaginaries in society. This leads to widening gaps between

the justificatory practices available to actors exercising political rationality. But we should not presuppose that pluralism or difference, in and of itself, is equal to polarization. Polarization can be understood to come about when the spaces of reasons constituted in widely accepted political imaginaries become narrower so that these political imaginaries severely limit the use of political rationality between different political imaginaries. This polarizing dynamic of narrowing spaces of reasons is in this section exemplified by how neoliberal and authoritarian political imaginaries have accepted core imaginary significations across imaginaries. This has led to the formation of an authoritarian neoliberal imaginary which encompasses both authoritarian ethnonationalist significations and significations connected to capitalist accumulation in neoliberal imaginaries. This has led to a narrower space of reasons shared between neoliberal and authoritarian political actors which now encompasses two sets of core imaginary significations, drawn from both imaginaries.

This convergence between neoliberal and authoritarian political imaginaries constitutes a narrower space of reasons, that of “authoritarian neoliberalism”. This lowers the compatibility between this emergent space of reasons and other political imaginaries in society (see Figure 2). The fusion between neoliberal and authoritarian political imaginaries has led to the emergence of a space of reasons and concomitant political rationality which accepts justifications that embrace both ethnonationalist imaginary significations and the significations associated with neoliberal imagination concerning the ontology and epistemology of capital accumulation, market logic, competition, and effective performance. This leads to fewer justifications from other political rationalities, constituted in other political imaginaries, passing the requirements of being seen as acceptable or intelligible within authoritarian neoliberals’ imagination. This narrowing of the space of reasons creates a polarizing dynamic which makes it harder for actors to move between different political rationalities and locks the exercise of political rationality, from the perspective of the actors, more tightly to the boundaries of the different polarized political imaginaries.

As Jonathan Benson argues, from an epistemic perspective, “polarization has the tendency to reduce the diversity of perspectives utilized in a democratic system” (Benson 2023, 1), but this remains true from an ontological perspective as well, if we follow the political imaginaries approach. For Benson, furthermore, polarization weakens democracy’s “capacity to identify and address problems of public concern” (Benson 2023, 1). From the perspective developed here, it is not so much about weakening the capacity to identify and address concerns, as political rationality can be exercised to identify problems from

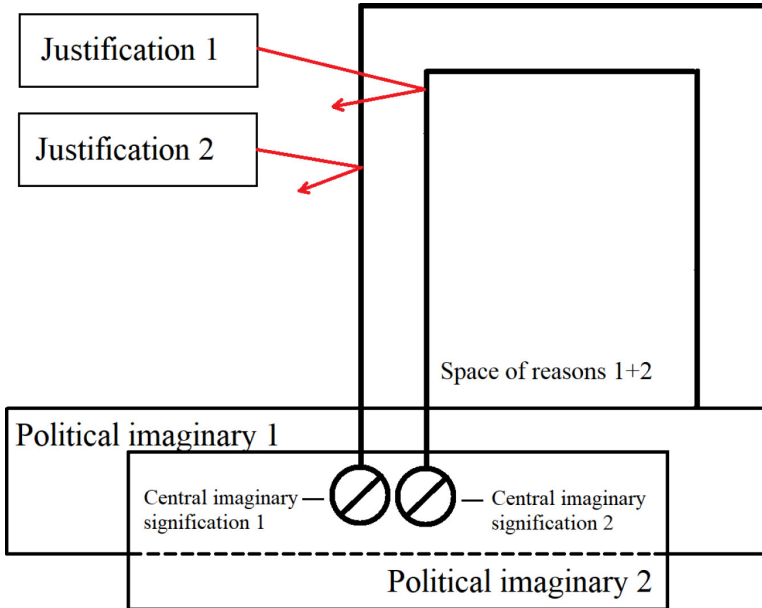


FIGURE 2 Illustration of the narrowing of the space of reasons  
AUTHOR

only a single “perspective” or political imaginary, as neoliberalism’s continuing dominance shows. Instead, the problem of polarization is about diminishing the available space for exerting political imagination, so weakening pluralism, on the one hand, and about increasingly narrowing the compatibility between the remaining imaginaries’ political rationalities, as the narrowing of the spaces of reasons in political imaginaries blocks political actors from cooperating across imaginaries, on the other hand.

