The title of the present paper is inspired by David Graeber's essay "Revolutions in Reverse".[1] In this piece, the anthropologist and activist – who had been deeply involved in *Occupy Wall Street* – offers theoretical reflections on the experiences of modern social movements. He suggests that there is a crucial difference between the political ontology of violence or force on one hand (the right) and the political ontology of imagination on the other (the left). This, however, should not be mistaken as a distinction between purportedly 'realist' and 'utopian' politics. Graeber evokes a traditional concept of imagination as a passageway between experience and reflection, and between intentions and action:

The common Ancient and Medieval conception, what we call 'the imagination' was considered the zone of passage between reality and reason. Perceptions from the material world had to pass through the imagination, becoming emotionally charged in the process and mixing with all sorts of phantasms, before the rational mind could grasp their significance. Intentions and desires moved in the opposite direction. It's only after Descartes, really, that the word 'imaginary' came to mean, specifically, anything that is not real: imaginary creatures, imaginary places (Middle Earth, Narnia, planets in faraway Galaxies, the Kingdom of Prester John…), imaginary friends.[2]

Graeber's essay is not the topic at hand, but I want to explore the idea of a political ontology of imagination by commenting on a semi-classical text: *Discours de la Servitude volontaire* by Etienne de La Boétie (1530-1563). Even if it does not belong to the central canon of modern philosophy, it has been of inspiration for diverse political currents, from anarcho-communists like Graeber to right-wing libertarians.[3]

Imagination – and precisely in a sense like the one Graeber point towards – is in fact central to de La Boétie's writing. The discourse on voluntary servitude was most probably written in the early 1550ies; it circulated as a manuscript and was printed for the first time in 1576. Note, however, that Michel de Montaigne did *not* include it when he published his friend's papers posthumously in 1571.

The main idea of de La Boétie's *Discourse* is simple as it is disturbing: *People don't obey because tyrants are powerful, tyrants are powerful because people obey*. This disrupts the idea of an inherent stability of dominance and introduce a relational and dynamic concept of power, which is seen to emerge from below, rather than to emanate from above. De La

Boétie does not only criticize tyranny, but he offers a critique, in the sense of investigating the conditions of possibility of tyrannic rule. In addition, he gives a brief sketch of the alternative, an image of how society might be, if people stuck to what nature and reason demand: acting freely, they would treat each other as equals, or rather as brethren, as he puts it. At the end of this paper, I'll return to the concept of solidarity implied by this. First, I want to expand somewhat on the relational and dynamic concept of power. This serves as an introduction to the second part of my paper: Reflections on the politics of imagination, both as an explicit topic and as a performative aspect of the *Discourse on voluntary servitude*.

A disturbing concept of power

Without making any claims on the historical reception of de La Boétie's writings, we may nevertheless say that he the topos of 'voluntary servitude' introduced by him has been of lasting importance to subsequent and contemporary social and political theory. That power is relational and emerging from below, rather than emanating from above, is central to Foucault's conception, to name but one example.

A relational and dynamic concept of power calls for a decentered analysis, and maybe for giving the social priority over against the political. At least, centralized, and hierarchical structures are to be seen as effects, not as causes: Commanding power is the result of obedience, not the other way around. How then, are we to explain obedience? On de La Boétie's account, pervasive obedience cannot be explained by reference to neither physical force, moral obligation, nor self-interest, but rather as a weakness of the will, the result of habituation, and – crucially – *defective imagination*. We will return to that in a moment.

De La Boétie's simple idea is disturbing, I claimed. First, to those enjoying the privileges of power because it implies that the dominant are more dependent on their subordinates than the other way around. This is indeed how revolutions occur; governments are toppled, and state institutions may crumble, when enough people cease to obey. This, however, seem to be the exception; most of the time, most people do in fact obey, and they do so voluntarily, de La Boétie claims. Thus, his idea is no less disturbing to the dominated, who appear to be complicit in domination, and thus (at least partially) responsible for their own situation.

