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The many layers of fake of the “town hall meeting” and their role in shaping the political identity of the United States of America

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Etudes américaines

**The Many Layers of Fake of the “Town Hall
Meeting” and their Role in Shaping the
Political Identity of the United States of
America**

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Sous la direction de Mr LARSON Anthony
Année 2021 - 2022**



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Introduction

If one were to tell the story of the day they took part in an ‘American town hall meeting’, their listener would probably have to wait for the story to unfold before forming a clear picture in their mind, for there are two branches in the story of the town hall meeting. In an article for the now shut-down *Splinter* news website, journalist Molly Osberg said : “one is about men with snow-dusted beards forging American democracy through sheer force of will in frigid ramshackle 17th-century buildings”¹, while the other is more easily conceived framed by a television screen, featuring well-known and well-groomed politicians. So which one was it ? Did the story-teller wrestle with the elements to sit through hours of debate on a freezing January evening, summoning what little strength they had left to raise their arm and shout ‘Ay’ to agree on the more efficient route snow ploughs should take ? Or were they among the lucky few chosen to enjoy a few seconds of national celebrity by asking a televised question to a politician ?

Both these scenes, while obviously being simplified versions of what they aim to describe, are drawn from a gallery of widespread images town hall meetings have been associated to. These images have not taken shape out of thin air, they have been painted through time; in discursive, visual, textual fashions. In the course of history, these representations may have been contradictory, flawed, exaggerated, critical or glorifying; but today (and for three decades now) the flow of meaning appears to have stopped on this duality. It is what these images carry and the way this duality interacts that have fuelled the basic reflection for this research. Indeed, what both these images project, in their own way, is a face of the practise of politics, and particularly democracy, in

1 Osberg, Molly. ‘How Bill Clinton and MTV Invented the Once-Thrilling, Now-Meaningless Town Hall Debate’. *Splinter*, 9 Oct. 2016.

the United States of America. With the US town hall meeting come visions of a political history, of unique American ideas, of freedom of speech, of democratic practises... naming them all would be impossible. If the question were to be approached in semiotic terms, it could be said that the signified behind the signifier “town hall meeting” is imbued with countless visions of US politics. To give an exhaustive account of the images that lie behind the town hall meeting cannot therefore be a goal of this research. However, it is possible to try and map out how the town hall meeting has been treated through discourse, and especially by influential voices, in the course of US history. As a matter of fact, the town hall meeting has been regularly addressed publicly ever since US political leaders and thinkers first started to accept and construct a certain idea of democracy as a form of government. It has received praises from figures whose faces almost illustrate the history of politics in the US, figures like Thomas Jefferson, Henry David Thoreau or Alexis de Tocqueville. Although it has also faced its share of criticism, the canon of approval has cemented its place in the national narrative and has secured its spot as one of the United States’ founding traditions, as the tradition which laid the first stone of the practise of democracy in the nation. Eventually, by the end of the 19th century “the applause had found its way into the textbooks”², and the story of US democracy had found a starting point.

The first chapter of this study deals with an aspect the story eludes : the observable complexity of the town hall meeting, and an explanation as to what composes the duality the terms now refer to. Key components of this complexity are to be found primarily in light of the many varying rules they are subjected to, and through their unstable and changing history. Originally, as a local form of government, its influences have emerged from a micro level to sprout countless community traditions and as many ways to conduct policy making. Such small scale forms of governments are also directly influenced by the members of the assembly, as Frank M. Bryan’s work extensively shows. Historically, their very existence was decided by the unique context behind

2 Bryan, Frank M. *Real Democracy : The New England Town Meeting and How It Works*. Benjamin I. Page, The University of Chicago Press, 2004.

the arrival of the first puritan settlers on the Northern American continent, and has from its first appearances been a stage for timeless issues of political power. However, the most crucial piece of insight to bring in order to understand the full reasoning behind this research concerns the duality introduced in the first paragraph. For the analysis to be functional, this introduction needs to establish clear, defining boundaries between the town hall meeting of the “frigid ramshackle buildings”, and the town hall meeting worthy to appear on national television.

The first one, and the older, is the town hall meeting as a *form of government*. It is commonly referred to as the New England town meeting, or simply town meeting; and it is a form of local government based on deliberative democracy which has been practised since the 17th century in the territory of New England. While the modalities vary from one locality to the next, the general form is for residents of the town or school district to gather in the town hall (the building) and act as a legislative body, voting on diverse matters for the community's operation, mainly the town's budget or upkeep, usually over the following twelve months (it is therefore restricted to the level of authority towns have been granted by the state). The meetings are moderated by a board of “selectmen”, but any person in attendance is free to stand up and participate to the debate. After deliberation, the laws are voted directly during the meetings, the voting systems may also vary from state to state or even from town to town, but the final word always goes to the assembly's vote.

The second, more recent tradition is the town hall meeting as a *political event*, which is often referred to as town hall forum or more regularly now : town hall. It is defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as an event at which a public official or political candidate addresses an audience by answering questions posed by individual members. This broad-brushed definition fits well the number of contexts a town hall can be planned in or the reasons it can be organised for. The blueprint of the format it still is known for today was drawn during Jimmy Carter's 1976 presidential campaign (Richard Nixon had already used the ‘question and answer’ format in 1968, but it was not meant to resemble an authentic town meeting), but its current form was used as an

efficient communication tool by another southern democrat candidate, Bill Clinton, some fifteen years later. His 1992 campaign demonstrated the potential of town halls, as they played a major role in making him the ‘Comeback Kid’³. Town halls in the context of presidential elections are televised, and their organisational body changes from one session to the next. Presidential town halls and their national aura may occupy the largest space in collective representations of the town hall, but most town halls happening regularly across the US are actually not televised (though they are nowadays often broadcast on other media, mainly online) and concern other sectors than institutional politics. Town halls can be used by corporations, colleges, constituencies... any organisation large enough or influential enough to assemble an audience. The major difference with the New England town meeting is of course that the assembly does not have any direct political power, nor does it have the option to deliberate among themselves or with the speaker(s). The assembly’s role is, before anything else, an audience’s. The relation with the people on stage is confined to individual exchanges, usually one answer for one question.

This research will refer to the town hall meeting as a form of government as *town meeting*, and to the town hall meeting as a political event as *town halls*. The first reason why these terms have been chosen is that they are used widely to refer to one or the other, but this is not enough of an argument, as some town halls may adopt the name town meeting or vice versa. Choosing these terms also points to the quality of the event they refer to, *town meeting* places the emphasis on the process, while *town hall* places it on the setting. The distinction reflects their fundamental differences quite well, as town meetings are about policy-making while town halls are more about providing a stage. The general terms *town hall meeting* will be used in any context when both *town meeting* and *town hall* are treated as one entity bearing two faces (so, mostly through representation).

A relevant observation which can be made today is the different impact town meetings and town halls have on political representations. When it comes to town halls, this impact has become

3 Terms he used to qualify himself in a speech given in Manchester, NH during his 1992 campaign.

quite easy to verify, as they have become unavoidable for any candidate running for president. Indeed the tradition set in motion by Bill Clinton proved so decisive that it has become a key element of presidential campaigns, and it did not take long for the Commission on Presidential Debates to institutionalise such events (see M. Osberg's article), and for television channels to seize the potential viewership they could bring (NBC and ABC for the 2020 presidential election). With town halls being now widely presented as inherent to the electoral process, the bond tying them with the practise of democracy in the USA appears to be extremely tight. Moreover, their broad use by corporations, campuses, etc... solidifies their status as potential problem solvers and one of the sole links tying decisional bodies to their employees, students, or constituents. On the other hand, town meetings appear to have been moved from an effective policy-making process worthy of national consideration, to a cherished, now archaic landmark of US politics. Frank M. Bryan goes even as far as saying that in many places in New England, "they seem near death". Once the core of political power of colonial and US towns, the town meeting was never met with any arrangement that would have allowed it to survive the advent of national politics. Its symbolics live on however, through its status in the national narrative, through the textbooks and the ever present past of US politics, and mostly, through the town hall.

The second chapter of this research revolves around the notions of symbolics and social and political imaginaries. The analysis will initially approach what has been placed in the foreground in the story of the town hall meeting, mainly through discourse, but also through representation and perception. This will be done in an attempt to trace back how, and under which conditions the symbolics associated with the town hall meeting (although for the greater part of history, only the town meeting) have been constructed. This requires a recollection of discourse regarding the town hall meeting, which again cannot be exhaustive of course, but which can help draw the public, or rather the social picture of the town hall meeting through history. What will mainly be investigated is the type of discourse which has participated in making the town hall meeting an inspiring element

of the national narrative. It ought to be said that many elements play in the town meeting's favour when it comes to generating symbols. As the political system used at the very beginnings of US history, it bears the indelible mark of genesis. Furthermore, it is intimately linked to the US path to independence, and would stand at the centre of political discussion when the time came to draw the 'idea' of the newly-born nation. Consequently, conversation and rhetoric around the town meeting were also taking one of their most decisive turns at this time, engaging a progressive drift from potential basis for national politics to marginal romantic practise. The construction of town hall meeting symbolics did not stop there however, and the advent of town halls at the end of the 20th century would once more bring these symbolics to the centre of the political stage, albeit in an entirely new light.

To set the course for the analysis of these symbolic constructions, the study will then present a theoretical background organised around the notions of symbolics and social and political imaginaries. The different definitions given by the authors quoted in this study seem to converge towards the notion that the symbol is primarily defined by its abstraction, and secondly by its ability to congregate meanings. Through congregation, synthesis and abstraction, the symbol acts a gateway to the symbolic realm, a space widely open to interpretation, where subjectivities can be projected. In this it can be distinguished from the sign which – as the name suggests – signifies, while the symbol evokes. Copiously discussed national historical symbols like the town hall meeting are especially potent because of the synthesis they produce, a synthesis of political practises, political values, of discourses... each providing a gateway into social and political imaginaries. The notion of "imaginary" will be approached through its socio-political existence, especially the ways in which it constitutes a structuring force of social and political reality. The fundamental dynamics animating imaginaries, which have emerged from the study of the authors quoted in this research, are conservation and creation, and ultimately performativity. Imaginaries of conservation find support in utopian constructions of the past, born from natural cognitive biases

and sustained by references to a mythical golden age. Creation finds its roots in the performative nature of social imaginary, which can move rather independently but can also be directed or even controlled to serve a political project. By drawing from existing, historically framed features of social imaginary, new symbolic configurations can be established around different aspects of social life. This observation will form the analytical basis of the study's next two chapters.

The third chapter will explore the place occupied by the town hall meeting within the national narrative, a place which it holds in a bidimensional way. The first part of this chapter will be dedicated to the inaccurate treatment of the town hall meeting in the US national narrative, in strictly historical terms. Mainly, this part will challenge its perfectly democratic image to relocate it within its evolving historical and political context, as well as proposing a critique of the very form of the town meeting. The other dimension of the town hall meeting's presence in the national narrative is a fundamentally self-sustaining dynamic. Indeed, the US national narrative, like many other narratives of the Western world, is glorified. This dynamic is especially strong with the US however, and finds incarnations in notions such as American exceptionalism. It could even be argued that exceptionalism constitutes a reference point for the 'meaning' of US history, considering the number of contexts where it is used as an explanation or exhibited as a result. Such glorification can be turned into a powerful political tool, through summoning flawed atavistic figures and pushing forward ideas of lost grandeur. The town hall meeting's contribution to these utopian constructions is worthy of a specific analysis, as it builds bridges with the past to firmly attach democracy – as a general concept – to the story of the US nation.

The symbolics associated with the concept of democracy itself are also shaped by the town hall meeting; and through a particular filter by the modern town hall. Indeed, beyond simply rehabilitating the town meeting in social imaginary, it offers a staging of democracy which does not quite match the notion of power by the people and for the people. This effect on political imaginary is the subject of the fourth chapter. To examine the processes at play in the redefinition of the

symbolic configurations of democracy, the study will be supported by the concept of spectacle applied to the current neoliberal context. The spectacle implies an organised display which appears as an undisputable positivity, in the case of the town hall, this positivity is manufactured and serves as entertainment on many different scales. Its use has now been generalised, and concerns national elections of course, but they also serve as political and communicational tools in many constituencies, as well as in many corporations and higher education. The display it offers is inscribed in the revision of the concept of democracy carried by neoliberalism. In its most “spectacular” manifestation, it also solidifies, and exacerbates a certain vision of presidential elections.

Committing to a contemporary standpoint, the main thesis defended by this research is that the town hall meeting, from the distinctive spot its New England manifestation occupies in political representations carried by the national narrative; and through the stage its modern version has provided since the 1992 campaign, has played an active part in the *making* of US politics and its symbolic landmarks, and still does today.

Chapter 1 : Town Meeting, Town Hall : Defining the Terms and Restoring Complexity

1) The New England Town Meeting – Definition(s)

As surely as there is no single way of understanding and practising democracy across different territories, there is no single way of conducting a town meeting in the USA, hence the plurality of definitions which can be associated to these deliberative assemblies. From traditions, territories and constituents to the driving forces of history, many factors came to weave what has logically been an uneven political web since the arrival of the first European settlers. It does not take much for a town's meeting to differ from its neighbour's; the voting method, the power it has over the community's operation, the number of gatherings each year... all can stand out as what makes a meeting unique. The difficulty faced when trying to put together a definition of the New England town meeting is a first hint of a certain complexity inherent to the practise of democracy in the USA. It should make sense, as democracy is the making of politics by the people and for the people; and a system which would fail to embody the realm of complexities hidden within the word 'people' could not be so easily referred to as such. The purpose of this chapter is – as its title suggests – to introduce complexity as inherent to any definition of town meeting politics in New England, and break from the usual broad-brushed definitions provided by dictionaries, or definitions

amplified by myth. It is possible to draw out a backbone of rules and principles which can be observed among open and representative town meetings across New England (potentially excluding a few marginal ones which may have escaped this analysis), however no singular definition could encapsulate them all without getting lost in the way. This part will focus separately on “open” and “representative” town meetings, bearing in mind that open town meetings are those which largely occupy political imaginaries.

1.1) The open town meeting

1.1.1) Founding and Common principles

The “open town meeting” is its most famous form, it is the type of meeting where all residents of the town who are legally registered to vote can take part in deliberation and voting. All New England town meetings find their roots in the political gatherings which took place just some years after the first European settlers set foot on North American soil. One date regularly emerges from historical records such as those of the New Haven Colony Historical Society : June 4, 1639. It is said that on this day in New Haven : “all the free planters assembled together in a general meeting to consult about settling Civil government according to God”⁴. This gathering led to the signing of The Fundamental Agreement of the New Haven Colony, which is one of the first legal documents issued after an official assembly was held on the territory of the future United States. Reference to this date can also be found on the website of the New England Historical Society,

4 New Haven Colony Historical Society. cn. *Papers of the New Haven Colony Historical Society*. New Haven, Ct. : [The Society], 1865.

again, presented as the embryo of town meeting politics⁵. However, as Joseph Francis Zimmerman⁶ points out, the decision to move government rule from England to the New England colony had been voted a decade earlier, on August 29, 1629 and it appears town meetings were already commonplace as early as 1635, as a General Court order dated from September 2 mentions the ‘meetinghouse’ as the centre of town government (Zimmerman 18). Because the town meeting was never part of any preset political project or even political vision, its form and modalities were established ad hoc, and even though the very first town meeting is said to have been held in Dorchester in 1633⁷, attempting to confine the genesis of town meetings into one historical event is likely pointless. The same conclusions can be made about the search for a single set of written rules guiding all meetings that would come, or had already taken place. Instead, research should be aimed towards recorded *practises* to determine what came to become tradition in town meeting politics. The irregularities inherent to the open town meeting, because it depends in every way on micro political factors, make it the most difficult to establish an exhaustive set of common practises for. However, it is quite easy to stop at what defines them fundamentally, and display the framework which gives them their particular identity.

The first elements to clarify in order to point out what these meetings share are the terms used commonly to refer specifically to town meeting politics. The “warrant” is the document produced in preparation of the session, whose main purpose is to warn the town inhabitants that a town meeting will be held, as is described by D.Syrett⁸, and J.W Sullivan⁹ (among others). Town meetings are usually held once a year, though they can occur more or less frequently. The warrant is a steady component of the town meeting tradition, and although it was sometimes overlooked in

5 ‘A Brief History of Town Meeting, From Election Cake to Lemon Meringue Pie’. *New England Historical Society*, 8 Mar. 2016, <https://www.newenglandhistoricalsociety.com/a-brief-history-of-town-meeting-from-election-cake-to-lemon-meringue-pie/>.

6 Zimmerman, Joseph Francis. *The New England Town Meeting: Democracy in Action*. Greenwood Publishing Group, 1999.

7 Mansky, Jackie. ‘The History of the Town Hall Debate’. *Smithsonian Magazine*, 6 Oct. 2016, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/history-town-hall-debate-180960705/>.

8 Syrett, David. ‘Town-Meeting Politics in Massachusetts, 1776-1786’. *The William and Mary Quarterly*, vol. 21, no. 3, Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1964, pp. 352–66. *JSTOR*, doi:[10.2307/1918451](https://doi.org/10.2307/1918451).

9 Sullivan, James William. *Direct Legislation by the Citizenship Through the Initiative and Referendum*. True Nationalist Publishing Company, 1893. *Internet Archive*, http://archive.org/details/bub_gb_B1RHHgAACAAJ.

certain towns, it is a key prerequisite to insure participation. The warrant also informs of the schedule for the meeting, and is usually divided into as many articles as there are preset matters to be debated on. Other matters can emerge from the assembly but will be treated as “other business” and will not be legally binding. In order for other elements, chosen by the residents of a town, to appear on the warrant, at least twenty-five people must submit a petition five weeks before the meeting. After the meeting, a report is published to inform the townspeople of its outcome.

The warrant is issued by ‘selectmen’, who form the body of ‘elected executive members of the town government’¹⁰. The selectmen also decide on the date the town meeting will be held. Although the original name has been kept, it should be pointed out that women have progressively gained access to this body of town officers. The selectmen of a town are elected at each town meeting and usually act as moderators for each meeting happening on their term, meaning they take part in setting the rhythm of the meeting and work towards achieving consensus. Most importantly, they pronounce the closure of the debate when a form of consensus has been achieved, and they enact the laws. This lexicon, used all throughout the towns relying on town meeting polity, surely points towards the existence of a set of common practises, of a certain tradition, but they do not reveal much about what they share in political status. Drawing from the work of Frank M. Bryan, this study will present the three pillars supporting the political status of open town meetings as : the powers they possess, the territory over which their powers are applied, and who is eligible to take part in the meetings.

Bryan’s reasoning was built on the claim that town meeting politics was an example of “real democracy”; he is not the only one to have made that claim, far from it, and it is clear at least that their basic function follows the strictest and most basic rules of democracy. First and foremost, open town meetings have the power of law. This power is not only official, it is also direct, as citizens of the town deliberate not to pass ideas up to a decision-making committee, but make the decisions

10 Salvino, Robert, et al. ‘A Direct Test of Direct Democracy: New England Town Meetings’. *Applied Economics*, vol. 44, no. 18, Routledge, June 2012, pp. 2393–402. *Taylor and Francis+NEJM*, doi:[10.1080/00036846.2011.564148](https://doi.org/10.1080/00036846.2011.564148).

themselves. In principle there is no filter between the laws fashioned by the town meeting assembly and the rules binding the community (Bryan 4). The matters on which they have power concern the necessary services of the town, which may vary from one municipality to the next, but which includes elements such as annual budget, road upkeep or public transportation for example. As it has already been said, each decision is specifically discussed beforehand.