A significant problem for the functioning of a democratic, pluralist political environment is not only that there is an expanding gap between the ontologies and epistemologies of the different political imaginaries, but also that the possibilities for inter-imaginary communication between the rationalities constituted in these imaginaries becomes harder. Therefore what is referred to as political polarization should not be understood only through the existence of many incompatible political imaginaries giving rise to incompatible spaces of reasons in which to exercise political rationality. Political polarization can also be understood through the fact that the spaces of reasons constituted within political imaginaries become increasingly incapable of incorporating justifications built on rationalities constituted in other political imaginaries and push actors to adopt an either–or mentality in relation to the dominant political imaginaries circulating in society.

The polarizing dynamic of narrowing the spaces of reasons constituted in different political imaginaries is accompanied by specific affective dispositions created under such polarized conditions. As Kekkonen et. al (2022) describe it, affective polarization is double-edged and includes favoritism towards the political in-group in combination with animosity towards the political out-group. Increasing political polarization can be thought to have feedback effects on the political imaginaries themselves. That is, under conditions of political polarization, political imaginaries start to lock in on themselves, becoming less fluid, and stop being open to external imaginary significations. The reasons for this can be understood to be twofold, connected both to the narrowing of the overlapping space in-between political rationalities and to the double-edged affective dynamic of in-group favoritism and out-group animosity. This feedback dynamic means that the political rationalities operating from imaginaries under conditions of strong political polarization will start to take on freedom-reducing characteristics which could be associated with domination: there are only two choices, you can be with us or against us. Indeed, it has been argued that polarization not only clearly affects the attitudes of those actors which already have strong political commitments or stakes in the polarized field but can also polarize “independents” or “bystanders” in society more generally (see Yang et. al 2016; Ahler 2014).

The question about the roots of the global escalation of polarization cannot be settled here and spans a wide variety of political contexts with several threads one might pull on to begin unraveling this question. However, to exemplify the polarization dynamic discussed here, authoritarian neoliberalism is used as an example of one major political driver of polarization.

When the current resurgence of authoritarian political movements, such as different right-wing populisms, started to gain momentum, these movements were often understood as reactions to neoliberalism, especially its austerity measures, internationalist commitments, and general elitism (Putzel 2020; Bonnano 2019). As many researchers have noted, the continuing prominence of the neoliberal imaginary today in many contexts in the West is increasingly intertwined with authoritarian imaginaries (Biebricher 2020; Gallo 2022) and the emergence of a “mutating politics of neoliberal legitimacy” in the direction of a more authoritarian political rationality (Ward and Vieira 2024). This has been accompanied by authoritarian populist parties becoming more accepting of neoliberal economic rationality (Oudenampsen 2023; Spector 2019).

These imaginaries share central imaginary significations in a way that strengthens their hegemonic position and creates a tightly policed space of reasons in which the exercise of political rationality exerts a deeply polarizing force. This emerging “authoritarian neoliberalism” closes the gap between the

earlier spaces of reasons which existed between neoliberal and liberal projects. Proponents of authoritarian imaginaries, such as many populist parties, are more prone to accept the economic visions of the neoliberal right, and the neoliberal right is more prone to accept authoritarian nationalist visions. This mixture, authoritarian neoliberalism, consists of “an authoritarian neoliberal current, which aims to push the domination of capital over every aspect of our lives even further, while combating immigrants, racialized subjects, the LGBTQI movement and even rational argumentation and Western science” (Saidel 2023, 118). We might reflect on it as a convergence between neoliberal imaginaries and authoritarian ones, which in the present political context constitutes a deeply polarizing and narrowed space of reasons.

The acceptance of the neoliberal form of austerity politics and capitalist dynamics by right-wing populist parties and the jettisoning of liberal value commitments by neoliberals means that justifications given to proponents of this “new consensus” have to conform both to an ethnocentric, traditionalist, and anti-liberal image of the world and to a neoliberal anti-state-interventionist, pro-austerity image of economic politics. The emergent political rationality that requires from interlocutors acceptance both of the core imaginary significations of neoliberal capitalism and those of ethnonationalist authoritarianism makes it increasingly desirable to reject the terms of discussion and deliberation with proponents of the authoritarian neoliberal consensus. Where the core imaginary signification for neoliberalism is the capitalist economic configuration of the relations of production according to the logic of the markets that underscore competition and effectiveness, the space of reasons this constitutes still makes it possible to inject into it, for example, value-liberal policies, policies set to protect minority rights, and so on, to a certain degree. At the same time, where the core imaginary signification for authoritarians is the protection of the ethnos and its nation state, it can be mobilized as a quasi-Polanyian project to protect (some) citizens from the excesses of neoliberal financial politics.