Last, but not least, the idea of voluntary servitude is disturbing to those in intermediary positions of authority. Public servants, teachers, intellectuals, etc., can never be quite sure of whether they act on behalf of the dominant or the dominated. Note that Etienne de La Boétie as well as Michel de Montaigne held positions of this sort, as judges in the Parlement of Bordeaux. Montaigne deplored the publication of the *Discourse* and maintained that de La Boétie himself would not have endorsed it, precisely because of the disturbance it might provoke. This does not, however, preclude that Montaigne may very well have sympathized with his friend's views.

Forgetful habits

According to de La Boétie, custom is the first reason for voluntary servitude, i.e., obedience becomes a habit. Habituation occurs when the reason for a practice is forgotten. When people act as usual, simply because they are used to, they demonstrate a lack of imagination. Man is denatured, de La Boétie claims, so that he lacks the memory of his original condition and the desire to return to it.[4] Memory is a primary act of imagination, and it is precisely the faculty of imagining a situation prior to the state of servitude that is broken when people submit:

It is incredible how as soon as a people becomes subject, it promptly falls into such complete forgetfulness of its freedom that it can hardly be roused to the point of regaining it, obeying so easily and so willingly that one is led to say, on beholding such a situation, that this people has not so much lost its liberty as won its enslavement. It is true that in the beginning men submit under constraint and by force; but those who come after them obey without regret and perform willingly what their predecessors had done because they had to. This is why men born under the yoke and then nourished and reared in slavery are content, without further effort, to live in their native circumstance, unaware of any other state or right, and considering as quite natural the condition into which they were born.[5]

It is worth drawing attention to the relationship between experience, reflection and intentionally that comes into view in de La Boétie's account of voluntary servitude. People who have never *experienced* freedom themselves, and live in 'complete forgetfulness' of previous states, will *unreflectively* consider the status quo as 'quite natural'. Thus, the status quo is conceived of as the limiting condition of *intentional action*. Put in slightly

different terms than the ones de La Boétie uses, we might say that imagination constitute the link between experience, reflection, and intention, i.e., the basis of consciousness. Perception becomes experience when what is passing is preserved as images that are emotionally charged, and thus fuel desire.

One never pines for what he has never known; longing comes only after enjoyment and constitutes, amidst the experience of sorrow, the memory of past joy. It is truly the nature of man to be free and to wish to be so, yet his character is such that he instinctively follows the tendencies that his training gives him.[6]

In other words, if you have never enjoyed freedom, you just don't know what you are missing. And if you don't know what you're missing, the idea of achieving it won't even cross your mind – and you will go on as you are used to. Right before the quoted passage, de La Boétie express pity for those who are born under the yoke: "We should exonerate and forgive them, since they have not seen even the shadow of liberty, and, being quite unaware of it, cannot perceive the evil endured through their own slavery."[7] If the subordinates are complicit to their own condition, it is not by their own fault, and it would even seem that by lack of imagination, they also lack the capacity to do anything about it.

Writing and the shadow of liberty

If this was the end of the story, there would hardly be any point in writing a discourse – or at least, it seems odd to consider its dissemination as a possible source of disturbance. However, the end of the story is not told. The point of telling it, is to remind the recipient of what was forgotten, and thus to disturb the reader's habitual ways of thinking. The reader is included in the 'we' that should exonerate and forgive those born under the yoke. If this invitation is accepted, it is because the reader's own imagination is activated. This is decisive for the performative force of de La Boétie's writing.

Imagination – and the lack thereof – is thus not only a *theme*, i.e., an important part of the explanations de La Boétie puts forward in the *Discourse*. His writing is an exercise of political imagination, and notably so on the part of the implied reader. The point of writing, we might say, is to make the shadow of liberty visible. The task of the reader is to imagine what have been forgotten. We tend to forget that that tyranny is parasitic on obedience, and

that obedience itself rest on forgetful habits. Obedience is nothing but the shadow of a liberty that has forgotten itself. Liberty, as forgotten, is present in its absence, so to speak.