Also, open town meetings have legislation over a specific geographical unit : the town. This is relevant because the limits - in terms of numbers of participants - which are to be set for such a form of government are not obvious by any means. Robert Martin claims that, like other components of town meeting government, establishing the town as the geographical unit over which it would have power was a matter of debates and discussions, and it is easy to imagine why¹¹. From the start, it appeared obvious that open town meetings could only work on a restricted scale, and would face difficulties when towns would start to grow or if meetings were to attract more people. Their directly democratic rules were indeed put under stress later, and the bigger towns often chose to opt for a representative town meeting, in many cases entirely replacing direct democracy and open town meetings.

Lastly, and because it is possibly the most democratically relevant principle of town meeting politics, this part will expand on the eligibility of the town residents to take part in the policy-making process. Although it may be presented as the most basic ingredient for democratic life, it is also the one which has been subjected to the starkest changes. It is undeniable that a certain idea of an open form was key in the development of town meeting politics in general, and the agreed-upon rule has always been that all registered voters of the town could take part in the legislative process and vote on the town's budget or other matters (Salvino et al). However in the early days of the plantation, the requirements to meet in order to be considered a registered voter were out of reach for the greater part of the population. At the time town meetings were born, only men who owned

11 Martin, Robert W. T., and Camille Salgues. '« D'une manière pacifique et ordonnée ». Town meetings et assemblées populaires à l'époque de la fondation des États-Unis'. *Participations*, vol. N° 15, no. 2, De Boeck Supérieur, 2016, pp. 175–202. Translations from this work are mine.

land were allowed to vote, and thus allowed on the decisional committee, and it is only through the wider-scale social transformations that have happened in the US that they have progressively become illustrations of real democracy as described by Frank Bryan. Town meetings have always been open to those who were allowed to attend them, with every member of the assembly having a right to speak up and vote on every article, but for an important part of American history the practise of democracy in the open town meeting has been reserved to a privileged few. Such observations indicate that the definition of town meeting politics depends on the period in which they took place, and the right to attend has not been the only aspect of town meeting politics to have undergone significant changes. It introduces the notion that open town meetings are, maybe above all else, defined by their instability and their changing nature. This appears clearly through their evolution, as this part will later conclude on; but before that, this study will investigate the observations made by Frank Bryan and his students on open town meetings which point towards the importance of local context and micro factors as major forces defining community politics.

1.1.2) Community politics and the influence of local context

The more thorough the research, the more presumptuous it appeared to give an accurate account of all the different changes town meeting politics have been through. This is mainly due to the fact that town meetings operate on a local scale and are therefore very much influenced by micro issues. It is easy to get lost in the myriad of town names mentioned in the many articles written on town meeting politics. The sheer *number* of towns of less than 2,000 inhabitants in New England is quite remarkable for US standards, and they give an insight on the potential amount of different town meetings. Communities practising this polity dot the New England map, and each dot is an independent political unit with its uses, traditions, constraints and perhaps most importantly,

personas. Now, to say in what quality has any meeting been shaped into what it is today is impossible, the main point here is to illustrate the potential differences with examples taken from existing research, to then discuss what it implies.

Frank Bryan, on his quest to establish links between context and the practise of democracy in town meeting politics, provides quite an insightful overview on how an open town meeting is defined by the setting it takes place in. His extensive descriptions of small Vermont towns, dusted with unusual pieces of information (such as Newark, VT. being the state's leading town in chainsaws per capita) reveal a lot about his intention. As a reader, one is truly under the impression that town meeting politics is such an inherent part of community life that even the most random fact about any town may potentially shape its town meeting differently from its neighbour's. Without stretching as far as directly linking chainsaws and politics, his method is clearly influenced by such a perspective. One of his main arguments is that scale is one of the most defining factors in town meeting politics. He says : "I take it as a given : from participation to policy, size (the scale of things) is critical to any discussion of democracy". And indeed, his results show that the smaller the town, the higher the rate of attendance (Bryan 83), and so policy and the very function of the town meeting vary accordingly. He also makes multiple references to the role of weather conditions, which increase what he calls the "costs" of democracy for the people (in terms of time, individual resources, etc.). These types of factors contribute in shaping the policy-making process by having direct effects on the population, but they also shape how town meetings work, in practical terms. Bryan identifies several local particularities which all have the potential to shatter a common definition for town meeting politics. A lot of meetings are held in the evening for example, such as in the Vermont towns of Walden and Victory, so that they do not clash with working hours. Others like Newfane, VT. have opted for the Australian ballot (the voting options are decided by the government) as a way to decide on the policies to be debated and voted on by the assembly, and so diverge quite far from the democratic power of other open town meetings. Others again have

separated meetings for school-related issues and general policies, these meetings, held in towns like Charlotte or Starksboro, VT. are simply called ‘school meetings’.

Not only does local context shape the policy-making process of the town meeting, but town meetings have also been historically built with the possibility for its rules to be adapted with each assembly. David Syrett talks about this flexibility in his article on town meeting politics at the beginning of US history. He gives the example of meetings running short of time :

votes were taken sometimes by written ballot and sometimes by a show of hands. Voting by a show of hands was generally employed when a town meeting was short of time. If a meeting had, say, spent more than half the day on three articles and had four times that amount of business before it, then it might vote "to Do the Remainder of the town Bisness by a Hand Voat".¹²

This type of changes, happening at a micro level, find an echo in Bryan’s focus on the individuals taking part in the debate, presented as so many driving, or dragging, forces in town meeting politics. He introduces them as “witnesses”, and their contributions are found all throughout his work. The following example speaks for itself :

Maltby was chairman of the now defunct Victory Planning Commission.

“I’m looking straight at you,” he said, pointing at one of Victory’s 26 voters.

“You fouled up the only information meeting on planning we managed to have.” The audience smiled and one woman said to another about the unfortunate voter Maltby was pointing at,

“Came in drunk and broke up the meeting. With planners there from Montpelier and all.”

“We have a planning commission but I don’t want any dumps outside my house,” an elderly woman said, speaking into the dead silence that had followed. At Kerr’s suggestion, Victory

12 Syrett, David, op. cit., pp. 352–66. *JSTOR*, doi:[10.2307/1918451](https://doi.org/10.2307/1918451).

elected a new planning commission. Then, with an air of relief, Maltby declared the meeting adjourned.¹³

At this scale, politics and the practise of democracy truly depend on people and the social relations they entertain, which can lead to events such as those described by Bryan's witnesses. But really, anyone who has taken part in micro-political events is aware of how 'unstable' they are and how it would be impossible to assign them a converging and detailed definition without losing a few marbles. In the case of town meetings, this observation is further supported by the confusing terminology, with the words "town meeting" also referring to representative forms of government adopted by larger New England towns, or even cities.

1.2) The representative town meeting

With US demographics rapidly rising in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, especially in urban areas, the relevance of town meeting government began to be questioned in bigger towns and cities. Boston, for instance, was among the first localities to part from the town meeting because of its growing size and, with a population already reaching 43,000 in 1822, decided to abandon town government altogether to rely on a city charter. However important Boston town meetings were in defying the British army, their aura did not withstand the growing scale on which the city's politics began to operate. A committee created in 1815 claimed that a representative system was best suited for a town like Boston, arguing firstly that politics would be conducted more efficiently by a selected few than by an assembly bound to be "swayed by local views"¹⁴, and secondly that with

13 Bryan, Frank M. op. cit. p 180.

14 Zimmerman, Joseph F. 'On the Other Hand'. *National Civic Review*, vol. 55, no. 1, Jan. 1966, pp. 14–28. *DOI.org* (Crossref), <https://doi.org/10.1002/ncr.4100550107>.

town meeting then sparsely attended, decisions were being made by an illegitimate group of ‘regulars’ that ought to be replaced by an elected body. In addition, it was advanced that towns did not have the facilities to accommodate large amounts of voters (even though it clashed with the statement that only a few people attended the meetings), and that representatives would become well educated on local issues, supposedly making them more likely to take the right decisions.

It is on these foundations that mayor-council and council-manager types of local governments came to be put in place in what is now the great majority of US municipalities. With ever-growing towns and soon to rise political leaders of the Progressive Era pushing in favour of local forms of government they considered to be safer from corruption, the town meeting was dealt many a blow at the turn of the 20th century. However, growing towns wishing to keep the meeting as a form of government would also be met with a compromise : the representative town meeting. The first town to adopt it – institutionally at least – was Brookline, MA, in 1915. Since 1821, the option had been on the table for towns of more than 12,000 inhabitants to adopt a “limited town meeting”, but was met with little interest. Smaller towns which had kept their meeting through the challenges raised by the 19th century began to show interest when their numbers started rising though, and so the official threshold to be able to adopt a representative town meeting was lowered to 6,000 inhabitants in 1926. Brookline, which is the home of more than 50,000 people nowadays, still uses the representative town meeting as its local government¹⁵.

In terms of how a representative town meeting is conducted, it resembles the open town meeting in almost every way : the assembly is free to discuss the different articles and react to a fellow member’s speech, and possesses the power to vote directly for or against the proposals put before the meeting. The major distinction lies of course in the fact that only elected representatives from a town’s districts or precincts can take part in the meeting. This alone opens a great rift between representative and open town meetings, as it entirely deletes the one element that is

15 Although this is an exception, as only four US towns with a population of over 40,000 use the representative town meeting as their local government. (Zimmerman, op.cit).

considered truly unique with open town meetings : that anyone can walk in and have a say in matters that directly affect their daily life. Deliberation and policy-making among elected representatives are common sights, and are therefore rooted in representations of political life in the US and the Western world in general, but very rarely (or marginally) does the population form institutionally ratified decision-making deliberative assemblies which cannot see their policies overturned easily. This is surely why representative town meetings do not have the radiance of open town meetings, and are as good as absent from the dichotomy implied by the terms “town hall meeting”. At their core, and through the image they project, representative town meetings are linked closely to mayor-council and council-manager types of local government, not enough to bear as strong an identity as open town meetings. The question of rising demographics provides a gateway into another constitutive element of town meeting politics : their evolution. Indeed, a 17th century definition of a town meeting would greatly differ from one written a hundred years later, and even more from one written today. The influence of the local context, presented in the first part of this chapter, only allows to draw patterns in this evolution though, since each individual town meeting may have evolved at its own pace or in its own way.

1.3) From necessity to valued tradition : an evolution through time

To dig into the history of town meeting politics is to dig into the popular history of the US and the events that have shaped it since the establishment of the Plymouth colony in 1607. The people constituting the Plymouth colony were far from being complete strangers to one another. The settlement grew from a group of English religious separatists who saw in America a land of the blessed, virgin tracks of wilderness on which God’s plan for mankind could be fully accomplished.

This conception of America is copiously displayed in numbers of political documents establishing the will of God as the only guideline needed for the community's operation (particularly in The Fundamental Agreement of the New Haven Colony). Complementary to these profound beliefs was a common will to do better than the Church of England, which was considered too dependent on the Church of Rome. However, the Puritan endeavour to build a haven of purity was soon faced with the harsh reality of surviving in a completely uncharted environment without the required skills and knowledge to do so. To even stay alive required constant work for most settlers, and day-to-day survival came with its load of suffering. They died by the hundreds in the winter of 1609-1610, which came to be known as the "starving time" (Zinn 23), and many were pushed to the furthest limits of what they could bear. It is in this improbable combination of day to day survival and Puritan utopianism that town meeting government finds its roots. The necessity to take decisions as a body to ensure that the plantation would work towards a common goal brought communities to the meetinghouse. However, Puritan traditions were not in line with any democratic practises, quite the opposite in fact, and this led these communities to struggle through coercive practices for a time¹⁶. These coercive practices concerned the plantation and were enforced through town meeting politics, for which attendance was compulsory and absentees were penalised (Zimmerman 19). During this time, town meetings were used as a necessary tool for the colony's subsistence, and were simply considered as the most efficient way to pass directives onto the community. Having no practical means to deal with an unsatisfied minority through repression though, town meetings progressively began to grow along the pursuit of community consensus rather than a strictly horizontal power. Given the block of common values and beliefs shared by the New England community, majority consensus was not out of reach and pluralism of opinions was marginal and marginalised. The agreements reached by the town meeting serve as a way to point to any ulterior deviation as immoral, a social transgression, and so it can be argued that the goal of town meeting

16 Zuckerman, Michael, and Xavier Blandin. 'Le mirage démocratique du town meeting américain'. *Participations*, vol. N° 15, no. 2, De Boeck Supérieur, 2016, pp. 83–102. Translations from this work are mine.

politics in the early years of the North American colony was the establishment of a moral community (Zuckerman and Blandin). This implies that democracy, understood as the politics answering concerns voiced by the people, emerged in town meeting politics as an ‘accident’, or perhaps an inevitable cause of its inherently democratic form.

Their democratic function would develop gradually, as the main objective of political life slowly shifted from day-to-day survival to future prospects for the community. With the emergence of real social entities which could be called towns, and town officials holding power; with the decline of puritan guidelines; and with nationalist feelings beginning to grow, the role of town meeting politics took on a different dimension. In effect, town meetings were key players in building a strong basis for a national government to rise for instance, as the subject was regularly discussed within local instances and improving means of communication (like the postal service) allowed for their outcomes to be shared, providing fertile ground on which renewed *ideas* of America could grow¹⁷. Such ideas would of course find their accomplishment in the 1776 Declaration of Independence and the years-long birth of the American nation. When it comes to town meeting politics, independence from the British Crown was fundamental, for it paved their way into the territory’s institutions. This meant firstly legitimising their status as legal powers, clearly establishing the area over which they had legal power, but also moulding them into the national political process. Town meetings were treated with such consideration at the end of the 18th century because they had expanded from the role they had had in the early years of the colony. What had changed since the first decades of the plantation was that a class system had started to develop amongst the settlers, a class system which reproduced quite accurately power relations in Europe, with land owners holding most of the power. These power relations enfolded mostly at the expense of slaves who were cruelly exploited, and Native Americans who were practically hunted down by frontiersmen, but also among European settlers and their descendants. Rich land owners

17 Cossart, Paula, et al. ‘Introduction. Les town meetings, mythe fondateur de la démocratie américaine’. *Participations*, vol. N° 15, no. 2, De Boeck Supérieur, 2016, pp. 5–47. Translations from this work are mine.

could now enjoy a life of comfort and use their influence to rule over their community's politics. Town meeting politics went from being a necessary social contract for survival to being the basic component of political power held by local land owners (Zinn 42). The new Constitution of 1780 endorsed the meetings as the basis for a representative national government, which would act according to their outcomes. Soon after, the process of institutionalisation was set forward by members of the Democratic-Republican party such as James Madison, whose goal it was to 'formalise' democratic practises (Martin). Integrating this polity into the great political machine of the US pushed national politicians of the early United States to consider it as one of its major educational engine. Conclusions of this sort were predominantly supported by influential figures of the American Transcendentalist current, but also by Alexis de Tocqueville, who shared his thoughts on the matter in his famous *Democracy in America*¹⁸ : "Town meetings are to liberty what primary schools are to science; they bring it within the people's reach, they teach men how to use and enjoy it." Through evolutions like these, the legacy of the puritan consensus can be spotted. Indeed, although pluralism is tolerated to a certain extent in the early days of the nation, the idea of the US moving as one body made of different organs aiming for the same goal remained predominant¹⁹. Applying the initial thrust was to be the role of town meeting politics in New England (and other forms of local politics across the territory), and steering was the role of national government. In reality however, it appears as though integrating town meeting politics into institutional politics did not result in so clear a picture. Rather than applying a thrust, town meeting politics (and local government in general) tended to the people on board, but was only rarely involved in advising national powers on political planning. The 19th century therefore saw the town meeting take on an ambiguous status, at the same time solidified into the nation's political process but left out of building the framework of the young Republic. In a century where national instances organised what seemed to be exponential growth of land surface, and had to deal with a high-stake civil war,

18 Alexis de Tocqueville. *Democracy in America*. Cambridge : Sever and Francis, 1862, p76.

19 The formal name given to the Declaration of Independence was : The *unanimous* Declaration of the thirteen united States of America, already pointing towards unanimity as a flexible notion.

the conditions were united for local politics to pale in comparison, and consequently be relegated to their direct local influence.

It is probably during the 19th century that the national perception of the open town meeting gradually changed as well, from a relevant source of emerging political ideas to an anachronistic but deeply cherished political invention. The ideas put forward in the advent of the Progressive Era of the early 20th century support this claim. During that time, national interests began to explicitly overcome the local in political discourse. Driven by the notion that corruption had taken over local government, and that individual interests were slowing down political endeavours, town meeting politics became the target of criticism (Bryan 30). In a national context of rapid urbanisation, industrialisation, rise of capitalist modes of production, and increasing trust in scientific method; US politics were built as ‘cost-efficient’, and relying on direct referendum rather than the result of deliberations happening on successive strata. Moreover, while cities saw their demographics explode, small towns of New England declined and struggled, and the people who set off West did not implant town meeting tradition in other parts of the country. Such decline was sustained by a broader view that rural areas should ‘catch up’ with US urbanity, whether in terms of infrastructure, economic priorities (making farmlands more productive), or even intelligence²⁰. Arguments stemming from eugenic roots were receivable in public discourse at the time, and so came the question of the “quality” of the rural population to properly conduct democratic processes. With democracy now considered among many political leaders to be the affair of national politics, town meetings found their place in a form of outdated, not yet picturesque way of practising politics, and the affair of a reluctant few. Even though the 1929 depression had for effect to stir disenchantment in modernity and cause a renewed interest in town meetings (especially among the highly-educated), they kept on riding the downward slope taken after the War of Independence.

20 Leonard, Thomas C. ‘Retrospectives: Eugenics and Economics in the Progressive Era’. *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*, vol. 19, no. 4, 2005, pp. 207–24.

What they did not find in terms of legitimacy on the national stage, they progressively found in symbolic radiance. With mainstream and academic interest sprouted by the NBC radio program “*America’s Town Meeting of the Air*”, which brought together guests to form discussion groups and debate on a chosen topic in front of an audience allowed to interact with them. The program most likely was the first large-audience broadcast to associate the name “town meeting” to an event such as this, and planted the seeds of the now dichotomous perception of the terms “town hall meeting”. This new branch would come to supplant the old one in terms of visibility (which admittedly was not too difficult) namely since presidential candidates started to use it to boost their campaign. Meanwhile, real town meeting politics continued to be practised in New England towns, quietly sustained by their population. The effects of this discrepancy have been insightfully summarised by Frank Bryan : “By the year 2000, more ordinary citizens in America knew about town meeting than ever before. Yet fewer than ever knew what it is.”²¹

2) Setting of the Town Hall and Contextual Uses

In form, what the New England town meeting is today has in fact not changed significantly since the days of its creation, but what is now associated with the terms “town hall meeting” has, greatly. What is identified by many who focus on its distinctive features as the “modern town hall” borrows the image and sometimes setting of the town meeting, but the similarities end there. As a matter of fact, if one were to simply search images of a “town hall meeting” on the internet, they would find indiscriminate examples of town halls and town meetings, and it would often be impossible to make out the difference based on images alone. A town hall is not organised in order to make political decisions or even deliberate on political matters, and therefore the assembly does

21 Bryan, Frank M. op. cit. p48

not hold any direct political power. Above all, the assembly of a town hall is an audience; an audience which – most of the times – gets to see a few of its members ask questions to the real authority of the event. The nature of this authority depends on what organisation decided to hold the town hall. In his book entitled *Town Hall Meetings and the Death of Deliberation*²², J. Beecher Field identifies four main types of town halls. The first is the town hall as a debate format, primarily used during presidential campaigns, during which candidates take selected questions from the audience and discuss them. Organisers in this case are television channels hosting the event. The second is the town hall as “constituent service”, which gives the possibility for the audience to interact with an already elected representative. Although the author calls them a “service”, he goes on to write that these events are usually held to consolidate the elected representative’s position as such and again are not designed to deliberate or make political proposals emerge from the audience. The third type is the town hall as “campus spectacle” where university administrations can communicate on issues like campus policy, on general management or crisis management for example. The fourth is town hall as corporate event which, similarly to campus town halls, allows for corporations to communicate updates and decisions to their workers. This classification probably does not account for every town hall held in the US on a regular basis but it provides a valuable account of their importance. Due to their recurrent use, J. Beecher Field describes town halls as ‘ritualised’, inscribed in the communicational framework of many organisations across the US, and therefore as one of the basics of the relations between decision-makers and constituents today. Although it is remarkable how quickly the modern town hall has been established to this status, a look at its political efficiency explains its rapid success.