However, the fusion between these imaginaries has resulted in the consolidation of neoliberal rationality with that of authoritarian reason. Where neoliberalism earlier could support parts of the political rationality constituted in liberal political imaginaries, the new authoritarian neoliberalism creates a space of reasons which rejects justifications coming both from political imaginaries based on “traditional” value-liberal imaginaries and from political imaginaries based on “economically” leftist political imaginaries.

One part of contemporary polarization could therefore be traced to the ontoepistemology and political rationality constituted in authoritarian neoliberalism and its narrowed space of reasons. The constrictive character of both

neoliberal and authoritarian imaginaries can be related to how they both build on imagined “objective facts” about reality. Jacques Rancière has argued that many reigning political imaginaries, including the authoritarian and neoliberal ones, operate from a new “consensus”, not in the sense of being about consensus between people but about consensus with objective reality (Rancière 2024). Accepting such immovable central imaginary significations exerts considerable defining power on the acceptable space of reasons constituted in a political imaginary as they require from the actors that they accept an authoritative image of reality.

On the one hand, for neoliberalism, this central imaginary signification is the reimagined capitalist economic sphere with its purportedly “objective” laws, the logic of the markets, and the principles of competition, effectiveness, and performance that need to be extended across society. On the other hand, for right-wing populists, the core central imaginary signification is the ethnonationalist foundation of the people, with its own locally varied “objective” criteria for distinguishing between different ethnic peoples and the role of the nation state as the protector of these peoples. In themselves, these core imaginary significations greatly constrain the acceptable spaces of reasons for proponents of these imaginaries. The fusion, authoritarian neoliberalism, operates with both sets of central imaginary political significations. This creates a new political imaginary with an ever more authoritative and constraining political world which consists of both the unchangeable and immovable laws of capital, markets, and competition and the exclusionary foundation of the ethnonationalist popular political community. The space of reasons constituted in authoritarian imagination rests on central imaginary significations both from the authoritarian right-wing populist movements’ imaginaries and from neoliberal imaginaries and rejects justifications arising from political rationalities constituted in such political imaginaries that do not accept both pillars of political rationality on which neoliberal authoritarianism leans.

By what measures these imaginaries have closed in on each other is best settled by looking at the distinct compositions of political imaginaries in different contexts, a task which is outside the scope of this article. To give a short example, in Finland the current authoritarian–neoliberal coalition in government between the authoritarian right-wing populist party, the True Finns, and the neoliberal right-wing party, the National Coalition Party, makes up the lion’s share of the government base. During the Finnish general elections of 2023, both parties utilized the social imaginary signification of national debt, a signification which weds economic rationality with nationalist sentiment, in order to construct a shared space of reasons where justifications for nationalist, exclusionary austerity politics became mutually intelligible. The twin-



pillared political imaginary signification of national debt, intelligible to both authoritarian and neoliberal imagination, exerted considerable force in welding together the authoritarian right-wing populist imaginaries with those of the neoliberal right. This led to the space of reasons which became dominant during the Finnish general elections of 2023 revolving almost exclusively around issues of national debt, with the exception of the Russian security threat (see Arter 2020).

Another key imaginary signification, also present in the Finnish case, but which testifies to the convergence between authoritarian reason and neoliberal rationality at a broader scale, is the category of the undeserving poor, which has united actors across the new authoritarian neoliberal divide in different countries (see Stubbs and Lendvai-Bainton 2019). While one may speculate on the reasons for authoritarians such as right-wing populists to adopt such hostile language against members of their “own ethnos”, one might suspect that the convergence of neoliberal and authoritarian imaginaries has produced an economically supercharged hybrid imaginary of the ethnos. Race and heritage are no longer the sole defining criteria for belonging to the “true people”, as the neoliberal requirement of being a productive citizen is added to the list of community-including significations. However, as poverty often traces racialized lines, it might also be that there is a more temporary alliance between neoliberal and authoritarian reason on this point.