To show this, de La Boétie plays the oldest trick in the book. He makes use of an ancient, simple, and efficient rhetorical twist. Strictly speaking, he doesn't make statements, but suggestions, in the form of a rhetorical question: *It seems like this, but maybe it's the other way around?*

This could be said to be the very essence of how Socrates' was doing philosophy, e.g., as portrayed in Plato's dialogue on rhetoric, *Gorgias*. Here, Socrates confronts common opinion in this way: It seems good to be able to serve one's egotistical desires ruthlessly and get away with it, but maybe it's the other way around? That it is better to suffer injustice than to perform it, must have been rather counterintuitive to the Greeks. This is at least what Hannah Arendt claims, in her lecture on thinking and moral considerations. Also note that 'thinking', on her account, consist in active imagination.[8]

This Socratic move seem to be the very prototype of the 'epistemic rupture' that distinguish philosophy from sophistry (and for later generations: science from ideology). But maybe it's the other way around? If philosophy's superiority over sophistry is based on a rhetorical trick, it may be that those of the ancient writers who placed Socrates himself among the sophists were on to something, after all. – As far as I get it, the case that Barbara Cassin makes in her comments on Plato's dialogue *Gorgias*, is of this sort: Even if it does not seem so, "rhetoric" was invented by philosophy, as an invective, a rhetorical tool for establishing true (platonic) philosophy as superior to "sophistics".[9]

In a section of the essay "Seeing Helen in Every Woman: Woman and Word",[10] Cassin comments on the grand-scale performance the historical Gorgias made upon arrival in Athens: To demonstrate his oratory skills, Gorgias first gave a speech that corroborated the common opinion on Helen's guilt – she was responsible for the Trojan wars. In the speech he gave the very next day, preserved as the *Encomium of Helen*, he acquitted her. For once, it's unreasonable to make anyone responsible for their fate, and neither could she be guilty of her own abduction. And even if she was seduced, she is not to blame – because in this case, she has been carried away by the power of logos. – Now, the point of this is of course that Gorgias himself demonstrates the power of logos, to the extent that it makes the

Athenians perceive the story of Helen in a different way and revise their judgement of her. But even if Gorgias employs the power of logos, it does not emanate from him as an orator, but rather emerges from the audience; they could have chosen not to listen to him, but they let themselves be persuaded. So, the persuasive power of speech or writing, rest on the audience's experience of freedom. (On reflection, Helen of course remains an ambiguous figure – a main point of Cassin's essay.)

Rhetoric – or 'sophistical practice' – is disturbing, not least to professional philosophers (or teachers in general), who can never be quite sure if they serve a dominant ideology or the intellectual liberation of the dominated. De la Boétie is indeed an irresponsible writer, who release the power of logos, leaving it to the readers to make sense of his text. This power of logos rest on an experience of freedom in the readers – who might be persuaded, who might change their minds, when imagining things in ways different from what they were accustomed to.

Another World is Possible: Images of solidarity

By reminding his readers that even tyranny is dependent on liberty, De La Boétie deconstructs the received concept of power as something that emanates from above. It follows that domination cannot be a necessary trait of human society; it only seems so, because we are accustomed to think it is. Keeping that in mind, we might be able to at least imagine what could be different. And indeed, De La Boétie does suggest an image of what kind of society free human beings would be able to establish. What would happen if people did act from the freedom they possess anyway?