Building on the foundations laid by Jimmy Carter in 1976, Bill Clinton’s 1992 presidential campaign was the first political endeavour to make televised question and answer sessions with the public a cornerstone of its strategy. The idea originated from his campaign team, who saw in face to

22 Jonathan Beecher Field. *Town Hall Meetings and the Death of Deliberation*. University of Minnesota Press, 2019.

face interactions with the crowd Bill Clinton's best hope at turning the tables in the race for the Oval Office. After the Gulf War, approbation for George Bush was high, so much so that to see him lose the 1992 election seemed almost impossible. A skit played on *Saturday Night Live* in November 1991 was even named "*Campaign '92 : The Race to Avoid Being the Guy who Loses to Bush*"²³ and featured fake candidates trying to demonstrate that they were the least fit to rule the country. Against such unfavourable odds, Clinton's side were able to identify his most valuable qualities, and spent the year prior to the election organising meeting after meeting on the basis of what were to be called town halls after the campaign. Some of these meetings were broadcast on MTV, and Clinton's ease in front of the camera led his team to suggest a change in style for the second presidential debate of the campaign, from a formal opposition to a town hall format. This debate between Bill Clinton, George Bush and Ross Perot turned out to heavily favour the southern democrat, who had gone through extensive camera training, while the Bush team "simply practised verbal arguments and rebuttals"²⁴. Clinton went on to win the election, and such a decisive strategy could of course not go unnoticed. The Commission on Presidential Debates quickly institutionalised it, and it is now a stage constitutive of every presidential election. Most recently the 2020 campaign saw candidates Joe Biden and Donald Trump hold their separate town halls on ABC and NBC respectively, and they should have taken taken part in a town hall debate in the University of Michigan which was cancelled due to Covid-19 restrictions. But beyond their consecutive uses in later elections, which could be regarded simply as a way to make national politics more appealing to the voters, it is the way it has spread across so many influential organisations in the US which indicates that something truly powerful (and cost-efficient) had been discovered by Clinton and his team in 1992.

23 Watch *Saturday Night Live Highlight: Campaign '92: The Race to Avoid Being the Guy Who Loses to Bush* - NBC.Com. 2015. [www.nbc.com, https://www.nbc.com/saturday-night-live/video/campaign-92-the-race-to-avoid-being-the-guy-who-loses-to-bush/2859836](https://www.nbc.com/saturday-night-live/video/campaign-92-the-race-to-avoid-being-the-guy-who-loses-to-bush/2859836).

24 Mansky, Jackie. op. cit.

This chapter has attempted to show that in terms of observable practises the words “town hall meeting” encapsulate the dichotomy presented in the introduction, and with it a wide and diversified array of political practises which range from democratic ritual to what could be called a ritual of democracy. Within each branch the terms also bear defining complexities. Town meetings have been fundamentally influenced by local context and by the evolution of US society and politics, while town halls are used in the pursuit of different goals in different contexts. Yet, to stop at observable practises is to scrape the surface of the global picture the terms “town hall meeting” project, and does not allow for a relevant analysis of its current status in US politics. In order to approach such an analysis, research should aim towards the symbolics carried by the town hall meeting and build upon them. The second chapter of this study will therefore investigate how these symbolics have been constructed in US history, which political imaginaries they have nourished, and through what processes these imaginaries may have an impact on defining the town hall meeting’s higher status in the landscape of political events.

Chapter 2 : The Symbolics of the Town Hall Meeting :

Construction, Imaginaries and Theoretical Potency

1) Use and Abuse of the Town Hall Meeting in Painting the Picture of Democracy in the US

1.1) Seat of power and the rise of the New England way

Considering how well established they already were in the late 18th century, this study aimed to trace back the construction of town hall meeting symbolics not just starting from the birth of the United States of America, but starting from the first settlements. When it comes to establishing power on a new territory, New England is quite peculiar, for it was colonised by a union of believers determined to prove the superiority of their ideology without having to directly oppose an established order. Although the British Crown officially ruled over the region, the tools to practise and hold power were theirs to create. This combination of contextual elements led the structuration of Puritan society to be called the ‘Puritan experiment’, and as this study has already shown, the experiment quickly turned sour, and town meetings were formed out of necessity to achieve consensus and work collectively in the hope to survive. Any ideological principle which might have

influenced their creation therefore appears to have been secondary. As it became more established as a political tool, the symbolics of the town hall meeting probably did not revolve around the concept of democracy, which stood far from the puritan conception of government, but simply around power, the people who wield it and its institution. Indeed it seems relevant to reiterate the established rule that only registered voters (meaning the land owners) of a town were eligible to vote during the meetings, and although there has been discussion on the reality behind this rule, its existence proves that democratic values were not at the front of political considerations. On a larger scale, *the* institution of power at the time was of course the Church, and it worked hand in hand with the Town Meeting to make sure that no controversial voices would grow too loud (Zinn 45, Zuckerman and Blandin). In the singular setting of New England, power meant achieving, often enforcing consensus, and so town meeting government was perceived as the way to enact the Church's guidance, to establish moral grounds for the Puritan experiment.

Beyond these practical representations, and stemming directly from the Church's omnipresence in political representations, a particular concept appeared in New England in the 1640s, which would be the first great step towards the building of truly specific symbolics related to the town hall meeting. This concept was named 'The New England Way'. It refers to the theocratic polity, relation to the civil powers and general practises of churches in the Massachusetts Bay colony²⁵. Generally, as the name suggests, it was used to describe how everyday affairs and moral life were better conducted in the plantation. It grew in opposition with the hegemonic religious practices of the Anglican Church, and although it did not part from its founding principles, it was one of the first steps in conceptualising disobedience towards British rule. Furthermore, it was also one of the first official acknowledgements of the New England colony's own *identity* : a way of making policy and practising religion which was only associated to this territory. In that sense, it could be argued that pronouncing the New England Way as such contributed in shaping the

25 *New England Way* | *Encyclopedia.Com*. <https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/dictionaries-thesauruses-pictures-and-press-releases/new-england-way>. Accessed 16 Apr. 2021.

perception of town meeting government firstly as unique, as the only one of its kind; and secondly as a pure product of New England thinking. Both these elements would take on a new dimension as tensions with the British Crown began to rise.

1.2) A key element on the path to Independence

As the colony grew, it began to gain more and more legitimacy as a political unit. In 1691, the territories of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, the Province of New York and the Plymouth Colony were merged by the government of William III and Mary II to form the Province of Massachusetts Bay. It was endorsed by the Massachusetts Charter, which sought to formally establish British rule over the American colony. The Charter highlighted the importance of towns in the political system, and especially Boston²⁶. Towns were becoming more and more relevant indeed, and with them the town meeting, which was important in regulating the citizens' daily lives. Town meeting government was allowed by the Charter, as it focused on larger-scale government, appointing a governor, deputy governor and secretary to the colony. This effectively took away the self-governing rights the plantation had enjoyed so far, by bringing it back under the Crown's control; but the unwanted effect might have been the transfer of these self-governing rights onto the rapidly developing towns, progressively solidifying them as emancipating constituencies.

Prior to the Seven Years' War, tensions began to mount around taxation of the New England colony, notably with the Molasses Act passed by Parliament in 1733, which imposed a tax of six pence per gallon on imported molasses from non-British colonies. The colony's resources were exploited during the war of course, but it was not enough to save the British government from its dire financial aftermath, and contributed to further fatigue citizens of the colony. With the Crown on the verge of bankruptcy, taxation only increased. The Sugar Act of 1764 and the Stamp Act of 1765

²⁶ Wakelyn, John L. *Americas Founding Charters [Three Volumes]*. Greenwood Publishing Group, 2006.

sparked much discontent and protests started to erupt, especially in Boston. One of these protests, held on March 5, 1770, ended in bloodshed, and came to be known as the Boston Massacre. Progressively, protests made way for what could be called resistance against British rule. The famous 1773 Boston Tea Party resulted in the British government passing the Coercive Acts in 1774 (renamed the “Intolerable Acts” by the colonists). The measures enacted through this decision sought to drastically reduce the colonists’ power, and so declared that members of the powerful Council who were until then elected would be appointed by the King. Crucially, they also reduced local power by outlawing town meeting government and strengthening the power of appointed local officials, as well as jurors²⁷.

Until 1774, town meetings were used to voice popular grievances (Zinn 54) and played an undeniable role in organising protests. However, a significant number of people in Massachusetts refused to abide to the Coercive Acts, and town meetings took on a new dimension. While it was until then the outcome of the meetings which resulted in uprisings, the mere act of organising a town meeting became synonymous to resisting British rule upfront after the new laws. People were arrested for calling a town meeting (Raphael 24), consolidating their emancipating status and structuring them within an idea of America worth fighting for. It comes as no surprise then that key politicians of the Revolutionary period saw in town meeting government a potentially very powerful symbol in the building of their new nation.

1.3) A controlled drift towards the margin

After the Independence, and as towns saw their demographics rise quickly, town meeting government began its evolution from a central political power to a rather spread out local form of

²⁷ Raphael, Ray. ‘Yankees with “Staves and Musick”’: The First American Revolution’. *Phi Kappa Phi Forum*, vol. 86, no. 3, Summer 2006, pp. 23–26.

policy-making, and thus began to detach from the landowners' influence and became more open to less powerful individuals. With Independence having structured the foundations for a representative national government to rise, town meeting politics began their shift from potentially game-changing political organisation to symbolical catalyst. The integration of less powerful individuals into assemblies of the new democratic states was seen by several established politicians as a threat to political order, and the word "democracy" itself was used pejoratively. To preserve the notion of a sovereign people, political rhetoric revolved mainly around "representation", as a compromise between democracy and traditional rule²⁸. Seeing that democracy was however used successfully by anti-federalists, Thomas Jefferson engaged in a new path and claimed that democracy was "the only pure republic" but that it was impossible to conduct beyond villages²⁹. Such a quote provides valuable insight on how town meetings came to become associated with Republican thinking and the Union's national identity despite the early challenges opposed to democracy. Thomas Jefferson, who had faith in his broader vision that the future of the Union lay in the smaller agrarian communities, would also claim that town meetings were "the wisest invention ever devised by the wit of man for the perfect exercise of self government." (Bryan 26). The quote at once bears echoes of the puritan conviction that the people of New England were chosen for their superior qualities, and is endowed with the democratic ideal of self government, which was a driving force in the War of Independence. It is likely that links between The United States, democracy and town meeting government have grown tighter in these types of rhetoric spaces, and with it clearer, more impactful imaginaries for the newly-born nation. Bernard Lamizet provides an explanation to this process by pointing out the porous nature of the border separating "the public space of reality and the symbolic space of speech and communication"³⁰. This was a conscious political choice made by Thomas

28 Dupuis Déri Francis. *Démocratie, histoire politique d'un mot: aux États-Unis et en France*. Lux, 2013. Translations from this work are mine.

29 In a letter to Isaac Tiffany, August 1816.

30 Roventja-Frumușani, Daniela. 'Bernard Lamizet (2012), L'imaginaire politique. Paris, Hermes-Science Lavoisier, Coll. « Forme et sens »'. *Communication. Information médias théories pratiques*, no. vol. 33/2, 33/2, Editions Nota bene, Dec. 2015. [journals.openedition.org, http://journals.openedition.org/communication/5958](http://journals.openedition.org/communication/5958).

Quote : "l'espace public de la réalité et de l'événement se confond avec l'espace symbolique de l'énonciation et de la communication." Translations from this work are mine.

Jefferson, who saw great rallying potential in these new public praises in favour of democracy. What can be pointed out is that this formal, institutional way of practising democracy transpired as something even fearsome dissenters like James Madison could rally behind. At the turn of the 19th century, he began to work towards establishing more formal means of protest, believing like Jefferson that the right form of constitutional action for the United States lay in its established powers, which were there opposed to “citizens in a body”³¹. Town meetings were such established powers, and James Madison’s work contributed in symbolically shaping them into the American representative framework of practising democracy³². Politicians of the Revolutionary period therefore capitalised on the populist appeal of town meeting government, through the democratic ideals it carried and its purely American roots; but also worked towards stripping it of its national reach, confining it to history or to rural communities. It is probably this last point which brought figureheads of the transcendentalist movements to later take on the subject and dress it in romantic colours.

1.4) Transcendentalist admiration

It comes as no surprise that a movement so keen on acknowledging goodness and learning potential among individuals would see in town meeting politics an illustration for its claims. Around the 1830s, the powerful imaginaries surrounding town meetings would be magnified through essays and other writings imbued with a new perspective on citizenship. One of the most notable takes on this subject came from Henry David Thoreau and his idea of a “half-cultivated citizen”, and of “democratic cultivation”. He saw great potential in considering each individual as an actor in political life, providing they possess the tools to be one. Beyond institutional thinking, Thoreau

31 Jefferson T., (1798), « The Kentucky Resolutions », in J. Boyd (dir.), *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 30, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1950.

32 Martin, Robert W. T (op.cit).

thought that “New England villages should devote some of their resources to the intellectual, spiritual, and moral cultivation of their populations so that individuals might have tools available to develop themselves fully”. Moreover, he directly pointed to the “nobleman” as an example to follow, who made it his habit by “surrounding himself with whatever conduces to his culture, genius, learning, wit, books, paintings, statuary, music, philosophic instruments, and the like.” He saw democratic cultivation as a way to take part in politics, but also as the *result* of taking part in politics, and so encouraged people to “not stop short at a pedagogue, a parson, a sexton, a parish library and three selectmen because our pilgrim forefathers got through a cold winter once on a bleak rock with these.”³³ It is from these optimistic foundations that Thoreau would construct his view on town meetings, as “the true Congress... the most respectable one ever assembled in the United States”, found in his essay “*Slavery in Massachusetts*”³⁴. He saw this Congress as the affair of “obscure” countryside villages, binding it to a form of primitive, picturesque image of human-scaled politics. In this depiction lies a sense of innocence, of confinement, of harmless politics which would only be concerned with matters of daily life and not shake any large-scale structure.

Taking this perspective one step further, Ralph Waldo Emerson provided town meeting politics with an educational purpose : to “reveal the great secret of political science”, and bring it to the people’s reach³⁵. This take on the subject echoed Alexis de Tocqueville’s analysis in *Democracy in America*, and although these three interpretations elevate town meetings above mainstream politics on an ethical level, they always posit them as complementary on a micro level, and not as an alternative. To gather in a faraway shack and discuss town matters is seen as a way to take part more consciously in electing the next national or state government, or at most advise those in charge on popular grievances. In all these perspectives, town meeting politics have an influence on the individual, not on the structure, and in that the influence of James Madison and Thomas

33 All quotes from : Walker, Brian. ‘Thoreau on Democratic Cultivation’. *Political Theory*, vol. 29, no. 2, Sage Publications, Inc., 2001, pp. 155–89.

34 Thoreau, Henry David. *Slavery in Massachusetts*. 1854.

35 In his “*Historical Discourse at Concord*”, 1835.

Jefferson appears quite clearly. The way transcendentalists abundantly praised its ingenuity and democratic form went a step above the praises town meetings received from politicians of the Revolutionary period however, further solidifying them as symbolical powerhouses to be channelled in discourse, and later in national politics.

The symbolics related to the town hall meeting would undergo serious criticism later in history, especially during the Progressive Era in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Attacks were based on the notion that : “[Town meeting] wasn’t where the action was” as Thoreau scholar Bob Pepperman Taylor put it (Bryan 28). However these symbolics and their associated political imaginaries would not die, and modern ways to exploit them would emerge, and with them, new stakes.

1.5) “Blue collars and snow-dusted beards”

The 20th century really started to shape the symbolics of town hall meetings into what they are today. As a result of their presence in textbooks, visual representations, feelings of regional or national pride, and obviously today the comeback of the *terms* on mainstream political stages, modern perceptions of town meeting politics became more and more imbued with myth. From the early 1900s to the mid 1970s their presence in textbooks further cemented their place into the national narrative, but combined with their absence from mainstream politics and local politics outside New England, the rift separating them from an experienced political reality became total for most US citizens. In her article for Splinter, Molly Osberg referred to participants of town meetings as wearing blue collars, and indeed the most famous visual representation of a US town meeting – *Freedom of Speech* by Norman Rockwell³⁶ – depicts exactly that. In this painting the speaker, a

36 See annex.

member of the audience, is a middle-aged man in a worn jacket covering an everyday blue shirt. He stands confidently to deliver his speech, and other members of the assembly look up at him, showing real interest. This choice of imagery displays what ran through Rockwell's mind when he decided to depict a scene of town meeting politics, and shows what he passed on. Having been inspired by F.D.Roosevelt's 1941 State of the Union Address, it shines with national pride and raises town meeting politics as a testimony of freedom of speech. This painting is paradoxical in that sense : it summons a marginal, local practise to illustrate what is supposed to be a universal right. Such a representation displays the powerful symbolics of the town hall meeting, which widely overruns the boundaries of its actual significance in the US political system as a whole. This use of town meetings as a way to paint the picture of US politics and the US citizen does not stand alone in modern times, and even research is not safe from bloating the myths. The most obvious example in the resources used in this study is Frank M. Bryan choosing to entitle his book "*Real Democracy*" as if any other form of policy-making would stray further from democratic ideals. Bryan also reserves a few paragraphs to a comparison with the legendary Athenian democracy, and although he uses the comparison to challenge the democratic model of town meetings, both are placed on the same plane. Another example was found in the article written by Cossart et al. claiming that town meeting attendance consists of "most or every member of a community"³⁷.

The later part of the 20th century saw these persistent representations materialise into mainstream political stages. This study has already mentioned the influence of the radio show "*America's Town Meeting of the Air*" in legitimising the format in modern US politics. This had for effect to sprout popular and media effervescence around town hall meetings, which became a hub where selected US political values could meet. Frank Bryan describes this phenomenon quite humorously : "This was Tocqueville and Jefferson and apple pie and common sense all rolled into one." (Bryan 49). Media coverage of Vermont town meetings having voted for the impeachment of

37 Cossart, Paula, et al. (op.cit.). Original quote : "la plupart ou tous les membres d'une communauté se réunissent en son sein pour délibérer et légiférer sur les questions publiques, les budgets des administrations locales, etc."