It is also notable that both imaginaries operate from converging imaginary logics which accept a naturalized view of inequality as one facet of their political rationality (see Finlayson 2021). For neoliberals this stems in part from replacing the image of humans as rational economic actors with that of humans as nonrational actors that need paternalistic neoliberal tutelage in order to make the right choices, but it is also connected to neoliberalism’s commitment to certain forms of meritocratic justification (see Gane 2021) as based on the previously discussed neoliberal reimagining of capitalism through market-based performance and competition. The authoritarian imaginary operates with several different vectors of naturalized inequality, from biologicistic, to racist, to sexist conceptualizations of the natural inequality between humans (see, e.g., Bhatt 2020). Here Meos Holger Kiik’s (2024) analysis of the nondemocratic and depoliticizing tendencies which unite populist ideologies and what Kiik terms epistocratic ideologies also seems to mirror the functioning of authoritarian and neoliberal political imaginaries as discussed here. Epistocrats believe in the “superior epistemic capabilities” of a select few experts, which in neoliberal imagination are those who have access to the true foundation of politics, neoliberal economic doctrine. Populists in Kiik’s analysis operate on an imaginary which ignores democratic proceduralism and pub-

lic deliberation as they seek to base what has here been called their imaginary political rationality on “the morally superior will of the people”. Both populists and epistocrats hence accept a “non-procedural conception of political legitimacy as they claim a non-participative shortcut to political knowledge” (Kiik 2024, 15). This is exactly a facet which unites both authoritarian and neoliberal political imaginaries and also undoubtedly contributes to a fundamental compatibility between the ontoepistemologies of both sets of political imaginaries.

However, to take it to a simplified level, the authoritarian imaginary encompassing ethnonationalist imaginary significations and the neoliberal imaginary encompassing reimagined capitalist imaginary significations can be understood to constitute central imaginary significations which inform the composition of the space of reasons in the authoritarian neoliberal political imaginary. While the ethnonationalist component has been harder to integrate with forms of political reasoning stemming from non-ethnonationalistic imaginaries, as it breaks with many facets of the standard liberal imaginaries, the neoliberal imaginary was, before converging with authoritarian imaginaries, at least somewhat compatible with many facets of standard liberal political rationality, such as value pluralism. The conjunction between these two sets of imaginaries, thought of at the macro scale, has resulted in a narrow space of reasons constituted between them which has significant polarizing tendencies, as justifications from other political imaginaries cannot be introduced into the shared space of reasons without accepting both significations embracing ethnonationalist and neoliberally capitalist images of the political world. The example of neoliberal authoritarianism and its narrowing space of reasons is naturally not meant to be a wholesale explanation of all global trends of political polarization but might point to one powerful driver of contemporary political polarization as it severely disrupts the possibilities for inter-imaginary communication due to the constraints it puts on political reasoning.

At a more general level, the narrowing of spaces of reasons, which produces polarizing tendencies, need not come about from the conjunction between several imaginaries as in the case of authoritarian neoliberalism. If public life is dominated by one powerful political imaginary with a narrow space of reasons, this will likewise produce polarizing effects as justifications and ways of reasoning stemming from other political imaginaries of different orders cannot enter it.

## 5 Conclusion

It has been proposed that political polarization can be analyzed through a framework which focuses on political imaginaries, specifically by looking at the constraints which political imaginaries impose on the exercise of political rationality. We should therefore be mindful of the polarization of political rationality understood through its link to political imaginaries. Exercising political judgment according to political rationality can from this perspective be approached as an attempt by judging actors to legitimate their own political imaginary. One's own political imaginary is strengthened by exercising a concomitant form of political rationality which is called upon in judgment, which strengthens the imaginary significations central to the political imaginary being used. Based on their core imaginary significations, political imaginaries give rise to spaces of reasons which accept or reject political justifications and can be more or less narrow depending on the composition of the political imaginary.

Political polarization is therefore also connected to the emergence of narrower spaces of reasons in public life which make reasoning across different political imaginaries in society increasingly difficult. Political polarization leads to political imaginaries offering less variation in the avenues to exercise political rationality in common and can be traced to rising incompatibilities between emerging political imaginaries but also to how polarization has fused groups of political imaginaries together, making it harder for political actors to formulate justifications which are acceptable in the space of reasons of different polarized political imaginaries. The case of the fusion between neoliberal and authoritarian imaginaries has been offered as one exemplification which underscores why political polarization, understood from the perspective constructed here, is on the rise.