[I]f there is anything in this world clear and obvious, to which one cannot close one's eyes, it is the fact that nature, handmaiden of God, governess of men, has cast us all in the same mold in order that we may behold in one another companions, or rather brothers. If in distributing her gifts nature has favored some more than others with respect to body or spirit, she has nevertheless not planned to place us within this world as if it were a field of battle, and has not endowed the stronger or the cleverer in order that they may act like armed brigands in a forest and attack the weaker. One should rather conclude that in distributing larger shares to some and smaller shares to others, nature has intended to give occasion for brotherly love to become manifest, some of us having the strength to give help

to others who are in need of it.[11]

What de La Boétie describe here, is an image of freedom, equality, and brotherhood – *liberté, egalité, fraternité*, as the French would later phrase it. Liberty is the natural condition of each and every human being, and in this respect, we are also equal ("cast in the same mold"). This is the basis for imagining our fellow humans as "companions, or rather brothers", paving the way for a concept of solidarity: Superior capacities could be seen as sources of contributions to the common good, rather than as entitlement to superior positions. De La Boétie's image of brotherhood is one of mutual aid. Some might even say communism: *from each according to ability, to each according to needs*.

Another world is possible, de La Boétie seems to say. The crucial point, however, is that he suggests this image of peaceful cooperation without imagining any fundamental change in human nature. On the contrary, he imagines this to be the *natural* condition of the human race. Once again, he turns the table: Domination seems natural, but maybe it is the other way around. To "behold [i.e., to imagine] one another as companions" would mean that we remember that to have something in common, and to act in concert (Arendt), is primary and available to all. To exploit and command – the *modus operandi* of tyrants – is only possible as a deviation from nature – which nevertheless is habituated into something like a 'second nature'. Remembering this could be the first condition for a common hope.

This brings us back to Graeber, whose 2008 essay "Hope in common" turns around a rhetorical twist of the kind outlined here. The gist of his argument is that it that capitalism seem to be based on competitive individualism, i.e., the very opposite of solidarity. However, its real basis is cooperation:

Communism then is already here. The question is how to further democratize it. Capitalism, in turn, is just one possible way of managing communism — and, it has become increasingly clear, rather a disastrous one. Clearly, we need to be thinking about a better one: preferably, one that does not quite so systematically set us all at each other's throats.[12]

To pose the problem this way, is rhetorically ingenious, its aim is to fuel the political imagination of the reader. The thinking in need, must be imaginative – but not fanciful. If another world is indeed *possible*, it is not because we might imagine, fancy, a completely

different world. It is possible because we can imagine *this world* differently. This is a necessary (albeit insufficient) condition for change, and thus an important task for social movements. As Graeber puts it, it is a matter of seeing what we already do in a new light: "To realize we're all already communists when working on a common project, all already anarchists when we solve problems without recourse to lawyers or police, all revolutionaries when we make something genuinely new."[13] For my own part, I imagine that there is plenty of tasks for philosophy in this, too.

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Endnotes

[1] https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/david-graeber-revolution-in-reverse

[2] Ibid.

[3] Case in point: The English version cited here was published by the Ludwig von Mises Institute. *The Politics of Obedience. The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude*. Introduction by Murray N Rothbard, translated by Harry Kurz. Auburn, Alabama, 2008. Online: https://cdn.mises.org/Politics%20of%20Obedience.pdf Kurz' translation was first published under the title *Anti-Dictator* in 1942, full-text available online: https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Discourse_on_Voluntary_Servitude

[4] Cf. *The Politics of Obedience*, p 52.

[5] Ibid., p 54

[6] Ibid, p 58f.

[7] Ibid, p. 58.

[8] Arendt, Hannah: "Thinking and Moral Considerations" *Social Research*, 38:3 (1971: Autumn), pp 417-446.

[9] Cassin, Barbara: "Rhetorical Turns in Ancient Greece", *Sophistical Practice. Towards a Consistent Relativism.* Fordham University Press, 2014, pp 75-86.

[10] Cassin, Barbara: "Seeing Helen in Every Woman: Woman and Word", ibid. pp 57-71. (On Gorgias, p 66-68)

[11] *The Politics of Obedience*, p 50.

[12] Graeber, David: https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/david-graeber-hope-in-common

[13] Ibid.