Richard Nixon, or nation-wide interest over the 1982 vote against the expansion of nuclear armament were key steps in building their new picture. Town hall meetings have become at once the birthplace of US democracy, a symbol of independence, a symbol of the US citizen's political determination and self-fulfilment, a beacon for freedom of speech and action, and a display of the power held by individuals and local communities. Such an overflow of meanings formed a symbolic orchard whose fruits were there for the taking. Jimmy Carter laid the foundations, Bill Clinton used the terms extensively in his campaign and created what are now called "town halls". The veil covering practises behind town hall meetings grows thicker and thicker, blending town halls and town meetings into a single symbolic space where utopian imaginaries of US politics can be accomplished.

In order to build the analytical foundations pertaining to the role of the town hall meeting in US politics today, this study will now dive into existing theory regarding political imaginaries and the power of symbols-based politics.

2) Symbolics and Imaginaries : a Theoretical Background

2.1) The symbol and the power of synthesis

The term "symbolics" used in this study describes, above all else, the quality of congregating symbols which interact systemically. To study an event such as the town hall meeting through the prism of its symbolics requires to consider the symbol in the way it is conceived in social sciences. This approach entails first its distinction from the *sign*. Their fundamental

difference lies in the notion that signs refer to one or several specific meanings, while symbols evoke, broadening the space of interpretation. Jean Baudrillard takes the analysis a step further, and claims that the “signifying process” eliminates symbolics, which survives by “haunting” the sign, dismantling the formal link between signifier and signified³⁸. Anne Souriau rallies his interpretation in her definition : “The symbol must not be mistaken with the sign, for it is not conventional and intellectual, but rather calls to perceptive imagination for a suggested but unsignified spiritual realm.”³⁹. Such definitions implies that the core of how a symbol functions is formed by the mental representations it may summon, and it appears therefore that the meaning of a given symbol can emerge through the nature of the synthesis it produces. In this regard, Jean Chevalier posits that the symbol escapes definition by nature, and are thus best described through their properties. He identifies such properties as the constance of their suggestive quality, interrelations between what they may suggest, and substitution or occultation for example. He too speaks of their unifying properties, as elements able to “condense mankind’s total experience” and form a “synthesis of the world”. In this, he sees socialising qualities, but also fuel for transforming unconscious energy into developing psychological processes⁴⁰. Unification or synthesis thus appears central in the study of symbolics, as symbols not only congregate meanings or representations, but also different functions.

Synthetic functions appear to be especially relevant when studying political symbols. Political scientist Lucien Sfez even bases his definition of political symbols on this very property. He describes them as the converging hub where concurring images coming from all intellectual fields create a “Truth”⁴¹. He chooses the Centre Pompidou in Paris as an example to illustrate his claim, he describes it as a symbol of national culture whose role it is to relocate mentalities in a

38 Baudrillard, Jean. *Pour Une Critique de l'économie Politique Du Signe*. Gallimard, 1972. Translations from this work are mine.

39 Souriau Étienne. *Vocabulaire d'esthétique*. PUF, 1999. Translations from this work are mine.

40 Chevalier Jean. *Dictionnaire des symboles: mythes, rêves, coutumes, gestes, formes, figures, couleurs, nombres*. Éditions Bouquins Éditions Montchrestien, 2021. Introduction pp XX-XXXI. Translations from this work are mine.

41 Sfez, Lucien. *La politique symbolique*. Presses Universitaires de France, 1993. www-cairn-info.distant.bu.univ-rennes2.fr, <https://www-cairn-info.distant.bu.univ-rennes2.fr/politique-symbolique--9782130445401-page-9.htm>. Translations from this work are mine.

single spot where images of the past can work towards unity. This example presents the notion that synthesis is not only what defines political symbols, it is also what makes them potentially powerful. Indeed, this ability to congregate and process intangible elements on large scales means that political symbols entertain specific dynamics with social (and consequently political) imaginaries. Another constitutive trait to take into account when defining symbols is their relativity. They take on different meanings and project different images depending on the context they appear in, and on the forces shaping them. Relativity is of course what makes symbols so versatile when it comes to targeting imaginaries for political purposes. Behind the use of a symbol lies a ‘message’, and to deconstruct the message is precisely the goal of studying symbols-based politics. This study will integrate symbolics within the greater movement of social imaginaries, and state that the relation they entertain mutually fuels them. Symbols are born from social imaginary, and by processing its elements are able, in turn, to shape it, sometimes to the point of substituting a critical approach of reality (Chevalier, Introduction p XIX). It is therefore not only the ‘message’ that will be studied but also its possible impact on social and political imaginaries.

2.2) Imaginaries : a malleable socio-political space

2.2.1) ‘Imaginary’ in social and political studies

In addition to the agreed-upon definition of the word “imaginary” relative to its most common contexts of occurrences, the term “imaginary” also bears meaning in social and political sciences. In this approach, imaginaries become more than the product of thoughts that can be represented, laid out or voiced; they are considered beyond their fictitious nature. Instead, imaginaries are viewed structurally, as forces which are part of social and political life; at the same

time influential and constantly influenced. Many definitions of social imaginary exist, but this study will focus primarily on the work of Florence Giust-Desprairies⁴², which compiles different perspectives to form an elaborate definition, and Pierre Ansart. Florence Giust-Desprairies defines social imaginary as “a set of common representations, and a process through which society presents a given reality by associating it to a system of values”. She brings up two basic functions inherent to this relation, the first is “making the identification of a new object easier by linking it to pre-existing values” and the second is “defensively veiling an element of reality perceived as being too close to dreaded fantasies”. She compares their role to that of the lighting of a theatre stage, showing and hiding different spots when the time is right. Pierre Ansart, for his definition, focuses on the possible components of social imaginary : “Social imaginary refers to a social group’s common set of imaginary representations : myths, cosmic and religious beliefs, utopia.” and describes it as the implications of symbolics in practises. While Giust-Desprairies’ stance on the functions of social imaginary is centred on its psychological effects, Ansart expands on social chains of causality. He states that contemporary societies constantly reproduce different forms of social imaginary and chooses a famously telling example : advertising. Advertising does not simply promote one product or another, it also fuels social imaginary with images of specific lifestyles, of certain conceptions of happiness, of self-perception⁴³. Similarly to Anne Souriau’s approach of symbolics, he emphasises how the imaginary works as a system, and forms a hierarchy. Bernard Lamizet makes a case for this system being inscribed in the “structures and codes of intertextuality” as a web meshing together “media discourse and literature, political discourse and fiction, writings and imagery and other systems of expression and representation.”⁴⁴ To this list, social and political actions or practises should be added, as they too can influence imaginaries. For Lamizet, whatever propels the political

42 Giust-Desprairies, Florence. ‘Imaginaire social’. *Dictionnaire de sociologie clinique*, ERES, 2019, pp. 350–53. www.cairn.info, <https://www.cairn.info/dictionnaire-de-sociologie-clinique--9782749257648-page-350.htm>. Translations from this work are mine.

43 Ansart, Pierre. *Imaginaire Social*. Encyclopædia Universalis. www.universalis-edu.com.distant.bu.univ-rennes2.fr, <http://www.universalis-edu.com/encyclopedie/imaginaire-social/>. Accessed 21 Mar. 2022. Translations from this work are mine.

44 Lamizet, Bernard. *L’imaginaire Politique*. Hermes-Science Lavoisier, 2012. Translations from this work are mine.

dimension of social imaginary is always organised to achieve a certain goal in contemporary power relations.

And indeed, Ansart claims that democratic regimes, bound to to grab the attention of potential voters, greatly favour the development of *political* imaginaries on a constantly renewed stage. This notion of renewal can also be found in Cédric Faure's definition, which broadly identifies political imaginary as a space where "political meanings are created and where collective and individual representations and desires take shape, meet, and renew themselves". This solidifies the idea that social or political imaginary is not a grand archive where ideas and perceptions belong to historical records, but rather a fuel propelling social and political life. Faure sees its functions as fundamental to the definition as well : political imaginary "determines discourses, practises, plans, hopes" and "draws its symbolic power from how it shapes language". However, he makes his definition more elaborate by identifying two types of political imaginaries, based on the nature of their impacts : *creative* political imaginary and *repetitive* political imaginary. The former "takes part in creating subjectivities and establish new symbolic configurations" while the latter "crystallises society into rigid modes of organisation"⁴⁵. Similarly to Lamizet's conception of imaginary in political power, this distinction is based on the project behind fuelling one or the other. The fundamental difference between the two lies in their relation with the symbolic realm. To fuel repetitive imaginary is to recycle established symbols and their associated representations, while to stir creative imaginaries implies redefining symbolic meanings to form new ways of thinking politics.

Whatever the definition chosen, it appears that social imaginary is animated by dynamics of *conservation* and *creation*. For Giust-Desprairies these dynamics are identified as psychological responses of hiding and showing. For Ansart, they are part of a system congregating countless images and messages whose political effects are fostered by democratic regimes. These dynamics

45 Faure, Cédric. 'Imaginaire politique'. *Dictionnaire de sociologie clinique*, ERES, 2019, pp. 346–49. www-cairn-info.distant.bu.univ-rennes2.fr, <https://www-cairn-info.distant.bu.univ-rennes2.fr/dictionnaire-de-sociologie-clinique--9782749257648-page-346.htm>. Translations from this work are mine.

will be central to the analysis of town hall meeting symbolics, and therefore require further development.

2.2.2) *Imaginaries of conservation and utopianism*

Dynamics of conservation are meaningful in social and political imaginaries, because the very perception of the past is constructed by different forces. Ever-present narratives of declension in the US political landscape actively contribute in making the past a safe space, a place of refuge as the present is perceived as unsatisfactory. Such narratives do not need to name or describe the period before decline was engaged, instead they open the window to individual nostalgia. This allows for natural cognitive biases⁴⁶ to be exploited without relying on historical accuracy, and leaves much of the work to subjectivity. In the process, the past becomes a volatile notion in social imaginary, an unidentified utopia on which subjectivities can be projected. François Laplantine identifies utopian imaginary as the construction of a mapped out universe striving indeed to be idyllic and reassuring. It is “perfection” finally attained, and constitutes a dominant *response* in the Western world which shuts off the flow of time at that moment⁴⁷. This response sets up past utopia as the screen broadcasting idealised images; which are not necessarily historically or even logically related, but which interact systemically to produce a symbolic space. This is fundamental to their survival and their political influence. Ansart claims that such images allow to do away with development, as they evoke the core of the political message without showing the details of its construction⁴⁸. Such an economy is vital in what Sfez identifies as symbols-based politics (12), which rely on these images in turn to further solidify the association of positive affects with the

46 Especially the negativity bias which is notably strong in perceiving present events, while past events will be perceived in a more positive light.

47 Laplantine, François. ‘Les trois voix de l’imaginaire’. Paris, Editions Universitaires, 1974.

48 Ansart, Pierre. ‘Nos Images Politiques Sont-Elles Neuves ?’ *Cahiers Internationaux de Sociologie*, vol. 82, 1987, pp. 57–72. Original quote : “L’image autorise l’économie d’un développement”. Translations from this work are mine.

past, creating a mythical political imaginary (imaginary political scenarios endowed with a global, structured vision of the collective present and future⁴⁹). Symbols are a part of this imagery, and their especially strong capacity to produce a “synthesis of the world” makes them crucial players in the conservative dynamics of social imaginary. Cédric Faure too sees utopianism as a nesting ground for mythical political imaginary, and he also recognises in them the capacity to occlude “ambivalence, conflict, guilt” and a strategy to avoid the real, preventing painful affects from being expressed. This interrelation between affects and images engages the functions of social imaginary described by Florence Giust-Desprairies’s, whereby a reality is subjected to a system of values which will either hide or set light on its elements. In the case of utopianism, light is shed on affects which favour conservation while shade is cast on historical reality and its complex processes.

There are relevant arguments that would even suggest that utopianism in contemporary political discourse of the Western world is not simply linked closely to imaginaries of conservation, but is restricted to it. Utopia has, in countless instances, been a way to display future perspectives, but for Ansart (and as can be observed regularly in political discussions), it is now a powerful counter-argument. In his definition of social imaginary, he mentions that political leaders must not only wield social imaginary to their benefit, but must also point to the flaws in adversary discourses; flaws which include their utopianism. It appears therefore that utopianism today is used in a much safer way when it is inscribed in conservative imaginary, not as a direction to follow but as something to retrieve, something which is up for grabs and can be shaped by anyone’s subjectivity. Creativity therefore seems to lie in the performative properties of social imaginary, and draws on what already exists to establish the new symbolic configurations mentioned by Cédric Faure.

49 Girardet, Raoul. ‘Mythes et mythologies politiques’. *Le Seuil*, 1986. Translations from this work are mine.

2.2.3) *Performative creation*

As it has been mentioned earlier in this study, social imaginary is not a static archive whose elements may be stored and ignored, it is a vortex in perpetual motion as it is constantly renewed by an evolving society. This means that any creative dynamics which can be engaged within social imaginary is spawned from its existing components. Whether the path followed by social imaginary to create new symbolics is *performative* or *oppositional*, it entertains some form of relation with its previously established foundations. This study will only focus on the performative nature of social imaginary and how it may be controlled and channelled.

The performative nature of social imaginary appears to be its default setting, a trait so integrated within its functional logic that it has been placed at the centre of the majority of definitions presented in this paper (Faure, Giust-Desprairies in particular). Lamizet goes further in his definition, claiming that the political dimension of social imaginary fundamentally follows a logic of “perspective”, and that its symbolics are representations of power. He posits that symbolics and the performativity of social imaginary are deliberately used to establish the spaces, the times and the people on which power has a grip, to serve a political project. The intertextuality he mentions (see 2.2) can be organised or tempered with in order to legitimise the existing political imaginary and reinforce it. Sfez joins him in this analysis, although he focuses on memory as a way to practise politics. This study has mentioned his take on the Centre Pompidou, which he saw as a way to “reterritorialise” specific images of the past to see what they can bring to national unity. He adds that along the eruption of memory come references to political myths which are renewed and enriched in the process. Raoul Girardet also establishes the main function of mythical political imaginary as an ideological tool for legitimisation. For him, myths are means to restore “social transcendence” as they take on an explanatory function through which “every myth bears within

itself a global and structured vision of the collective present and future”, a mobilising function organised around “propelling images”, and a mystifying function veiling reality.

To summarise the perspective presented by these three authors, the creative dynamics of social imaginary are mainly used in a performative manner by power, allowing for new symbolic figures to emerge while preserving the structure of the dominant ideology. Keeping the structure intact requires effective power over the general public, and influential power over the intertextuality which directs social imaginary. This intertextuality can be composed of mythical elements, endowed with symbolics powerful enough to distort past or present reality in social imaginary (the myth of past utopia – which Girardet calls the “golden age” – is a typical example). Mythical imaginaries are volatile enough for subjectivities to draw their meaning, instead of historical accuracy or social reality, and are therefore ‘up for grabs’. It is this trait which constitutes their unifying potency, and an invaluable tool in symbols-based politics.

This study will now attempt to show that the town hall meeting appears to precisely occupy this role in directing contemporary socio-political imaginary in the US. Like other symbols of the past used in US politics, its democratic and popular origins have been ‘mythified’ through different media. Echoes of their authenticity have been carried by transcendentalist writings and dressed in idealised visions of township America, a ‘true’ and unifying past which could have only happened in the US. Such glorifying symbolics have turned the town hall meeting into an *allegory* of democratic values, particularly the importance of the people’s voice and the relevance of ‘grassroots’ politics, embodied by representations like Norman Rockwell’s *Freedom of Speech*. However, democratic values do not account for the whole reach of town hall meeting symbolics. The authors mentioned above establish such mythical hubs as spaces of subjective projection, a trait which entails that the totality of the town hall meeting’s potential reach is too great to even fathom. It cannot therefore be the goal of this study to draw an exhaustive map of its allegorical reach. Instead, the focus will be set on large-scale impacts on political imaginary in the US. This stance

will guide the next two parts of this research, but the following chapter will tackle the role of town hall meeting symbolics in politics of memory, so especially regarding the past and the US national narrative.

Chapter 3 : An Allegory of Past Utopia, the Town Hall Meeting and Politics of Memory

1) The Unhistorical Treatment of the Town Hall Meeting

The first chapter of this research aimed at restoring complexity in the definition of the town hall meeting, by shedding light on the distinctions and practises which have been eluded from their story. This constituted a first step in approaching both the town meeting and the town hall in a historically relevant way, and in ‘disunifying’ its symbolical framework. This part intends to pursue this effort by deconstructing the utopian representation of the town meeting and the mythical imaginary it contributes to.

1.1) Challenging the democratic ideal

1.1.1) Government by which people ?

Have town meetings been the historic pinnacle of democracy praised by so many ? This question alone requires a frame of reference to determine what ought to be considered as fundamental democratic rules. Indeed, when the term democracy is used to describe regimes of the

Western world, its only fundamental rule appears to be the act of voting for representatives who will rule and act based on their ideological background. Deliberation and debate may be part of the political process but official political power ultimately resides in the hands of the winning party. This study will logically take a more 'basic' approach on democracy, and assess how democratic the town meeting was based on the effective power township people had over their community's operation. Since town meeting government has always aspired to set rules and guidelines for entire communities, 'the people' here does not simply refer to the people present in the assembly, but the people of the community the assembly holds power over. This distinction is crucial because when it comes to the form the meetings take, democratic principles appear indeed to be respected. People in the assembly hold the power of law, and the deliberative format officially allows anyone to take part in the discussions. Many modern criticisms directed against town meeting government have indeed been mostly based on claims that they were outdated and even boring (especially during the Progressive Era⁵⁰), but not that they were not democratic. When it comes to evaluate them as a form of government for the community however, the first dents in the democratic tale begin to show.

The fact that for a long time, town meetings were the affair of a powerful or privileged few, has already been mentioned in the first chapter of this study. Howard Zinn wrote, speaking of the colonial leaders in Boston :

By means of their control of trade and commerce, by their political domination of the inhabitants through church and Town Meeting, and by careful marriage alliances among themselves, members of this little oligarchy laid the foundations for an aristocratic class in seventeenth century Boston.⁵¹

50 Bryan 45, quoting Harry T. Burnham among others.

51 Zinn Howard, op. cit., p46.

Such a statement firstly finds evidence in the fact that the number of people merely able to take part in early town meetings was quite low, and secondly in the fact that Boston quickly grew into a town of significant size, making town meeting government by the people difficult. Attending town meetings was of course unthinkable for oppressed communities, and so there were no women in these assemblies, nor were there non-white people. As was the case with any other aspect of political life in the US, members of these communities would have to fight to be acknowledged as active citizens in local politics. Disparities emerge even when focusing on white men alone, as the condition of holding property to take part in local politics was widespread. Zinn's work goes even further, he quotes Carl Bridenbaugh's *Cities in the Wilderness*: "the town meetings, while ostensibly democratic, were in reality controlled year after year by the same group of merchant aristocrats, who secured most of the important offices..."⁵². This suggests that a significant number of colonial town meetings acted as a centralised power. Any form of government purposefully excluding members of its community from political decision-making could hardly integrate the basic definition of democracy used perspectively in this chapter, and although it is likely that exceptions were made even in these times of severe oppression, the norm would seem to be that town meetings were tools for political control. Today's meetings have come a long way in that respect, although they now have much less political significance than they used to. However, and perhaps as a result, participation remains scarce today. In his extensive study of New England town meetings, Frank Bryan found that the average attendance rate among New England towns was only 20% (57). This figure varies from town to town of course, but the overall picture does not reflect well in terms of democratic implication. Even without the restrictions of the past, town meeting government does not convince more than 20% of New England voters to turn out once a year. Although this may find explanation in the study of wider-scale phenomena, the result on New England communities

52 Bridenbaugh, Carl. *Cities in the Wilderness : The First Century of Urban Life in America, 1625-1742*. New York : Capricorn Books, 1964. *Internet Archive*, <http://archive.org/details/citiesinwilderne0000unse>.

challenges the notion sometimes found in definitions of town meeting government that most people of a community gather to deliberate.