The perspective advanced here underscores how polarization might be approached simultaneously as a way denoting increasing rifts and especially incompatibilities between the imaginary significations central to the polarized political imaginaries, and that this polarization has far-reaching effects on the exercise of political rationality in societies as it locks actors more tightly to the polarized political imaginaries.

This facet of polarized political rationality obstructs the kind of depolarizing mobility or fluidity which protects political life in settings with plural political imaginaries by allowing actors more freedom to move between political rationalities. Political polarization is connected not only to overt or self-conscious political identifications and programs but also to widening rifts in the ontologies and epistemologies between how people experience social and

political reality. Linking the question of political rationality to political imagination underscores that it is through the presence of political imaginaries that the exercise of political rationality becomes possible, and that pathologies in the exercise of political rationality such as polarization are simultaneously pathologies relating to deep-seated rifts between imaginaries in society which split intersubjective reality. At the same time, in complex societies, we do live in-between worlds, and plurality should not be equated with polarization. The concept of imaginary political rationality lets us bring into view how one crux regarding polarization is the narrowing of the possibility to exercise political judgment in a way that moves between, or resonates across, several spaces of reasons, based on different political imaginaries. Finally, the perspective offered here is not meant to undermine the thought or possibility of exercising common public reason under plural democratic conditions. To the contrary, the analysis offered here is intended to help us think about the conditions which need to be met to strengthen a democratic common space of reasons which would be conducive to sustaining a plurality of ways of living together.

### Funding Details

This work was supported by the Ella and Georg Ehrnrooth Foundation.

### References

- Ahler, Douglas J. (2014). "Self-Fulfilling Misperceptions of Public Polarization." *The Journal of Politics* 76 (3), pp. 607–620.
- Anderson, Benedict. (1983). *Imagined Communities*. Verso: London.
- Arter, David. (2024). "The Making of an 'Unhappy Marriage'? The 2023 Finnish General Election." *West European Politics* 47 (2), pp. 426–438.
- Baldassarri, Delia, and Gelman, Andrew. (2008). "Partisans without Constraint: Political Polarization and Trends in American Public Opinion." *American Journal of Sociology* 114 (2), pp. 408–446.
- Baldassarri, Delia, and Amir Goldberg. (2014). "Neither Ideologues nor Agnostics: Alternative Voters' Belief System in an Age of Partisan Politics." *American Journal of Sociology* 120 (1), pp. 45–95.
- Beattie, Peter, and Beattie, Marguerite. (2023). "Political Polarization: A Curse of Knowledge?" *Frontiers in Psychology* 14, pp. 1–12.
- Benson, Jonathan. (2023). "Democracy and the Epistemic Problems of Political Polarization." *American Political Science Review*, 1–14.

- Bhatt, Chetan. (2020). "White Extinction: Metaphysical Elements of Contemporary Western Fascism." *Theory, Culture and Society* 38 (1), pp. 1–40.
- Biebricher, Thomas. (2020). "Neoliberalism and Authoritarianism." *Global Perspectives* 1 (1), pp. 1–18.
- Boltanski, Luc, and Thévenot, Laurent. (2006). *On Justification*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Bonanno, Alessandro. (2019). "Crisis of Neoliberalism, Populist Reaction, and the Rise of Authoritarian Capitalism." *International Review of Modern Sociology* 45 (1), pp. 9–26.
- Boxell, Levi, Gentzkow, Matthew, and Shapiro, Jesse M. (2024). "Cross-Country Trends in Affective Polarization." *Review of Economics and Statistics* 106 (2), 1–60.
- Brown, Wendy. (2015). *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*. New York: Zone Books.
- Browne, Craig, and Diehl, Paula. (2019). "Conceptualising the Political Imaginary: An Introduction to the Special Issue." *Social Epistemology* 33 (5), pp. 393–397.
- Brubaker, Rogers. (2022). *Hyperconnectivity and Its Discontents*. London: Wiley.
- Carlin, Ryan E., and Love, Gregory J. (2013). "The Politics of Interpersonal Trust and Reciprocity: An Experimental Approach." *Political Behavior* 35, pp. 43–63.
- Carmines, Edward G., Ensley, Michael J., and Wagner, Michael W. (2012). "Who Fits the Left–Right Divide? Partisan Polarization in the American Electorate." *American Behavioral Scientist* 56 (12), pp. 1631–1653.
- Castoriadis, Cornelius. (1983). "The Greek Polis and the Creation of Democracy." *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 9 (2), pp. 79–115.
- Castoriadis, Cornelius. (1990). "Individual, Society, Rationality, History." *Thesis Eleven* 59 (25), pp. 59–90.
- Castoriadis, Cornelius. (1991). *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Castoriadis, Cornelius. (1997). *World in Fragments*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Castoriadis, Cornelius. (2005). *The Imaginary Institution of Society*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Dardot, Pierre, and Laval, Christian. (2014). *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society*. London: Verso.
- Dews, Peter. (2002). "Imagination and the Symbolic: Castoriadis and Lacan." *Constellations* 9, pp. 516–521.
- Dorst, Kevin. (2023). "Rational Polarization." *The Philosophical Review* 132 (3), pp. 1–68.
- Druckman, James N., Peterson, Erik, and Slothuus, Rune. (2013). "How Elite Partisan Polarization Affects Public Opinion Formation." *American Political Science Review* 107, pp. 57–79.