Historically, participation has not been the only restraint to the democratic functionality of town meeting government. From the middle of the 17th to the end of the 18th century and the birth of the United States, town meeting had to evolve in the midst of an anti-democratic climate sustained by the ruling class on different scales.

1.1.2) Town meetings magnifying fear of democracy

David Syrett, in an article focusing on town meeting politics in the first decade following the War of Independence, brings light to many cases involving town meetings where obstacles were placed on the path to achieving democratic participation. He firstly targets the preparation of the meetings and the issuing of warrants in particular :

The methods by which town meetings were called often served as a deterrent to local democracy in Massachusetts during the Revolutionary era. [...] The inhabitants of a town occasionally were not informed of a town meeting. The failure of the constable through oversight to warn of town meetings would usually result in the calling of a new meeting at a later date. In Boston the constables often failed to warn entire wards. When this happened the Boston town meeting usually voted to call a new meeting several days later.' On the other hand, on more than one occasion a section of a town was purposely not warned so as to exclude voters who did not intend to vote as the town officers desired.⁵³

53 Syrett, David, op. cit., pp. 352–66. *JSTOR*, doi:[10.2307/1918451](https://doi.org/10.2307/1918451).

He also makes a point about the possibility for those who ran the meetings to outrightly discard the results of a meeting's vote :

Frequently illegal methods were purposely used in calling town meetings to assure that the votes cast at such meetings would be subsequently ruled illegal. Both provincial and state law required that the selectmen issue warrants ten days in advance of any town meeting for the election of provincial and state officials. The selectmen and town clerk could make an election illegal, as they did in the Malden election of a representative in 1783, by deliberately issuing the warrant so that the election came only nine days before the last Wednesday in May instead of the prescribed ten.

The examples found by David Syrett confirm the previous conclusions made by Howard Zinn, that town meetings supervised by a dominant minority were commonplace. Furthermore, it points to a serious reluctance towards democratic practises among rulers of New England towns, who seemed ready to search for means to deny the people of a part to play in local politics. Syrett proves that this reluctance applied at a micro level, but his examples were all but anomalies among the ruling class of New England and the early United States. James Madison's push to institutionalise town meeting government as a tool to fight protest by "citizens in a body" illustrates how these practises were indeed rooted in political ideology on the national scale. The people would be granted a voice, but as much as possible within an institutional frame. On Madison's effort to undermine independent popular assemblies, Robert Martin writes :

Once again, the people of Virginia were meeting in public assemblies, signing petitions, and preparing for civil resistance, but rather than contributing to these efforts, or even condoning

them, Madison worked to marginalize them by pursuing a much more formal, and much less popularly accessible, oppositional mechanism.⁵⁴

Madison's stance on popular government was motivated by recurring episodes of unrest among the rulers of the newly-founded United States. One of these episodes stands out as a turning point, for it had representative government in its sights. It is referred to as "Shays' Rebellion", it started in the summer of 1786 and ended in the spring of 1787. This rebellion had at its core the question of how and where the voice of the people might be heard, and advocated for the holding of county conventions perceived as more qualified than institutionalised town meetings to identify and solve the problems of the "backcountry". The rebellion actually faced opposition from certain town meetings on account that *they* held enough power and knowledge to address any issue concerning the people. It was soon "pacified", but it had brought to light the ideological grounds on which local and national governments were standing. This type of revolt echoed with the national upheaval that was the Boston Tea Party, regarding the power which could potentially be held by democratic movements. It was taken as a warning by national rulers and especially by James Madison, who began his enterprise of building a structure for opposition to take place. Outside of the structure, Martin shows that democratic life was not at all chaotic. There existed democratic 'societies' and 'clubs' which, in addition to escaping the institutions' grip on legal outcomes, provided people with a safer stage to voice their grievances :

Lacking time, education and perhaps even complete literacy, the common labourer would have to enter the public glare in a highly deferential culture. The semi-private space provided by the clubs allowed members to air their tentative views to a sympathetic audience and then hone their arguments before exposing them to public critique. This provided those derided as the "subterranean gentry" with a commodity they sorely lacked: confidence. (Martin 13).

54 Martin, Robert W. T. (op. cit.)

These assemblies did not hold the power of law or control public debate, but their mere existence was enough to worry Federalists and Republican-Democrats alike, the former claiming that criticisms towards governmental practises should only come from the elite and the latter working against opposition by “citizens in a body”.

Such a rift between how the town meeting was theoretically meant to function, given its form, and how it has been used throughout US history finds an explanation in the dominant political culture of the newly-born United States. As early as the colonial times, the hegemonic Puritan culture was profoundly antidemocratic, and the form of town meetings was born out of necessity, not as the culmination of a great democratic ideal (Zuckerman and Blandin). This ideology would traverse the ages and its legacy was quite visible at the end of the 18th century. Francis Dupuis Déri, in his 2012 book *‘Démocratie, Histoire Politique d’un Mot’*, writes : “many in America then use the word ‘democracy’ to qualify in a pejorative way the consequences of the Independence they deemed detrimental.”⁵⁵. ‘Pejorative’ appears to be a euphemism to qualify how violent the critics of a democratic paradigm could be towards the people of the United States. Indeed, more than simply not being taken seriously, supporters of democracy – whoever they may be – would be entirely disqualified as such or even dehumanised in mainstream political discourse. The ruling class’s representations of the people played a huge role in discarding basic democracy as a form of government. Howard Zinn’s chapter entitled “Persons of Mean and Vile Condition” provides many examples which support this claim. It is amidst this political climate that the Constitution would be signed. The Federalists would win their battle for a powerful centralised government, and representation would be promoted to keep the people out of national decision-making, shaping a different meaning of democracy, which could be practised without democrats.

Town meeting government has by no means been a sanctuary of ‘pure’ or ‘real’ democracy, they have been shaped by the search for a national consensus, and subjected to political

55 Dupuis Déri Francis (op. cit.). Original quote : “plusieurs en Amérique utilisent alors le terme «démocratie» pour désigner de manière péjorative les conséquences jugées néfastes de l’indépendance.” Translations from this work are mine.

manipulation. One could argue that the form still remains, and of course it would be excessive to dismiss the meetings themselves as non-democratic, but what Robert Martin found concerning the existence of parallel democratic movements historically delegitimised by town meeting government raises questions.

1.1.3) *Questioning the safe space*

I would like to begin this part of the study with a personal note. The idea, or should I say the instinct of questioning the form of town meeting as the ‘ideal’ form of democracy came to me very naturally. Having spent much of my college years attending general student assemblies during times of political crises, I have grown more and more doubtful of the ‘purely’ democratic nature of assemblies based on public speaking. The reason why I consider my experience to be relevant is that student general assemblies in Rennes 2 and town meeting politics are very much alike. Both are based on speaking loudly in front of a somewhat large audience to voice grievances or raise awareness towards a particular issue. In both cases, a warrant is issued beforehand and a handful of moderators dictate the session’s rhythm. In both cases finally, the assembly’s vote directly guides future actions. But the impression I am left with is the following : if you attend one of these gatherings, you might consider it a true beacon of democratic practises, if you attend many, this initial observation will fade. You begin to notice that existing in such a political event is a lot about *owning*⁵⁶. *Owning* in a rather literal sense, meaning being part of the body responsible for organising the meeting, but also owning its codes (such as public speaking) and owning your convictions in a way that they cannot be used against you.

Quite logically, I strongly believe that town meeting participation is also greatly influenced by *owning*. First of all, with town meetings generally occurring once a year, moderator rotation is

⁵⁶ Note : the word which would have been used had this paper been written in French is : ‘appropriation’.

not perceived as a key component of policy-making, and so votes against established selectmen are quite rare. This leads to the rhythm of the meetings being set by the same people year after year, and although no claim can be made with assurance about their honesty, this certainly clashes with basic democracy. Secondly, social and sometimes institutional pressure can be huge deterrents for participants struggling with public speaking anxiety. This is not a rare condition by any means, Leary and Kowalski's research indicates that today, approximately one in five persons may be concerned⁵⁷. Can a form which potentially excludes 20% of its participants from deliberation be considered truly democratic ? The conclusions drawn by Frank M. Bryan and Jonathan Beecher Field⁵⁸ on the true essence of democracy being found in the New England town meeting indicate that criticism of the form often falls behind other points of interest. What is more, Bryan even dedicated a great part of his study to participation (in his study of more than one thousand town meetings, he found that on average, 7% of participants spoke out) and did acknowledge a wide variety of obstacles standing in the way of democratic participation. However he did not see these obstacles as reasons to change the title of his book : *Real Democracy*. Whilst not being entirely overlooked, it appears that the obstacles inherent to the *form* of town meetings tend not to constitute a basis for criticism.

Even without experiencing any particular public speaking anxiety, the context of town meetings can make owning one's convictions difficult. The institutional context and the socially perceived importance of expertise ought to be considered as additional restraints. Granted town meetings nowadays deal with everyday issues, but what happens when the town's budget must be discussed ? And what happened back when town meetings were much more relevant ? Without saying that to be truly democratic town meetings should aim for 100% participation, it should be pointed out that certain modalities of town meeting politics do not encourage democratic participation. And so, in town meetings as in student general assemblies, the voice of many emerges

57 Leary, Mark R., and Robin M. Kowalski. *Social Anxiety*. Guilford Press, 1997.

58 Jonathan Beecher Field (op. cit.). p63 "even as they represent a total abrogation of the democratic ideals of the town meeting".

after the usual speakers are done speaking, through voting. Democratic societies and clubs of the late 18th century had felt this, and created their own safe spaces outside of town meeting regulations, from which could emerge action.

From effective participation through history to their use as a proof that democracy has been at the basis of US political thought since European men first set foot on American soil, widespread perceptions of the town meeting are deeply unhistorical. This is not an isolated phenomenon by any means, mythical imaginaries are a major part of the historical construction of the US, or what Frederick Dolan refers to as “the historicodiscursive events we know as America”⁵⁹. As a constitutive element of the genesis of the US, the town meeting occupies a significant space among these events, but the fact that it is glorified is not singular.

2) Utopian Constructions of US History and Political Implications

2.1) The US tradition of glorified history

To state that the US has a unique history when compared with other Western nations is not a bold statement by any means. What is especially remarkable about its origin is that it was fundamentally manufactured by a community of men and women aspiring to a new beginning. It bears the mark of man-made constructions within its core, especially protestant values and therefore a deeply-rooted eurocentrism. The puritan experiment – one of the names given to the plantation –

59 Dolan, Frederick M. *Allegories of America*. Cornell University Press, 1994. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt207g726.5>.

reflects this man-made nature of US history, through scientific method and early echoes of the idea of progress. This study does not ignore of course the notion that history is by definition man-made, as it refers at once to the events experienced by humanity and the study of these events. History as humanity knows it is therefore a linguistic construct of humanity, and so no civilisation can pride themselves of possessing a 'pure' version of their history, only a narrative of it. However, US history had the bases of its narrative laid before history had even happened. This was especially true in colonial times, but it was also a trait of the period following the war of Independence. This part of the study will not focus on case by case analyses of glorified events of US history, but rather on these types of core representations glorifying US narrative.

1.2.1) The illustrious project of the American colony, and of the US

Pursuing what has been pointed out in this introduction, the US tendency to glorify history finds great support – perhaps paradoxically – in the conception of the American colony, and later the US nation, as a goal. This could be interpreted as a paradox because striving to achieve a goal invariably implies looking forward, yet it is precisely this perspective which plays a role in distorting the reception of the past. Moreover, the Puritan perceived themselves as the agents of God's plan, moral examples meant to be followed. A famous quote by Richard Hofstadter illustrates the impossible retrospective incidentally brought about : "America is the only nation which began with perfection and aspired to progress"⁶⁰. The way in which the resulting distortion works is – at least – twofold. First, such a prevalence of the goal, of the becoming of the colony and later the nation tends to favour unhistorical stances. Frederick Dolan writes :

60 Hofstadter Richard. *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F. D. R.* Vintage books, 1955.

In Winthrop's discourse, too, America is less a territory or place than a goal, a project, a making. The violence involved in such a conception of America—which dismisses as merely incidental or unessential the concrete histories of America and its inhabitants in order to reconfigure America as a new, that is, newly authenticated, England—is inescapable and by now, of course, widely acknowledged.⁶¹

John Winthrop was one of the leading figures of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, and his discourse, which does not consider America as what could be called a political land, but rather a transcendental land, reflects a will to do away with the complexities of mankind's history. Coming from the man who first used the metaphor of the “city upon a hill” to refer to the American colony, this posture is coherent. Indeed, how could the newly established colony serve as a beacon of higher moral values if it was linked to a questionable history ?

The image of the city upon a hill makes for a fitting transition to approach the second way in which visions of America and the US as a goal affect the account of history. Striking discursive constructions such as these have an impact on the *study* of history. Countless documents praising the greatness, the ‘nobleness’ of the project take part in painting a magnificent overall picture. Leaders of US history may consequently be endowed with higher moral qualities by means of projecting the noble nature of their alleged prospects. The eventual goal may also explain or justify events of history, as was the case for the many wars which the US has been involved in, even in modern times. The fight against the morally and politically inferior communism served as justification for the war in Vietnam for example (Zinn 436).

Going beyond the consequences this perspective regarding a form of historical self-perception, US historian Joyce Appleby makes a case for prospect to be a fundamental element of US national identity. She claims that many men and women saw the country's greatness reflected in

61 Dolan, Frederick M. (op. cit.).

“a set of lusty qualities—open opportunity, an unfettered spirit of inquiry, personal independence.”⁶² She even mentions the reality of life in the US being perceived as a “new kind of social existence”, a reinvention of humanity’s condition. She supports this through what she describes as the process of “rooting out” the sensibilities acquired from a colonial past which took place in the revolutionary period. The successful War of Independence did not provide the new established order with symbols powerful enough to be truly unifying, especially with a ruling class still composed of rich landowners who were very well established before the war. Social and political imaginary in the freshly-proclaimed nation thus began to be structured around new symbolic arrangements, around novelty and opportunity. This is possibly one of the most unique aspects of the history of the US, its identity was built on projection. Many of its components like social life, the political system, the living conditions, and even the land itself have been painted by a congregation of subjectivities looking forward to a brighter future. In many ways, the US and its history have therefore been *envisaged* and constructed as a utopia.

At its beginnings however, the nature of the goal pursued by the Puritan was one of recovery. Indeed, the city upon a hill was meant to be inspired by the return to a state prior to European society, the recovery of an Eden lost to the forces of human corruption, and this group of people on this patch of land was the way. Beyond the inherently unhistorical heritage left by this project, it also acted as a vector for exceptionalism. As the dynamics of social imaginary are performative, the notion of exceptionalism itself, crystallised in the expression “American exceptionalism”, came to support a prospect-based national identity, Joyce Appleby writes :

Specifically, the idea of American exceptionalism projected onto the United States a future more significant than its past, encouraging a neglect of the historic diversity of the United

62 Appleby, Joyce. *Inheriting the Revolution : The First Generation of Americans*. The Belknap Press, Harvard University Press, 2000.

States in deference to an imagined time when progressive, cumulative, irreversible processes of change would have worn away the variety in human experience.⁶³

She presents the conception of the US being exceptional as unhistorical through what it occludes or veils, and indeed its inherently forward-looking perspective. The mythical imaginary it has inscribed itself into and perpetrated has branched into different structuring elements of US politics.

1.2.2) *Incarnations of exceptionalism*

Perhaps the first defining feature of American exceptionalism is one pertaining to utopia itself : intangibility. Its conceptual background is supported by a stable set of beliefs, but its areas of expression are open-ended and subjected to interpretation. Historian Godfrey Hodgson, by no means a harsh critic of politics in the US, identifies this set of beliefs as the view of US moral, economic, and political structure as exceptional, meaning not only unique but also of unmatched greatness. However he acknowledges that what is meant to illustrate exceptionalism is divided into “significantly different views”, sometimes directly addressing structuring elements of society such as a supposed political heritage free of class division or a distinctive individual freedom, but often simply referring to matters of resources and material opportunity, especially for people seeking to begin a new life in the US⁶⁴. Such an overflow of illustrations can be explained through the effect of exceptionalism, and its “essentialising” dynamics which serve as an explanation for greatness. Great things must naturally form a great people, and a great people naturally foments great things; whatever the domain, exceptionalism can be used either as a result or an explanation. It can also be

63 Appleby, Joyce. ‘Recovering America’s Historic Diversity: Beyond Exceptionalism’. *The Journal of American History*, vol. 79, no. 2, 1992, pp. 419–31. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2080033>.

64 Hodgson, Godfrey. *The Myth of American Exceptionalism*. Yale University Press, 2009.

explained at its basis, by its very birth from emancipatory ideals : leaving behind a European past perceived as corrupted by immoral values, and diving into an exciting and uncertain future.

Joyce Appleby develops this notion in her work, and presents the perception of the significantly named “New World” as an asylum, a space to escape from a lost Europe. In *Recovering America’s Historic Diversity*, she quotes William Short, Thomas Jefferson’s secretary, who compared the Americans to “a group of prisoners who have broken out of a “common goal” and are being watched by their fellow inmates to see if escape is possible”. It appears that for a significant number of people, European society was as a constraining frame composed of dysfunctional values whether moral, political or social, and that true greatness could only be achieved through complete liberation from its grasp. However, the mere act of settling on the American continent was constructed as an act of total emancipation, and so social imaginary in the US became imbued with the idea that the nation was built with a clean slate. For Appleby, the idea of the clean slate in itself implies a rejection of the past, forging what would develop as an unhistorical US past, whose basis is the perfection of the absolute zero. The effects of such representations appear clearly in the influential work of Frederick Jackson Turner. His development of the “frontier thesis” lies entirely on the notion that US institutions find their root in the adaptation to the constantly moving frontier. The moving frontier, for Turner, entails a constant renewal, a constant state of building from nothing or at best from scraps, and even goes as far as claiming that the development of US democracy could be traced back to frontier individualism⁶⁵. Utopian representations are not confined to historians of the 19th century though. In his *Essays on the State and the Constitutions*, Sheldon Wolin too falls victim to the temptation of the clean slate :

The New World of America, in contrast, appears as a fresh land, seemingly without limits or boundaries and innocent of past inequities. Land was easily available, and opportunities for

65 Turner, Frederick Jackson. *The Frontier in American History*. BiblioLife, 2008. The original essay in which Turner develops his frontier thesis was published in 1893 and was entitled : *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*.

wealth and higher status seemed limitless. Accordingly, America's politics was natural rather than historical. America's political practices developed as though written on a tabula rasa much as the contract theorists of the seventeenth century had imagined men imposing a civil association upon a state of nature. Inscribing politics upon nature rather than history was the essence of what was modern about America.⁶⁶

This quote encapsulates the different elements of the “New World’s” emancipation from the past, and it bears echoes of the essentialising effects of exceptionalism, by linking politics and “nature”. Although the relation he describes differs from what has been discussed earlier in this part regarding essentialisation, but to simply mention it is enough to endow his argument with mythical conceptions of US history. To be clear, this study does not negate the existence of the one-of-a-kind emancipation seized by European descendants on the American continent, it merely challenges the notion that the reach of this emancipation extended to the weight of History, especially regarding inherited values and political organisation. Frederick Jackson Turner took his interpretation to the extreme by claiming that the frontier “strips off the garments of civilisation”, to give birth to “a new product that is American”, pushing the limits of a form of exceptionalism beyond the essence of mankind, strongly supporting the notion that European descendants were, in accordance with the New World, new men⁶⁷.