- Finlayson, Alan. (2021). "Neoliberalism, the Alt-right and the Intellectual Dark Web." *Theory, Culture & Society* 38 (6), pp. 167–190.
- Forst, Rainer. (2017). *Normativity and Power*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fraser, Nancy. (2023). *Cannibal Capitalism*. Verso: London.
- Gallo, Ernesto. (2022). "Three Varieties of Authoritarian Neoliberalism: Rule by the Experts, the People, the Leader." *Competition & Change* 26 (5), pp. 554–574.
- Gane, Nicholas. (2021). "Nudge Economics as Libertarian Paternalism." *Theory, Culture & Society* 38 (6), pp. 119–142.
- Geuss, Raymond. (2010). *Politics and the Imagination*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Haghtalab, Nika, Jackson, Matthew O., and Procaccia, Ariel D. (2021). "Belief Polarization in a Complex World: A Learning Theory Perspective." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 118 (19), pp. 1–8.
- Heap, Jodie Lee. (2021). *The Creative Imagination: Indeterminacy and Embodiment in the Writings of Kant, Fichte, and Castoriadis*. Washington, DC: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Hibou, Béatrice. (2015). *The Bureaucratization of the World in the Neoliberal Era*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Iyengar, Shanto, Lelkes, Yptach, Levendusky, Matthew, Malhotra, Neil, and Westwood, Sean J. (2019). "The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States." *Annual Review of Political Science* 22, pp. 129–146.
- Iyengar, Shanto, and Westwood, Sean J. (2015). "Fear and Loathing across Party Lines: New Evidence on Group Polarization." *American Journal of Political Science* 59 (3), pp. 690–707.
- Kekkonen, Arto, Suuronen, Aleks, Kawecki, Daniel, and Strandberg, Kim. (2022). "Puzzles in Affective Polarization Research: Party Attitudes, Partisan Social Distance, and Multiple Party Identification." *Frontiers in Politics* 4, pp. 1–17.
- Kiik, Meos H. (2024). "Epistocracy and Populism: Second-Order Ideologies Challenging Democracy." *Political Research Exchange* 6 (1), pp. 1–19.
- Kozlowski, Austin C. (2022). "How Conservatives Lost Confidence in Science: The Role of Ideological Alignment in Political Polarization." *Social Forces* 100 (3), pp. 1415–1443.
- Ktenas, Yannis. (2021). "Weber and Castoriadis: Society as a World of Meaning and the Anti-Speculative Stance Towards History." *Sociétés politiques comparées* 53, pp. 1–24.
- Kurasawa, Fyuki. (2000). "At the Crossroads of the Radical: The Challenges of Castoriadis's Thought." *Theory, Culture & Society* 17 (4), pp. 145–155.
- Layman, Geoffrey C., and Carsey, Thomas M. (2002). "Party Polarization and 'Conflict Extension' in the American Electorate." *American Journal of Political Science* 46 (4), pp. 786–802.
- Lehtinen, Mattias. (2023). *Political Ontology and Imagination: Contours of a Democratic Imaginary*. Doctoral Dissertation, University of Helsinki, Helsinki.

- Levendusky, Matthew S. (2010). "Clearer Cues, More Consistent Voters: A Benefit of Elite Polarization." *Political Behavior* 32, pp. 111–131.
- Machin, Amanda. (2022). "Climates of Democracy: Skeptical, Rational, and Radical Imaginaries." *WIREs Climate Change* 13 (4), pp. 1–13.
- Marino, Maria, Iacono, Roberto, and Mollerstrom, Johanna. (2023). "(Mis-)perceptions, Information, and Political Polarization." LSE Research Online Documents on Economics 119268, London School of Economics and Political Science, LSE Library.
- McCoy, Jennifer, Rahman, Tahmina, and Somer, Morat. (2018). "Polarization and the Global Crisis of Democracy: Common Patterns, Dynamics, and Pernicious Consequences for Democratic Polities." *American Behavioral Scientist* 62 (1), pp. 16–42.
- Mcdowell, John. (2018). "Sellars and the Space of Reasons. Analysis." *Claves de Pensamiento Contemporáneo* 21 (8), pp. 1–22.
- Oudenampsen, Merijn. (2023). "Neoliberal Populism." *Political Studies*, pp. 1–17.
- Piazza, James A. (2023). "Political Polarization and Political Violence." *Security Studies* 32 (3), pp. 476–504.
- Presnyakov, Ilya. (2020). "Max Weber's 'Value Polytheism': Contexts, Origin, Logical-Methodological Foundations." *Sociology of Power* 32 (4), pp. 68–106.
- Prior, Markus. (2013). "Media and Political Polarization." *Annual Review of Political Science* 16, pp. 101–127.
- Putzel, James. (2020). "The 'Populist' Right Challenge to Neoliberalism: Social Policy between a Rock and a Hard Place." *Development and Change* 51, pp. 418–441.
- Ranciére, Jacques. (2024). *Uncertain Times*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- Rogowski, Jon C., and Sutherland, Joseph L. (2016). "How Ideology Fuels Affective Polarization." *Political Behavior* 38 (2), pp. 485–508.
- Saidel, Matias. (2023). *Neoliberalism Reloaded: Authoritarian Governmentality and the Rise of the Radical Right*. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Sellars, Wilfred. (1981). "Foundations for a Metaphysics of Pure Process (The Carus Lectures)." *The Monist* 64, pp. 3–90.
- Singer, Daniel J., Bramson, Aaron, and Grim, Patrick. (2019). "Rational Social and Political Polarization." *Philosophical Studies* 176, pp. 2243–2267.
- Spector, Alan. (2019). "Neoliberalism and the Rise of Authoritarianism in the United States." *International Review of Modern Sociology* 45 (1), pp. 71–92.
- Stubbs, Paul, and Lendvai-Bainton, Noémi. (2020). "Authoritarian Neoliberalism, Radical Conservatism and Social Policy within the European Union: Croatia, Hungary and Poland." *Development and Change* 51, pp. 540–560.
- Thompson, Michael J. (2020). "Marx, Lukács and the Groundwork of Critical Social Ontology." In Michael J. Thompson, ed., *Georg Lukács and the Possibility of Social Ontology*, Leiden: Brill, pp. 419–456.

- Ward, Joseph, and Vieira, Thomas. (2024). "Authoritarian Neoliberalism between Johnson and Jupiter: Declining Legitimacy and the Elevation of Home Affairs in Post-Brexit Britain and Macron's France." *Geoforum* 149, pp. 1–11.
- Weber, Max. (1949). "'Objectivity' in Social Science and Social Policy." In Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Finch, eds, *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, New York: Free Press, pp. 50–112.
- Weber, Max. (2001). *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. London: Routledge.
- Westwood, Sean J., Iyengar, Shanto, Walgrave, Stefaan, Leonisio, Rafael, Miller, Luis, and Strijbis, Oliver. (2018). "The Tie That Divides: Cross-National Evidence of the Primacy of Partyism." *European Journal of Political Research* 57 (2), pp. 333–354.
- Yang, J., Hernando Rojas, Wojcieszak, Magdalena, Aalberg, Toril, Coen, Sharon, Curran, James, Hayashi, Kaori, Iyengar, Shanto, Jones, Paul K., Mazzoleni, Gianpietro, Papathanassopoulos, Stylianos, Rhee, June Woong, Rowe, David, Soroka, Stuart, and Tiffen, Rodney. (2016). "Why Are 'Others' So Polarized? Perceived Political Polarization and Media Use in 10 Countries." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 21 (5), pp. 349–367.