Another incarnation of US exceptionalism is indeed the individual, and especially the male individual. The Puritans, the frontiersmen and pioneers, the immortal Founding Fathers; all are endowed with exceptional qualities, whether moral or regarding their capability. Again, these qualities appear to stem from their essence, men naturally brought on this earth with the task of building the nation, a nation which in turn ‘forms’ new individuals, the heirs of these qualities. Appleby establishes this reciprocity as a connection between American abundance and high moral

66 Wolin, Sheldon. *The Presence of the Past: Essays on the State and the Constitution*. John Hopkins University Press, 1989.

67 The main figures of the frontier being all male (frontiersmen).

purposes, but other exceptional features of the new nation qualify as well (2). For Matthew Dennis, the ‘newness’ of the nation is incarnated through the pioneers and a sense of “costless innovation”⁶⁸. His thesis then presents the pioneers as a symbol, “inflated heroes” whose mortality at the turn of the 20th century appeared to “mark the advent of a radically new, perhaps frightening modern world”. The specificities of this statement will not be investigated in this study, but the position it places the pioneers in is one that reflects reciprocity between individuals and the nation quite strikingly. Historic individuals of the US can attain a form of transcendental existence in the national narrative and, according to Matthew Dennis, social imaginary. The Puritan who first landed on the American continent saw themselves as God’s chosen people, and their resilience in the first years spent battling their new environment came to fuel representations which would again evolve in parallel with historical accuracy.

The only place suitable for a people chosen by God is a land where the recovery of a lost Eden could be possible. This recovery could not be burdened by the corrupted heritage of European society, and as history would prove, by any significant resistance to its noble design. For what would be alternately named God’s plan, Manifest Destiny, freedom, democracy, the American Dream; Natives were crushed, revolts were subdued, and the African-American enslaved and persecuted. The story that would be told would focus on unity though, erasing inner and outer conflicts to preserve the image of the nation confidently moving forward, stronger than the forces that hoped to diminish its grandeur. The notion of unity would even be chosen to label the nation, as the *United States of America*. A pillar on which Howard Zinn’s work : *A People’s History of the United States* stands is rehabilitation of the different conflicts, physical or ideological, which have been driving forces of US history. His work reveals that conflict and division are omnipresent, constitutive of the US as a nation, and the extent to which usual representations of US history conceal them. Joyce Appleby also dots her analysis of the post-revolutionary period with mentions

68 Dennis, Matthew. ‘Pioneers! O Pioneers! Pioneers and the Cultural Work of American Festivity: Remembering and Forgetting for Fun and Profit’. *Revue Francaise Detudes Americaines*, vol. 146, no. 1, Oct. 2016, pp. 68–88.

of conflict or disgrace disappearing from the national narrative yet to be set on a clear path :
“American abundance could be attached to the virtue of hard work, infusing the independence and hardiness of America’s farming families with civic value and generating patriotic images that could resonate widely without evoking the curse of slavery.” She tackles the issue directly several times :

Compelling as Northern interpretations of American successes were, they could not dissolve the very real tensions that divided the country. A sequence of wrangles about intensely-felt oppositions—slave and free, native-born and immigrant, black and white, male and female, saved and depraved, respectable and degraded, national and local, successful and failed, educated and superstitious, refined and vulgar—worked against the actual unity that the rhetorical consensus inferred.⁶⁹

Perhaps above all else, the political imaginary of the US must remain shaped by the spectre of “one Nation under God”, bound to the “consensus story of colonial gentry enthusiastically creating and offering to a united American people democratic institutions that gave full voice to the people’s economic, political, and social aspirations.”⁷⁰ Beyond simply ‘glorifying’ the past in this manner, erasing friction in the national narrative allows to easily create bridges between the past and the present, or the future.

69 Appleby, Joyce. *Inheriting the Revolution : The First Generation of Americans* (op.cit.).

70 Shain, Barry Alan, et al. ‘American Founding Narratives, Monarchy, and Republicanism: The Largely Unsought and Incomplete Democratic Revolution’. *Early American Literature*, vol. 53, no. 1, 2018, pp. 185–208.

2.2) Flawed Atavism in US Politics

Indeed, utopian constructions of the past clear the way for powerful calls to history in US politics to find a legitimacy in social imaginary. To put it concisely, painting the picture of US history – and especially ancient history – as a confident and bountiful straight line, has set up the frame for flawed atavism in US politics, past and present. The creation of a line implies the creation of ‘dead ends’, of a good path and countless wrong paths to be avoided. The basis of this concept has been used many a time in US political discourse, with movements and their leaders manifesting their honest intention to rectify the wrong turns taken and get the country back on track. On the track which has spawned whatever has made the country exceptional in the eyes of the speaker. Present or future action can therefore be supported by claims that it is inscribed in a timeless and undefined US tradition, itself being subjected to the listeners’ interpretation. Matthew Dennis thus describes the unhistorical relation the US fosters with its history as creative, or at least performative, a standpoint to build from⁷¹. This notion can be found in the work of Joyce Appleby as well, she speaks of the past being “used as a springboard for vaulting into a future that promises liberation from the past”⁷². It is unclear what she meant by “liberation from the past”, but she too acknowledges the past as a political tool, a deliberately vague source of inspiration.

In effect, it is really easy to find multiple examples of political use of a glorified past as an inspiration. Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis displays references to a glorious past as a way to support and legitimise the institutions, by elaborating on the notion that the constantly moving frontier has shaped a sturdier democracy than anywhere in Europe. Many other political forces however chose to depict the present as a deviation from the ideal path set by history, and promote narratives of declension. Perhaps the best illustrations for this statement are the three Great Awakenings of the 18th and 19th centuries. The Great Awakenings were periods of powerful religious

71 Dennis, Matthew. *Red, White, and Blue Letter Days: An American Calendar*. Cornell University Press, 2002.

72 Appleby, Joyce. ‘Recovering America’s Historic Diversity: Beyond Exceptionalism’ (op.cit.).

revival sparked by the will to restore faith (and society) to a purer state. Although the grounds on which each separate Awakening came to life have differed, their related actions have been directed to right the wrongs of a misguided society. The First Great Awakening of the 1730s and 1740s for example sought to counter the rise of atheism, Deism or Universalism considered impious⁷³. It is interesting to point out that if the dates associated to the beginning and end of each Awakening are accurate, it would appear that US history has happened in a nearly constant state of ‘religious revival’ spanning from the 1790s to the 1930s (and even the 1980s according to theoreticians of the fourth Awakening), as if the utopian construction of the US past had been materialised in the historical impossibility to reach it.

Narratives of declension have not died with the end of the Awakenings though, modern politics have been especially imbued with visions of a glorious past as a guideline for the future. During his time in office, which covered the 1980s, Ronald Reagan led the charge for what would be oxymoronically called the “Conservative Revolution”. The main concerns of this political current were noninterference of the state, free-market policies and exalting individualism, believed to be the three pillars on which the nation was originally built. Their restoration was considered to be the vector by which the country would retrieve the “greatness it had lost over the previous two decades”⁷⁴. For Reagan, the term “revolution” is associated with a return to the past, a past subjected to deeply unhistorical perceptions. As it has already been mentioned several times in this study, traditional power relations were quickly established in the New World, and the existence of a utopian “state of natural harmony” implied by the laissez-faire vision⁷⁵ actually relies on flawed representations of a fantasised ‘natural’ course of existence believed to have spawned a benevolent

73 Smith, Howard John. *The First Great Awakening: Redefining Religion in British America, 1725–1775*. Fairleigh Dickinson University Press., 2015.

74 Aubert, Didier, and Hélène Quanquin, editors. ‘Refaire l’Amérique : Imaginaire et histoire des États-Unis’. *Refaire l’Amérique : Imaginaire et histoire des États-Unis*, Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2018. *OpenEdition Books*, <http://books.openedition.org/psn/7654>. Translations from this work are mine.

75 Kuttner, Robert. *The Economic Illusion: False Choices Between Prosperity and Social Justice*. Houghton Mifflin, 1984.

balance now corrupted by forces that do not belong in this harmony. For Reagan, this force was the state and its regulations, said to impede on a market quite able to regulate itself.

More recently, Donald Trump, with his famous slogan “Make America Great Again”, has attempted to pull the exact same strings and become the face of restoration. With this strategy, his discourse descended in straight line from Reagan’s, as he had used this exact phrase a few months prior to his first election in 1980. Faithful to the former conservative leader’s legacy, Donald Trump too refers to an elusive past, mostly composed of projected, positive affects, not delimited in time and especially selective when it comes to memory. A great example can be found in his admiration for Andrew Jackson, summoning the symbolics of his disruptive rise to power while carefully avoiding his merciless killings of Native populations. To the conservative view of the threat posed by government interference to freedom of enterprise – a government he referred to as “the swamp” - Trump added the idea of a territory historically inhabited by an ‘unspoilt’ population whose inherent qualities allowed for self-regulation. In his first campaign especially, the fundamental disturbance in the beneficial balance had shifted from government regulation to “illegal immigrants”, and the path to follow in order to recover the nation’s glorious history was to preserve a certain idea of the US population.

The recurring use of such flawed and embellished atavistic political discourse has made it highly potent and reliable in modern politics. It plays on the explanatory function of mythical imaginary identified by Raoul Girardet, and their inherently performative nature. In effect, Ronald Reagan was re-elected after his first term, and Donald Trump defied all odds by winning the race to the oval office in 2016. Deeply-rooted beliefs of American exceptionalism still carry images of past perfection, of a land and its inhabitants blessed with their emancipation from the heavy, tumultuous history of the Old World. Images of a nation which can therefore take inspiration from its ‘pure’ beginnings to maintain its march forward, to sustain progress. The greatness of the national

narrative has created a utopian space for the past to exist in US social and political imaginaries, and the town hall meeting has had an important role in sustaining it throughout US history.

3) The Role of the Town Hall Meeting in Solidifying the National Narrative

3.1) Building bridges with the past

The first person to speak, or write about Bill Clinton's campaign and his "town halls" or the offer to organise a "town hall style debate" between the southern Democrat and President Bush had summoned an entire world of representations which would later find outlets in many other sectors of society. The modern town hall – because it has been labelled as such – undeniably evokes its New England inspiration, its citizens gathered to deliberate and decide on local issues, paying the "costs of democracy" Frank Bryan speaks of to refer to the many obstacles which can stand in the way of town meeting attendance. The conception of history, of the design of the US as a straight line, a right track from which it would be dangerous to deviate has been extensively discussed in the previous part, and the modern town hall integrates this conception perfectly. In fact, the town hall pushes this representation further.

Unlike the glorious past used as a political device by Ronald Reagan or Donald Trump, which relied almost entirely on subjectivity, the town hall effectively materialises the perfect, original, utopian past into a real political event. This incarnation is of course a fake (of a fake), but it does build a very concrete bridge between the politics of history and the politics of today. Not

only does it provide support to the idea that policy-making is being conducted according to a centuries-old tradition, it allows for the utopian elements of US history to find a landing point. To quote Frank Bryan once more, the town hall meeting has become “Tocqueville and Jefferson and apple pie and common sense all rolled into one”, a phrase which encompasses the history of US democracy, the frontier and the agrarian ideal, and a sense of reason, the legacy of the Enlightenment. It unusually illustrates Girardet’s notion of “mythological effervescence” sprouted by common misconception regarding specific aspects of political imaginary. The symbolical reach of the town hall meeting is especially potent in that it allows for straight lines to be drawn and bridges to be built in many different sectors of US history. As the second chapter of this study has attempted to account for, the long and eventful history of the town hall meeting as well as its part in the genesis of the Puritan settlement have fuelled long-lasting representations and affects which may be channelled into the national narrative. Its contribution actualises the past, foregrounding the continuity and strength of the symbols which have propelled the US and therefore preserves the image of a nation confidently moving forward, as one.

3.2) Preserving images of unity

Beyond the simple conception of history as a straight line from which it would be perilous to deviate, there is in the national narrative of the US a strong sense of unity. The very reason why the country was able to stay the course could be found in its perceived capacity to follow the ideal of “one Nation under God”. Through their common design, their common emancipation from Europe, their common resistance against British rule; and later their constitutional equality and their common push for progress, representations of the people as a body have been exaggerated, or at least their divisions have been obscured. Regarding US history, erasing the breaks in the history of the people implies veiling the many ways in which the ruling class has let down, repressed, or often

treated inhumanely different parts of the population at different times. The town hall meeting, through its historical and current functions, has been actively used to produce images of unity, figuratively and literally.

When the time came for the nation to build its social and political framework, in the years that followed the War of Independence, political leaders of the newly-born US felt “the intense need to create a union from the disparate groups that formed their country”⁷⁶. In that regard, town meetings were progressively institutionalised, notably by James Madison (Martin), who saw the implication of all the people in the democratic process as unsustainable and uncontrollable, and ultimately a threat to the nation’s political balance. Beyond the ideological fear of democracy such a process materialised, it also inscribed the town meeting into the institutional process of manufacturing consensus. The town meeting, although it was controlled in colonial times (Syrett, Zinn), was not part of the British government’s apparatus. It was therefore not shackled by institutional control and hosted fierce resistance towards British rule and acted to dismantle its legitimacy. After the war of Independence, town meetings were acknowledged as the powerful counter-power they were by the new administration, but rather than simply discarding them or forbidding them, they were integrated into the national political system. By remaining in reach of what government could control, the town meeting grew as a token for disagreement and deliberation, while progressively seeing its role as a counter-power reduced. Fundamental dissent would be voiced outside of this sphere (Martin), through different democratic organisations, which ultimately did not find representation in the institutions and would remain marginal. In framing the town meeting within institutional boundaries, and reducing its reach to local and practical, ‘day-to-day’ issues, it became entirely harmless to structural powers. Consequently, it solidified protest among institutional political processes as bound to a frame which preserves the integrity of the institutions. It has contributed in the creation of images of unity inherent to the political process in the US, whereby the range of political paradigms which find outlets in institutional politics is

⁷⁶ Appleby, Joyce. *Inheriting the Revolution : The First Generation of Americans* (op. cit.).

limited to regulations, control, checks and balances for example. Ideological challenges to the structure of the economy or the political system of the US are entirely absent from the dual political offer presented by the Democrats and the Republicans. The institutionalisation by James Madison of structural protest incarnated by the town meeting illustrates this greater process at play since the origins of the US. The preservation of its democratic symbol, through its open and deliberative form acts as an illusion in social and political imaginary, sustaining the idea that this – manufactured – unity has been the product of popular debate and is still balanced by democratic processes. In a very practical way, the Madison administration has allowed for the narrative of unity to remain unchallenged by the town meeting, but also to be enriched by controlled images of dissent and deliberation. The modern town hall has carried this legacy and pushed it even further.

While the town meeting holds actual deliberation, albeit within a regulated frame, the town hall altogether does not. With its original design thought out to follow television standards for political broadcasts, the assembly of a town hall has always been an audience. The only participation a member of the audience can hope for during a town hall is a question to the person(s) onstage, a question which would have been carefully selected if it were to be asked to a presidential candidate. Most town halls eliminate conflict through their very format, which erases deliberation, but presidential town halls do not even leave the slightest chance for serious challenge to emerge from the audience. In doing so, it is the image of unity free of any asperity which is put on display, unity without any rough edges or doubt. Background consensus around the themes discussed, the role of each participant and even the very political process implied by the town hall is displayed as obvious, almost natural, and therefore not subjected to the day's discussion. The 2020 election campaign erased yet another layer of conflict, with each candidate holding his own town hall in front of different audiences⁷⁷, and with questions mostly originating from a journalist. Such modalities, combined with the artificial bridge between town halls and town meetings can also have

⁷⁷ It should be pointed out that the covid pandemic played a role in keeping the two town halls separate.

an impact on the reception of history, particularly regarding the construction of democracy in the US.

3.3) Anchoring the concept of ‘democracy’

The emergence of town halls on the national stage, and later on smaller scales, has indeed served as a space where the symbolics of the town meeting could be stirred anew. The major differences between the two assemblies have made this space somewhat disorderly, but it has provided a hold for the town meeting to strengthen its position in the national narrative. Along with the town meeting, it is a certain idea of democracy which has been consolidated through the town hall. The reason why the phrase “a certain idea of democracy” is used here is that it is democracy as a vague and volatile concept which has been anchored in the national narrative of the US. Indeed, just as the variations in the historical practises of democracy do not allow for any clear definition of US democracy to emerge; the discrepancy between town hall and town meeting does not allow for the identification of what is considered a democratic assembly in the US. What the town hall does however is further broaden the boundaries of what is considered democratic in social and political imaginary, undercover of the closest thing to Athenian democracy the US has ever devised as an official form of government. To measure exactly the effects of such confusion on the national narrative would be impossible, but a few theses can be formulated.

Firstly, this progressive shift towards a broader definition of democracy may influence the perception of specific historical events. With democracy as a concept which would encompass a greater variety of political practises, some events may be instinctively identified as the result of democratic processes, while it ought to be the subject of discussion. The very birth of the nation is viewed as a democratic process, with the creation of a Constitution meant to insure inalienable rights for all; while the affair was mostly conducted by, and served the interest of a ruling class

(Zinn 53-90). The same could be said about universal suffrage or the act of voting in general, which is perceived as the historical stamp for democracy, even though it cannot possibly render the full complexity of democratic processes. This particular point is illustrated by Jonathan Beecher Field's conclusion to his book on town halls : "If this brief study has a conclusion beyond surveying the various ways that individuals and institutions have co-opted a basic form of democracy, I hope that it reemphasizes that without voting, there is no democracy" (Beecher Field 75). To find such a statement concluding what is otherwise a highly critical work tackling the erosion of democracy and deliberation in political processes is rather surprising, but quite telling of how democracy is perceived even by someone who studies it⁷⁸. Similar to unity, democracy might appear as the background, the framework upon which US politics have enfolded.

This analytical displacement of democracy in the national narrative may consequently obscure its tumultuous origins. As this study has demonstrated through different angles, what is now identified as democracy in the US was born of the process of 'watering down' the term. Neither the Puritans who landed on the continent in the 17th century nor the leading political forces of the Independence thought of democracy as a viable system, quite the opposite (Zuckerman and Blandin, Dupuis-Déri). The word was even used pejoratively to discredit opposing political views, and perception of the masses was imbued with prejudice (Zinn). A narrative on democracy which would construct it as the background, or the framework of US political history would most likely fail to convey the complexities behind the establishment of what is now called US democracy. Not only is there a chance of veiling this institutional discussion, it is also probable that democratic movements such as the clubs identified by Robert Martin would be pushed towards the margins of history, suppressing the diversity that exists in this history. Stirring the symbolics of the town hall meeting and sustaining the place of the town meeting in the national narrative participates in

78 This study has also discussed the title of the book written by Frank Bryan on town meetings : *Real Democracy* (see Chapter 2, part 1.5).

anchoring the concept of democracy as the ‘obvious’ choice for US politics; because in appearance, democracy has always been at the centre of political life and has never left.

Expanding again on the notion that the importance of democracy in US history has been amplified, perhaps so too has the implication of the people in the progressive building of the nation. With symbolics of the town hall meeting come images that have fuelled the beliefs in the exceptionalism of the American people, especially those who have taken part in the mythical episodes of US history (the plantation, the frontier, or the establishment of democracy for instance). Indeed, the picture of hard-working people gathering for hours in a cold building after a day of labour to sustain democratic tradition brings up powerful feelings. Putting this direct link with history on display – albeit a tweaked version of it – through town halls, and solidifying town meetings as landmarks of US history might convey the notion that the history of the nation has been written from the bottom up. This is of course not entirely false, but it is very much an inflated account of a question which could not be reduced to any absolute answer. The symbolics of the town hall meeting nourish the idea that the people who planted the seeds of democracy in the US were endowed with the natural qualities to practise democracy, and that in turn the nation formed individuals who are the heirs of these qualities (Appleby); after all, the town meeting has been described more than once as a type of ‘school of democracy’, notably by H.D. Thoreau, R.W. Emerson and A. de Tocqueville⁷⁹.

The use of town hall meeting symbolics through the modern town hall, and the artificial bridge it creates with a utopian past make the town hall meeting an inherent part in the process of glorifying the history of the US. The complex web it weaves in social and political imaginary connects the different elements of American exceptionalism and the still ongoing democratic design of the nation carried by a united effort. Lucien Sfez would see in that a strategic move in calculated politics of memory, as a way to “reterritorialise” (Sfez 34) the glorious elements of the national narrative into a mythified landmark of US democracy and its history. The recurrent use of flawed

79 See Chapter 2, part 1.4.

atavism in the history of US politics would certainly support this claim, and the town hall meeting indeed displays at once pictures of a glorified past and the will to keep in touch with said past. Yet, this reading grid does not account for the full extent of what town hall meeting symbolics can convey. Indeed, what has been said about the national narrative regarding the ratification of democracy as a volatile concept and the exaggerated role of the people can be said about sustaining the political framework of today, about the narrative in the making. This, and the legitimisation of other aspects of the political process today are made possible by the town hall's spectacular properties.

Chapter 4 : The Town Hall as Politics of the Spectacle

It has now been established that the symbolics of the town hall meeting are formed by several layers of inaccuracies. Its perfectly democratic origins, its unifying properties and the mirage of its continuity are both the result and the fuel of embellished history. The modern town hall, with its sole focus on staging or simply unilateral communication, entirely replaces the function of the town meeting while pushing the terms as advertising material, offering what Molly Osberg named a “welcome patina of the nation’s directly democratic past” in her article for *Splinter*. Because such discursive displacements abound in late capitalism – as extensively documented by John Patrick Leary⁸⁰- this chapter was written with the intent to identify the structurally deceptive logic the town hall belongs to. Through the complexity of its theory, the concept of the spectacle, coined by Guy Debord in his 1967 book entitled : *La Société du Spectacle*⁸¹, has proven to be a valuable critical tool to approach this analysis. Possibly the main reason for this lies in the fact that the spectacle described by Debord has illusion at its core, establishes illusion as structural in capitalist power relations. Going further, this chapter will propose a non-exhaustive account of the different ways the town hall performs as a spectacle itself, but this entire analysis is only possible through establishing as clear a definition of spectacle as possible.

80 Leary, John Patrick. *Keywords : The New Language of Capitalism*. Haymarket Books, 2019.

81 Debord, Guy. *La Société Du Spectacle*. Buchet/Chastel, 1967. Translations from this work are mine.

1) On Spectacle and the Town Hall's Features

1.1) The concept

The reach of the concept of the spectacle goes far beyond the critique of show business, mass media and the reign of appearances over supposedly substantial content, or personalities. Although the term “spectacle” finds echoes in the discourse lamenting on omnipresent vulgarity and low-brow culture, whether in the media or in the physical world (sometimes even making reference to the concept), the work of Debord does not pass judgement on specific situations. Debord developed the spectacle as a complex critical tool for structuralist thinking, organised around the different themes he tackles (the spectacle and commodity, the subject in the society of the spectacle, ‘spectacular’ time...). His perspective has been identified as an extension of Marxist alienation. For Marx, alienation was the dissociation of individuals from their humanity, caused by capitalist modes of production. The argument was based on three pillars identified as the dissociation of the workers from what they produce, the fact that they worked for someone else, and the ultimate result that alienated work cannot humanise the subjects. Debord considers the spectacle, the state of modern society, as the “full accomplishment” of capitalism, and therefore the full growth of alienation which now affects every aspect of life. Debord keeps the foundations of alienation intact through this extension, and posits that it is still the capitalist logic of commodity which is the main source of dissociation. He considers the spectacle itself as “the main production” of modern society (thesis 15), propelling forward the ongoing “reification” of the world theorised by Georg Lukács⁸² (whereby subjects are turned into objects contemplating objects become subjects). As Clayton

82 Lukács, Georg. *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*. The MIT Press, 2000.

Rosati summarises : “All aspects of social life become permeated with the ‘universal category’ of the commodity and as such with the ‘separations’ necessary to commodity production”⁸³.

For Debord, the social implications of reification are “mediated through images” or through “an immense accumulation of spectacles” (thesis 1). Debord indubitably confers a central role to the image in his work, but not as a fundamental cause of social order, rather a means to insure it (thesis 4). Individual images act as countless converging spectacles which contribute to the establishment of the “present model of dominant social life” (thesis 6), a model which supports the commodification of existence itself. This singular tendency implies large-scale falsification through establishing the artificial as social reality, as truth, as history, or as what ought to be. In that, the potency of images – being inherently man-made – and their organisation, find an especially purposeful use. Rosati emphatically speaks of “the enslavement of society by images” which describes “the absolute compulsion to work, to acquire *symbols*, in order to return them to our masters for survival.” Without endorsing such militant rhetoric, the theoretical grounds of this research support the thesis that by adding to commodified experience its constant artificial ‘legitimation’ through images, the spectacle shapes social imaginary into “an enormous, indisputable, intangible positivity” which does not reveal more than “what is on display is good, what is good is on display” (thesis 12). Lamizet describes a very similar process when he identifies an “intertextuality” guiding social imaginary and keeping it within a controlled frame. This process eventually leads to spectacular domination to become an “objectified worldview” (thesis 5), an ideology materialised as the natural order of things.

The core principles of the spectacle intersect in many ways with contemporary examination of neoliberalism, and fundamentally on the commodification of existence and market gaining on every aspect of life. The critique of the concept of homo oeconomicus for example is a critique of what the spectacle turns individuals into, on the grounds that the features of homo oeconomicus are

83 Rosati, Clayton. ‘Guy Debord, “Gilded Poverty”, and the Contemporary Crisis: On Marxism, Spectacle, and the Banality of Inequality’. *Culture, Theory and Critique*, vol. 53, no. 3, Nov. 2012, pp. 339–63. *Taylor and Francis+NEJM*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14735784.2012.721626>.

not humanity's 'default setting' but the market's. Authors like Wendy Brown focus on the subreptitiously tightening grasp of neoliberal logic on great institutional principles of the Western world. In her book entitled "*Undoing the Demos : Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*", she elaborates on the commodification of democratic principles she identifies to be "speech, deliberation, law, popular sovereignty, participation, education, public goods, and shared power entailed in rule by the people"⁸⁴. This dynamic is constitutive of what could be called 'politics of the spectacle', politics based on commodified core principles, of which the modern town hall is an inherent part.

1.2) The town hall's spectacular features

1.2.1) A manufactured display

Perhaps the first constitutive element of the town hall that would push any observer – acquainted with Debord's theory or not – to describe the modern town hall as a spectacle is its controlled production of *images*. It is true that while Debord describes the media as the most the most exaggerated incarnation of the spectacle but not its very structure, he acknowledges mediation through images as a fundamental vector of the modern spectacle (thesis 4). On a side note, it could be argued that televised town halls are to smaller-scale town halls what mass media is to the spectacle : its most exuberant aspect. Depending on subjectivity, the literal and figurative production of images could even be considered as the town hall's principal production, or its main objective. A literal production which finds outlets in TV channels, in newspapers and more recently on broadcasting websites (Youtube in particular), and a figurative display of the practise of

84 Brown, Wendy. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*. Zone Books, 2015. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt17kk9p8>.

democracy through a form of ritual. What is certain is that it is at least one of its primary objectives, and this exposes two spectacular characteristics.

First, seeking to produce specific images implies a manufacturing process. No performance can come out the way it is expected without some form of preparation beforehand. Town halls are no different, and require at the very least that the setting allowing a speaker (or speakers) to address an audience be thought out in advance. Beyond that, the event's organisation will depend on the desired quality of the images produced. For town halls happening on the scale of a corporation, or a campus, or a constituency, these images will correspond to the institution's need or internal and external communication policy. J.Beecher Field gives the example of town halls held on campuses in response to a crisis, to help create a sense of community, presenting in the process a "simulacrum of affective labor by university administration" and "offering students, faculty, and staff the same kind of cathartic ritual we saw with the constituent service town hall meeting" (Beecher Field, 51). In the same way, he sees the constituent town hall as a possible medium to set up an "accountability theatre" through being able to speak one on one with a constituent, while nothing insures that anyone will be held accountable after the exchange. From its preparation to its execution, the town hall has become generally commodified. They have even become an 'industry' in itself, as many companies specialised in internal or external communication now provide advice on how to conduct town halls and how to make them a structuring element of leaders – constituents, workers... relations; defining the rules of what is sometimes referred to as "retail politics". Televised town halls reach even higher levels of artifice. A copiously-commented turning point was achieved with Clinton's 1992 campaign in terms of electoral communication : understanding the extent of TV's potential. This turning point was marked by a new kind of training for these events; speaking of Clinton, Molly Osberg writes : "Like other campaigns they used fake camera marks and doubles for his opponents; unlike their competitors they focused on body language rather than stump speeches." In the end, it meant that Clinton was ready whenever the camera was on him, but also that he knew

how to keep his opponents in the shot when they were not prepared to possibly catch “bad facial expressions” (Mansky). With these strategies and calculations acknowledged as potential game changers, televised town hall debates have become more edited, and candidates better prepared to insure they generate “substantial political capital”⁸⁵.

For small-scale town halls, and even more so for televised town halls of course, this manufacturing logic rapidly got paired with creating entertainment. Frank Bryan’s chapter on the “conversation” regarding the New England town meeting showed that as soon as the Progressive Era, traditional politics became to be associated with “boredom” (Bryan 45). With politics taking on TV and later its codes, boredom could be fought by taking inspiration from already existing entertainment. With representative regimes needing to captivate the electorate’s attention spans every now and then, televised town halls gradually developed as ‘political talk shows’ in form and arguably, in content as well. Avoiding boredom and keeping the audience somewhat interested has also grown into a primary concern for communication agencies in giving advice on how to conduct a town hall. Much of the advice will revolve around ‘revitalising’ a town hall, increasing participation, working on possible activities, interaction, and even non verbal communication. With artificiality as its foundations and drastically shifted aims, the modern town hall has become ‘massified’, exerting town hall meeting symbolics in a confusing and politically influential manner.

1.2.2) Confusing exertion of town hall meeting symbolics

Ever since its first stagings as part of a campaign strategy in 1992, the town hall has – remarkably – been used as a communication tool by countless organisations. J. Beecher Field identified four main contexts in which its has become standardised – namely political debates, constituent service, campus and corporate conferences – but any organisation with enough

⁸⁵ Kathleen E. Kendall quoted in Mansky, Jackie. ‘The History of the Town Hall Debate’. *Smithsonian Magazine*, 6 Oct. 2016, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/history-town-hall-debate-180960705/>.

members to make it relevant is susceptible to organise a town hall for various purposes. The practice has infused the politics of the US at many different scales and in many different environments, from private companies, big or small, to education and public services. The main concern raised by J. Beecher Field on the town hall becoming a “staple of academic and corporate governance”, in addition to an institutional form of debate, resides in the fact that the town hall is generally designed as an emulation of democracy but presented or even ‘advertised’ as a democratic practise. The very fact that televised town hall debates have been established within the process of every election with their ratification by the Commission on Presidential Debates after the 1992 election supports this claim. Another strong indicator can be found in Apple’s choice to name (until 2017) its principal space for public announcements a “town hall conference centre”⁸⁶ and its retail outlets “town squares” (Beecher Field 65) in an attempt to paint one of the largest companies in the world as a town, and its workers and customers as constituents bound under democratic principles. What is more though, this study has found that there was growing confusion in the usual *discourse* surrounding the town hall meeting, as well as in the very mention of the terms, in a wide array of different contexts.

First of all, the success of the town hall has made it a speciality of many companies specialised in internal and external communication, who provide advice on how to conduct a “good” town hall; and many appear to fuel confusion regarding the town hall and democratic practises. Among the most frequent ‘tropes’ found in articles dealing with town halls is the mention of their ancestral democratic origin (Convene⁸⁷, Geben Communication⁸⁸, Live Hub Events⁸⁹) or raising participation as fundamental for success (Davis and Company⁹⁰). In these examples, the

86 ‘Apple’s Town Hall: A Look Back’. *Six Colors*, 20 Mar. 2016, <https://sixcolors.com/post/2016/03/apples-town-hall-a-look-back/>.

87 ‘5 Dos and Don’ts for Planning a Corporate Town Hall’. *Convene*, 3 Aug. 2016, <https://convene.com/catalyst/meeting-event-planning/5-dos-donts-planning-corporate-town-hall/>.

88 Whaling, Heather. ‘20 Tips to Host an Effective Townhall (Online or In-Person)’. *PrTini*, 28 July 2010, <http://prtini.com/20-tips-to-host-an-effective-townhall-online-or-in-person/>.

89 *Tips & Advice On Hosting A Virtual Town Hall Meeting*. 9 June 2020, <https://livehubevents.com/how-to-host-a-virtual-town-hall-meeting>.

90 *Search Results | Page 3 | Davis & Company*. <https://www.davisandco.com/search/town%20hall?page=2>. Accessed 3 May 2022.

town meeting is treated ambivalently as an event that should aim for democratic practises, while preserving the form of a conference. Communication agencies do not have monopoly over confusing rhetoric though, the very dedicated organisation Town Hall Project, which offers a map of upcoming town halls across the US and encourages constituents to participate, presents an interesting account of the gatherings. On their “about” page, they claim that : “There is no better way to influence your representatives than in-person conversations. Town halls are a longstanding American tradition — where our elected representatives must listen and respond to the concerns of their constituents. Remember: you are their boss.”⁹¹ In that short statement alone, town halls and town meetings are blended in a single political tradition, and power relations within town halls themselves are turned upside-down, placing constituents in a dominant position. The article written by Jackie Mansky for the Smithsonian Magazine presents a near-perfect replica of this statement : “The town hall debate is now seen as part of the American political tradition. And in a way, it is a modern innovation cribbed from a much older way to include everyday people in the political process.” It goes on to quote a 2004 opinion piece for the New York Times : “It’s the democratic process in its most amiable state: earnest Americans asking serious questions about the issues”⁹² (Mansky). Again, the town hall format is euphemised into a simple “innovation” from the centuries-old town meeting, and the audience fantasised into an influential force.

Another significant context in which confusion around the town hall meeting is sustained is in academic efficiency reviews of meetings following this format. Indeed, the terms themselves and the modalities of the meetings are sometimes not properly or sufficiently laid out, making their reading impervious to readers outside of the organisation they happened in (examples from *Currents in Pharmacy Teaching and Learning*⁹³, *National Academies of Practise*⁹⁴, and *Drug and Alcohol*

91 ‘Town Hall Project’. *Town Hall Project*, <https://townhallproject.com/>. Accessed 5 May 2022.

92 ‘Opinion | The Town Hall Debate’. *The New York Times*, 9 Oct. 2004. *NYTimes.com*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/09/opinion/the-town-hall-debate.html>.

93 Meny, Lisa M., et al. ‘Faculty Perceptions of a Town Hall Model for Engagement in Continuous Quality Improvement’. *Currents in Pharmacy Teaching and Learning*, vol. 13, no. 8, Aug. 2021, pp. 968–74. *ScienceDirect*, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cptl.2021.06.004>.

94 ‘NAP Fall Virtual Town Hall Meetings’. *Journal of Interprofessional Education & Practice*, vol. 21, Dec. 2020, p. 100399. *ScienceDirect*, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.xjep.2020.100399>.

Dependence⁹⁵). With names like “town hall”, “town hall meetings”, “town hall forums” now becoming interchangeable, failure to make out which meeting followed which tradition results in confusion around observable democratic practises. The terms related to democratic practises are also used inaccurately sometimes, for example in a study on online town meetings as a way to bring together “constituents” and “lawmakers”, where the term “deliberative” is used to refer to a discussion, not a true deliberative process which may lead to a common decision⁹⁶. The nationwide, unrestrained and inaccurate presentation of the town hall meeting exerts its highly-regarded associated symbolics, themselves based on flawed accounts of history.

1.2.3) *Setting the neoliberal frame*

This widespread confusion around its democratic features triggers what Debord calls the “autonomous movement of the non living” (thesis 2). His second thesis intersects with the performative features of social and political imaginary, whereby representations are established upon pre-constructed elements, mythical or not, which find enough incarnations to become the very framework of social and political imaginary. The “non-living” is constantly renewed by subjects who have lost agency over said “non-living”, and its movement is therefore made autonomous. For Lamizet, this movement become autonomous but based on selected symbols serves a purpose : to set the frame for power relations by establishing the spaces, the times and the people on which power has a grip. The ritualised modern town hall provides a picture of all three. It positively displays the spectacle of effective power relations draped in powerful symbolics of deliberative democracy and national grandeur, which is in effect highly deceptive. In the words of J.Beecher Field : “the traditional democratic institution of the town meeting has been repurposed in the service

95 ‘Analyzing Town Hall Meetings to Identify Information Gaps in the Opioid Crisis’. *Drug and Alcohol Dependence*, vol. 197, Apr. 2019, pp. 164–67. *ScienceDirect*, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugalcdep.2019.02.002>.

96 Lee, Amy. ‘The New Town Hall: Deliberating Online to Connect Constituents and Lawmakers’. *National Civic Review*, vol. 108, no. 3, 2019, pp. 6–12.

of various neoliberal institutions, in particular the university and the corporation.” (Beecher Field 5). What is more, it has been repurposed to serve national governance itself, and so the very tangible and universal frame for politics in the US. The point here is not to claim that US citizens are becoming entirely unable to distinguish between deliberative democracy and a conference to announce a new iPhone, but that the undisputed positivity of the modern town hall as a political tool has effects over social and political imaginary, and that it is beginning to show its marks in usual discourse. More than an institution outwardly exemplifying the definite transition from liberal to neoliberal politics, the town hall meeting is a tool that “helps manage this transition as smoothly as possible” (Beecher Field 5). It is progressively “objectifying” (Debord, thesis 5) and legitimising the new symbolic configurations of neoliberal politics, and especially the new symbolic configurations of democracy under neoliberalism. Much like Debord, Wendy Brown sees its impact as the “economisation” of social and political imaginary, and political practises :

“neoliberalization transposes democratic political principles of justice into an economic idiom, transforms the state itself into a manager of the nation on the model of a firm [...], and hollows out much of the substance of democratic citizenship and even popular sovereignty. Thus, one important effect of neoliberalization is the vanquishing of liberal democracy’s already anemic *homo politicus*, a vanquishing with enormous consequences for democratic institutions, cultures, and imaginaries.” (Brown 35).

Her thesis extends to the political (de)construction of the neoliberal subject, who would be *expected* to set aside “moral autonomy, freedom, or equality” and political implication : “We no longer choose our ends or the means to them. We are no longer even creatures of interest relentlessly seeking to satisfy ourselves.” (Brown 45). In short, to become a fully-accomplished “*homo oeconomicus*”. Cédric Faure’s concept of “creative political imaginary” precisely describes the

nature of this transformation : the establishment of a new symbolic frame taking part in “creating subjectivities” and “political meanings” to insure a new kind of *order*. The observable facets of neoliberalism’s spectacle of democracy, legitimised by the town hall, will be the subject of the next part.

2) The Town Hall’s Legitimising Display

2.1) Democracy through the neoliberal filter

2.1.1) Hollowed-out democracy

In terms of meaning, the dynamics followed by neoliberalism regarding democracy appeared first of all to further broaden what the term encompasses. This is not a movement set forward by neoliberalism, far from it, as the section of this study dedicated to the postwar of Independence period has shown. Initially understood as government by the people and frowned upon for this very reason, the term became associated to representative regimes, indiscriminately of actual citizen implication. According to W.Brown the word now “stands for everything from free elections to free markets, from protests against dictators to law and order, from the centrality of rights to the stability of states, from the voice of the assembled multitude to the protection of individuality and the wrong of dicta imposed by crowds” (Brown 19). Current uses of the term now take on a new dimension, related to the progressive intersection of market and political discourse; it is now possible to find mentions of ‘democratic prices’ to speak of something affordable, or an

organisation's 'democratic policy' to refer to the way they deal with public relations. More importantly, neoliberalism appears to 'fasten' a new meaning unto democracy, as a process which implies specific new rules, starting with what Wendy Brown describes as a "hollowing out" process. This hollowing out can be observed quite literally through the erosion of what made democracy a tangible concept, and the town hall embodies and legitimises this new configuration.

The town hall, much like the injunction to vote every few years in representative democracies, is performed as a ritual. It has been fully integrated into political campaigns and as a tool for governance in countless organisations; its use is now entirely normalised, and sometimes even systematised, without any shift in power relations. This entails that town halls are organised as part of a predefined order, not as a medium for critical questioning or putting said order into perspective, and even less as a subversive space. Ritualising the town hall displays the spectacle of democracy without consequences, or results. With the meeting itself having of course no legal or decisional authority, it cannot have direct political effects; but the fact that nothing compels or incites organisers or speakers to even take action based on the town hall's content eliminates any impact the assembly can have on decision making. Some town halls do not allow the audience to participate altogether, leaving no room to any result induced by participation. Even in the case when decision makers would act on an item discussed during a town hall, nothing insures that the town hall itself had any impact on said action. With the modern town hall, the course is already set, meaning that not only are the results out of the audience's hands, but also that the display it offers is devoid of any democratic evolution.

Democracy is not all about results, it is also a social process. Democratic decision making is imbued with tension; implies at the very least deliberation, and possibly conflict and structural changes along the process. This is of course not to say that consensual agreement cannot happen within a democratic frame, but that this frame is built around the social process of decision making. Town halls provide a picture of democracy without this social process. In itself, it is not the space

nor the time when decision making takes place, and so it cannot reflect its underlying complexities or its evolutions. What it shows is therefore a simplified, a straightforward version of democracy whereby the process is reduced to announcement, reception, and interrogation at most. Crucially, the process, as well as influential dissent appear to not concern the people.

2.1.2) The people as audience

Perhaps the most telling facet of the town hall's relation to neoliberal symbolic configurations is its treatment of the people on the receiving end of the message. The assembly, or the people watching a televised town hall from home, are considered and treated as an audience. The term has been used throughout this study in a rather detached manner, but it is heavily connoted with 'spectacular' notions of inactivity and reception.

Quite literally, the treatment of the people as an audience underlies an aspect of the town hall previously discussed in this study : entertainment. An audience is usually understood a group of people who is offered some kind of entertainment, or perhaps more importantly a group of people eager to be entertained. The form chosen for the first televised town halls certainly bore the marks of live entertainment on TV, and their success encouraged corporations (especially Apple) and channels to consider them as potential shows. Entertainment does not have to be flashy, and in fact most communication agencies advise to keep things simple, while bearing in mind that boredom is what kills a town hall's efficiency (see 1.2.1). This emphasis alone not only reveals that a central portion of the work is done on appearances, but also on who is appearing. In usual town hall staging (and filming), the assembly is mostly invisible, sitting facing the speaker(s), often in the dark. In a practical way, the assembly of a town hall is treated in exactly the same way as the audience of a spectacle, or at best an interactive conference. Virtual town halls take this logic a step further, as only speakers can appear on the assembly's screens, and audience interaction is almost

systematically limited to questions written in the chat. An assembly treated as a mass to be entertained is in effect an assembly considered non-existent in the event's unwrapping, and is as such invisibilised in the final display. The audience's role is solely receptive, and will be analysed as such, which is why it can only appear as passive.

Passivity is identified by Debord as a result and a requirement of the spectacle society. It is the result of the spectacle's "monopoly over appearance" (thesis 12), which lays every aspect of a subject's life before them. This dissociation, happening according to the conditions of the spectacle, is considered by Debord to inhibit the subject's ability to think of themselves as actors, only as spectators. To sustain this undisputable positivity, the spectacle must therefore produce images of itself, of passivity in the different sectors of life, whether it be work, consumerism or politics. By following this logic and presenting a passive assembly, the town hall solidifies politics as only a matter of reception from the greater number, with perhaps a few interjections here and there. The picture of democracy painted by the town hall is one entirely free of the "costs" identified by Frank Bryan (Bryan 281). By "costs", Bryan meant to emphasise the notion that democracy requires time and energy. In the case of the New England town meeting, democracy can mean taking time at the end of the day to take part in what can be very long deliberative sessions and getting held off by a foot of snow on the way back. In a town hall, democracy is mostly portrayed as an act of presence. Much like placing a ballot paper in a box, the democratic process appears as easy, not worthy of meddling with everyday life. Passivity is therefore paradoxically put forward as a way to be politically 'active' or at least politically implicated. To speak in the words of Lucien Sfez, democracy is being "reterritorialised" (Sfez 34) into the town hall and following the neoliberal trend, as a political system where political power is held by a few decision makers, while the expected political existence of the people is one of acceptance. As a result, decision makers stand out as the figureheads of political responsibility.

2.1.3) *Bolstering the image of decision-makers*

The staging of a town hall is made for leaders and decision makers to be watched and listened to, as indeed its purpose revolves around them being the sole owners of speech and appearance. The first occurrences of what looked like a town hall, organised by Jimmy Carter's campaign team in 1976, already bore the marks of such a deferential setting, David M. Ryfe writes :

“Spatially, the meeting resembled a press conference. The effect of this arrangement was to accentuate the position of the president, who stood before the audience as a singular, stationary performer, while diminishing the individuality of the audience members, who remained faceless within an audience of over a thousand people. Rather than being a “real” person speaking to average Americans, this arrangement constructed Carter as “the president”, a star performing in front of a large audience.”⁹⁷

Raising politicians as “stars” is directly linked to the ‘personalisation’ of political processes among representative regimes, and more generally the personalisation of power. Personalities are advertised as encapsulations of a party's ideology and political program, or even the nation once inducted into their representative function⁹⁸. CEOs act as the face of their multi-faceted company, and both can become tightly associated; one can think of Elon Musk's personality now indissociable from the image of Tesla or SpaceX for example, or Steve Jobs' from Apple before him. With increasing visual media implication in politics as an authority, this personalisation has grown along the notion that appearing is a crucial factor in establishing a candidate as relevant for occupying a given function. Bill Clinton's team was perhaps the first to truly understand that in 1992, and made sure to multiply his appearances on TV. For Lamizet, visibility and the establishment of power are

⁹⁷ Hart, Roderick P., et al. *Politics, Discourse, and American Society: New Agendas*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2001.

⁹⁸ Lucien Sfez, in ‘La Politique Symbolique’, even investigated the representative features specific to three functions of the French political system, namely the member of parliament, the minister and the President.

indeed closely intertwined, as he sees the act of visible expression as sufficient to project the power of the speaker into political imaginary. This claim primarily concerns politicians of course, but it also applies to anyone with a legitimate and significant public presence, which is not reduced to TV appearances. In a performative manner, appearing has become associated with inherent personal qualities required to wield significant political power at different levels.

More than a way to centralise attention on a personality, appearing seems to have developed as a factor in determining an individual's "worth". And indeed, as soon as the first town hall debate ever held for a US presidential election, a significant number of critics focused on the candidates' ability to appear on TV and in front of a crowd. To very briefly summarise what came of the analysis, Clinton "locked eyes with the crowd" (Osberg) while Bush made the fatal mistake of glancing at his watch. Not a lot more was needed to claim that Clinton emerged as the winner of the debate. David Foster Wallace takes this observation a step further in his essay *E Unibus Pluram* : "we receive unconscious reinforcement of the deep thesis that the most significant feature of truly alive persons is watchableness, and that genuine human worth is not just identical with but rooted in the phenomenon of watching", and supports his claim by quoting Ralph Waldo Emerson who, decades before TV spoke of the very few individuals "fit to stand the gaze of millions"⁹⁹. Guy Debord, in his commentaries on the spectacle published in 1988, shared a similar observation : "Possessing a 'media status' now has infinitely more value than what one was really able to do, and it is only natural that this status be easily transferred, and that it confers the right to shine in the same manner anywhere else"¹⁰⁰. Without specifically endorsing "watchableness" as the most valuable trait of individuals, his take on the subject raises the idea that appearing is a true form of political expertise. Standing tall in front of an audience or a camera, speaking eloquently, easily handling rhetorical frameworks; all belong to a field of expertise now important to have relevant political influence. Events which place decision makers in front of an audience – like the town hall

99 Wallace, David Foster. *E Unibus Pluram*. Dalkey Archive Press, 1993.

100 Debord, Guy. *Commentaires sur la Société du Spectacle*. Gérard Lebovici, 1988. Translations from this work are mine.

– through their undisputable positivity, not only solidify these features as a form of political expertise required to have relevant political influence, but also as a type of expertise solely possessed by a dominant class. Town halls which function on a question and answer format additionally present decision makers as knowledgeable figures able to answer any question. The content of the answer might be unsatisfactory to the person who asked it, but the whole event will convey the notion that the person at the centre of the stage can be trusted to deal with a wide array of issues. When town halls serve as a debate format for politicians, this apparent ability is shared between the participants, but it also cultivates a certain vision of politics integrated into the representative system of the US.

2.2) On Presidential Elections

2.2.1) Exacerbated adversary politics

The state of “adversary politics” is identified when divisions between the parties of a society (not necessarily institutional political parties) are reckoned too crucial for consensual politics to happen. Jane Mansbridge, in her book entitled *Beyond Adversary Democracy*¹⁰¹, presents what she identifies as “adversary democracy” as the result of allowing conflict among the people to become the root of political reflection, in which case political power relies on majority rule to regulate tensions ‘naturally’. She opposes it to “unitary democracy” which is seen as politics aiming for consensus through deliberation. While the complexities of Mansbridge’s thesis ought to be

101 Mansbridge, Jane. *Beyond Adversary Democracy*. University of Chicago Press, 1983.

discussed¹⁰², her basic definitions clearly presents adversary democracy as a polity which considers conflict as a fight for power, whereas unitary democracy uses deliberation to settle conflict.

In current US national politics, adversary logic has been exacerbated. The hegemonic bipartism of national institutions, and the recurrent race for majority rule are painted in competitive colours. Democrats and Republicans have their respective symbols, logo, colours; their respective history of victory and defeat, and their respective supporters or in many cases, fans. For a significant part of the electorate, supporting one of these parties in many ways resembles supporting a sports team. The campaign and post election reactions appear deeply rooted in affect. When Donald Trump won in 2016 and Joe Biden in 2020, ‘winners’ could be seen boasting and taunting ‘losers’ online, often on the basis of emotions, making fun of the opposite camp’s supposed sadness¹⁰³. Presidential elections are seen as *the* political time of the country, and are advertised as such. Town hall debates are part of the ‘showdown’. With candidates face to face, an audience in person and at home and referees to moderate the debate, the match-up largely looks like the main event of a mounting confrontation. The end goal displayed by such staging and publicity is of course winning.

With this duality established between winning and losing, commodification appears to have taken over the choosing process, as citizens are left out of each party’s program elaboration, and said programs are advertised from the top down. Choosing thus comes down to assessing the risks and gains of a candidate’s political and personal ambitions, like an investor would. Mansbridge establishes the same parallels : “In order to stay in office, politicians act like entrepreneurs and brokers, looking for formulas that satisfy as many, and alienate as few, interests as possible.”¹⁰⁴

Adversary democracy is thus exacerbated to the point where nationwide political involvement and

102 The way she elaborates on these definitions is contradictory for instance, as she sees unitary democracy limited by conflicting “interests”, therefore making it – based on her basic definition – another form of adversary democracy. Her definition of “interest” also poses problem according to David Braybrooke : Braybrooke, David. ‘Review of Beyond Adversary Democracy’. *Ethics*, vol. 93, no. 1, 1982, pp. 153–55.

103 A market has even developed around mugs bearing the mention “liberal tears” or “conservative tears” (sold at outrageous prices).

104 Mansbridge, Jane. ‘Unitary & Adversary: The Two Forms Of Democracy’. *Context Institute*, vol. Governance, no. 7, 1984, <https://www.context.org/iclib/ic07/mansbrdg/>.

political effervescence revolves around the competitive fight for power. The complexities of social conflict, and especially their structural dimension are but seldom represented by two parties who find a fundamental ideological consensus in capitalist order. Candidates thus need to differentiate through different means, which usually take the form of affects, affects that the town hall can foster through an illusion of proximity.

2.2.2) *An illusion of small scale*

It is much easier to picture deliberative democracy on a small scale, as indeed the more subjectivities are implied in the process, the more complex the process becomes. Scale is notably one of the key factors regarding town meeting attendance identified by Frank Bryan in his extensive study of direct democracy in New England. In his own words : “from participation to policy, size (the *scale* of things) is critical to any discussion on democracy” (Bryan 69). To summarise, he found that the smaller a town was, the higher the attendance rate of its meeting would be, and produces the hypothesis that this correlation may be related to the potential influence voters may perceive in their presence. This specific hypothesis – as convincing as it may be – is not supported by qualitative studies, and it would be excessive to claim that a replica of small scale conveys the notion that voting makes a difference, but it could potentially be a side effect. What is certain is that the way in which the town hall aspires to look like town meetings the most is by conveying a sense of proximity, or according to J.Beecher Field, by emerging as “a spectacle designed to emulate the scale and intimacy of the town meeting but lacking direct political consequences” (Beecher Field 2), and this cannot be ignored. In a presidential town hall, what is playing is the spectacle of representative, adversary politics on a stage borrowed from a deliberative polity. This false proximity encapsulates constitutive elements of the hollowing out of democracy already discussed in this chapter, such as a false sense of people implication, with the staging of political power

directly interacting with what is meant to be a representative panel. The manufactured illusion of democratic substance is also notable, with decision makers standing at voice's reach and bound to offer a reply, sustaining the notion that answering questions is a form of deliberation. The town hall could be interpreted as an illustration of Debord's thirty-first thesis : "the very forces that have slipped out of our grasp appear in all their power", their power lying in tangible political influence, but also in pushing the new symbolic configurations of neoliberalism and display them as a positivity.

With direct interaction and the "spectacle" of intimacy also comes the possibility for presidential candidates to generate or exert affects. Frédéric Lordon, who has dedicated a great part of his work to the role of affects in politics, speaks of "generic sympathy" to describe the inclination to relate humanely, through similitude, with people in power¹⁰⁵. He chooses the example of the organised sequestration of a CEO who had decided on massive dismissals, which sparked unconditional support for the man in charge among a significant number of people, including people who could supposedly relate to the workers' situation and understand their anger. Generic sympathy is what members of the 1992 Clinton campaign aimed for when first buying half-hour slots on prime-time TV, and it is something that plays in favour of politicians holding a town hall. With illusion of proximity comes the notion that despite their high level of responsibility, politicians are willing to engage in dialogue with voters, making them for the duration of a town hall – accessible. Lordon identified politics as an "ars affectandi", as the art of generating and empowering affects, and the town hall certainly offers a stage to generate sympathy for the candidates. The nature of this sympathy can mean a lot in the fight for power, as it did for Bill Clinton, and operations to generate sympathy solidify the manufactured orientation of affects towards a candidate as defining features of democracy.

105 Lordon, Frédéric. *les affects de la politique*. Seuil, 2016, p70. Translations from this work are mine.

Conclusion

When Carole Simpson, who served as a moderator for the 1992 presidential town hall debate on ABC News, said as she came on stage that they were “making history” on this night, she was right in many ways. Of course, her statement mostly emphasised the first occurrence of such a debate in national elections, but it resonates uncannily with the contents of this study. Indeed, with the symbolics associated with the town meeting finding a new outlet on national television, and later through many other spheres, it is the nation’s social and political imaginaries which would be subjected to new forces. Firstly, this new symbolic exertion has solidified the town meeting as a landmark of the national narrative of the US, allowing the literal “making” of US history to be pursued. Historically, the town meeting in itself has been inaccurately treated, serving as a powerful catalyst for American exceptionalism and anchoring democracy as a vague concept to the story of the US. This treatment was by no means extraordinary, as the perception of the past in US social imaginary is imbued with utopian constructions stemming from countless sources of their uncommon history. The town hall is far from being the only trace of flawed atavism in US politics, for the simple reason that glorifying the past has been identified long ago as a powerful political tool. All in all, the modern town hall acts as a powerful vector for “reterritorialisation”, at the same time of mythical imaginaries into perceptions of the political foundations of the US, but also of the symbolics associated with the concept of democracy. As an inherent part of the politics of the spectacle, through its manufactured display and the many layers of fake that constitute its basis, the town hall positively presents a version of democracy reconfigured according to neoliberal logic. This new symbolic configuration implies a general hollowing-out of the democratic process and redefinition of the roles played by the people and the decision makers, but also an exacerbation of

adversary logic in presidential elections, to the point of reducing the choice to an affects-based decision.

These new ‘democratic’ configurations carried by neoliberalism are not confined to the town hall of course, rather, the staging of the town hall is inscribed into this neoliberal dynamic. As the political process of the US progressively disengages citizens and puts them at great distance from decision making in most parts of the country, observers like Wendy Brown denounce the commodification of said political process. Democracy as a concept has been reduced to ritualised practises or ritualised displays such as the town hall or political rallies, and what is more, such changes can be found in the late capitalist intersection of political and economic language. This study has mentioned the notions of “political capital”, but also the term “democratic” now used to qualify price range, and “accountability” when speaking of a politician’s record, but there are other examples. In *The New Language of Capitalism*, John Patrick Leary discusses the concept of “political brand”, and for some observers, a distinction now exists between “retail politics” and “wholesale politics”. The new symbolic configurations of neoliberal politics are carried by these types of displays and discursive shifts, and the town hall now stands at a crossroad which is the source of much confusion.

Today, the symbolics associated with town hall meeting lie in a liminal imaginary space, between what Cédric Faure identifies as repetitive and creative political imaginary. They are at the same time the ‘face’ of political order, and sturdy protectors of the national narrative, while serving the creation of neoliberal symbolic configurations of democracy. What links them perhaps most intimately with the first town meetings ever held on American soil, is that they still act as a tool to insure consensus. Consensus around an agreed-upon glorious – almost transcendental – past, and around the effective organisation of political life in the country. Along with the observable dispossession of political power, this might further erode the perception of politics as a life-changing force.

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Annex : *Freedom of Speech* by Norman Rockwell

